

# Looking beyond the 'adequate'

**Jan Britton** explains his council's link-up with a private sector consultancy to speed up the pace of change in children's social care

Children's social care in Sandwell has had a difficult time in recent years, but now we have launched an innovative partnership with consultancy firm iMPower and its recruitment expert, Penna, to make such a break with the past we can never slip back.

The contract has been signed and we are off to a good start – but we will continue to focus on performance so we stay on track.

The cycle of poor performance in this crucial area has seen us fail inspections and fall into government intervention three times in 12 years – most recently in November 2009. An Improvement Notice is still in force.

Over the same period, we have appointed nine directors of children's

services (DCSs) – 10, if you include my own period as interim DCS between the departure of the last permanent post-holder in September 2012 and the arrival of our new DCS in January.

The average stay of a DCS during this period has been 16 months. This alone is enough to set management alarm bells ringing.

But, looking back, there were plenty of other signs – including the inevitable budget overspends and an over-reliance on agency workers which shored up problems in the short term but undermined capacity for anything more strategic or long term.

Matters came to a head with the failed Ofsted inspection in November 2009. With hindsight, the council's

initial response to this inspection was not strong and things became worse before they began to improve.

But, by the middle of last year, there was tangible evidence we had turned a corner. A further Ofsted safeguarding inspection in January 2012 resulted in an 'adequate' rating, and a fostering inspection in July had the same result.

We got a thumbs-up for our progress in July from former minister for children and families, Tim Loughton, whose counsel we valued greatly, and who stressed the importance of senior management stability in the next stage of our journey from intervention to sustainable self-improvement.

As it happened, it was at this point our then-DCS left for a new post at another authority. At more than two

years, she was one of Sandwell's longest-serving directors and the first to deliver two consecutive 'adequate' Ofsted ratings.

The question we faced was how to consolidate this progress in the face of previous experience which indicated that recruiting a new DCS of an appropriate calibre would be challenging – and that this would mean a new direction and more uncertainty for hard-pressed, hard-working frontline employees.

As chief executive, I discussed this question at length with the leader of the council, Darren Cooper, and cabinet member for children and families, Bob Badham, and we decided on a radical course of action to accelerate the pace of change and boost manage-

ment capacity. We would 'in-source' an improvement partner via a service contract rather than recruit a DCS in the traditional manner.

The key requirements of the contract are to:

- supply the council with an experienced DCS with a proven track record
- reduce the over-reliance on agency workers
- remove children's services from the Department for Education Improvement Notice
- merge social care and education divisions to create an integrated children's services department
- reduce over-expenditure on looked-after children's placement costs, SEN transport and agency workers
- provide coaching and development for senior managers.

After taking this decision, we mobilised our proven expertise at contract procurement and let an OJEU-compliant, two-and-a-half year, £1.15m contract to iMPower four months later.

The period from the procurement decision to the start of the contract was less than if we had decided to recruit a new DCS in the old manner.



Chief executive Jan Britton and young people who have completed an independent travel training course – Sandwell offers training in how to travel alone through the GO4it Independent Travel Training Unit – to people aged over 11 who have physical or learning disabilities or difficulties

As a result, iMPower's improvement team joined the council before Christmas and our new DCS, Simon

White – latterly of Suffolk CC – arrived in January.

The decision to procure the im-

provement contract rather than recruit a new DCS was not without risks. The biggest was bundling the DCS post with the remainder of the contract, and the danger a good improvement proposal would fail because it was not supported by the best DCS candidate, or vice versa.

However, we decided a joined-up solution was essential if we were to ask the improvement partner to stake their profit on the performance of the contract.

We were rewarded in the final stages of the procurement process with two strong bids – both exceeded our minimum requirements. There was a narrow margin between iMPower's winning proposal and that of Mott MacDonald, which would have been acceptable had iMPower not beaten its rival to the post.

It is early days in our partnership, but we are on track. For the first time since I became chief executive in September 2010, we have a plan to do more than simply react to our last Ofsted inspection. Watch this space... ■

*Jan Britton is chief executive of Sandwell MBC*