

On the road to transformation



Once a byword for failure, Sandwell Council's children's services are now gaining a reputation for innovation

It's heartening for me that what we are doing in children's services is being looked at by other councils.'

Interest from other local authorities in this area of Sandwell Council's work would have been unthinkable just two years ago, admits chief executive Jan Britton.

He readily acknowledges that back then children's services was a 'basket case' following a succession of failed Ofsted inspections and an eye-watering turnover of staff.

However, a radical transformation agenda and rapid progress in the last 12 months have made others sit up and take notice. Sandwell, made up of six towns north west of Birmingham – Oldbury, West Bromwich, Smethwick, Rowley Regis, Tipton and Wednesbury – has tended to be under the radar. Not anymore.

There is still some way to go, but the fact that Sandwell's children's services is now influencing changes in other parts of the council speaks volumes about how far it has already come.

That journey began in 2012. Having received another 'inadequate' rating from Ofsted, Sandwell took the decision to bring in consultancy iMPOWER to change the way it provides care and support for vulnerable children and young people. It was a bold move involving a major shift in resources from ever-increasing demand in social services to demand management and has heralded a fresh approach characterised by multi-agency working.

iMPOWER not only brought with it a radical vision, improvement expertise and capacity but also an experienced new director of children's services (DCS), Simon White. Alongside that, an improvement team was set up involving staff from a number of departments – a decision that has proved invaluable in developing a culture of collective responsibility around the welfare of children in Sandwell, according to Mr Britton.

From the top down, children's services had been suffering from a lack of continuity, both for staff and the people they were there to support. Nine DCSs had come and gone in the space of 12 years and the department had more than 100 agency staff plugging gaps in its teams in

the face of an ever-growing caseload. 'The council decided they would try to solve the underlying problems rather than go for quick fixes to address the weaknesses that Ofsted found,' says Mr White. 'Our approach has been to improve the service in a completely different way to the path taken by many councils when they fail an Ofsted'

The first step was to ask children in the care system for their views, says Mr White. 'We redesigned services so there would be as few handover points as possible and children would have continuity. The old system saw a lot of repeat working and wasted resources. A lot of families were on a merry-go-round.'

To put an end to children being passed around from team to team and one agency to another, the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) was established. It

Children's services: progress in numbers

Child protection cases down by 9%

Children classified as 'in need' down by 26%

Overall number of cases has fallen by 19%

Workforce turnover down from 26.5% to 7.1% in last 18 months

Agency staff down from 100+ to below 20 in two years

Overspending department now has a £1.5m surplus

The number of looked after children has fallen from 624 in 2012 to 538 this year

brings together a dozen agencies – including children's social care, police and two health trusts – co-located in council offices so they can share information and ensure children receive appropriate support. The partnership with West Midlands Police has been critical to moving away from a reactive system towards one that manages demand. The goal is to prevent children from being 'passport' around and, wherever possible, help them to remain with their families. There's a much greater emphasis on early intervention with 'early help' teams

providing support to families so that more in depth intervention from social workers isn't necessary.

'Families should feel they are listened to, not having to wait until there's a crisis before they get provision,' explains director of children and families Matthew Sampson, who will succeed Mr White as DCS. 'They must be given the opportunity to succeed.'

The shift towards multi-agency joint working, shaped by iMPOWER, to deliver more flexible, responsive and intelligent provision has already paid off. Referral rates are falling, there are fewer child protection orders and social workers' caseloads are more manageable.


The other side of the transformation, the task of ensuring children's services has a full complement of permanent staff, has seen remarkable progress. The number of agency staff has been cut by two-thirds and all managerial posts have been filled. A fresh approach to workforce development is taking shape to ensure social workers not only view Sandwell as an attractive place to work but stay put to build a career there. (see p4)

The litmus test for how far Sandwell has progressed will come when iMPOWER and Mr White withdraw and hand over the reins to permanent staff, which is likely to be around the same time as Ofsted's next visit in early 2015. The Department for Education has been monitoring improvements via a performance accountability board, chaired by Professor Ray Jones. 'They had to be content that we were making progress quickly enough to satisfy them. We have been able to do that so far,' says Mr White.

In the meantime, Sandwell has brought in the Local Government Association to carry out an independent review of progress made to date. Talk to staff across the council and it's clear that the turning point for children's services was the decision to bring iMPOWER on board – a relationship which looks set to continue.

'They have given new sense of what good looks like and the capacity to help us change in order to break the cycle of one short-term DCS after another without ever making any real progress,' says Mr Britton. 'The work iMPOWER did on modelling the system to identify





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Simon White, director of children’s services

re-referrals, blockages and waste was exceptional, as was the work they did to understand the motivation of social workers in their work.’

The investment in iMPower is now paying dividends. Sandwell is fast becoming a place where social workers want to come to work to develop their careers and

the council’s MASH model is now being rolled out across the West Midlands. Another indication of progress is the way children’s services is influencing Sandwell’s council-wide transformation agenda.

Its management approach shaped around early intervention and prevention is now being applied in

community development, adult social care and other areas. ‘The need to change one area has informed change in other areas, bringing out lessons around demand management and early intervention,’ says Mr Britton. ‘Children’s services has become the exemplar for what we are now doing elsewhere.’



Council leader Cllr Darren Cooper



Cllr Simon Hackett

Joint forces for change

Taking a localised, multi-agency approach to children’s welfare has quickly become the ‘Sandwell way’

When Simon Hackett took on the cabinet role for children and families, he spent the first three months talking to families, children and professionals inside and outside the council. It was April 2013 and his predecessor had just resigned following another failed Ofsted. He wanted to find out ‘what had gone wrong’ and what needed to change. Fast forward 18 months and it’s clear to see how the feedback Cllr Hackett received has helped to shape changes on the ground.

High staff turnover and an absence of early intervention work with families were among the problems flagged up. Both have been tackled head on through the recruitment of permanent staff, new initiatives designed to retain and develop employees and a bigger focus on early help teams.

But the one issue that stood out above all else for Cllr Hackett was the lack of multi-agency working and the way it hampered efforts to provide families and children with appropriate support.

The creation of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) means staff no longer ‘spend weeks chasing

around for information.’ But this needed to be taken a step further.

‘The thing I found astonishing was there didn’t seem to be any sharing of information between agencies at a very early stage,’ says Cllr Hackett. The solution has been to create local multi-agency teams across Sandwell’s towns. He adds: ‘What families and children were telling me was they were fed up of different faces coming in and out of their lives. Wherever it’s not a child protection issue, we now identify who the lead agency should be. Therefore you only have one agency in that family’s life and they can liaise with other agencies.’

The most pressing challenges now are embedding an audit culture across social work and getting the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) up to speed.

The SSCB will take over from the performance accountability board ordered by the DfE when officials are satisfied it’s ready. John Harris, chair of the SSCB, is confident about the future and encouraged by the way improvements have been made.

‘I get a real sense of self-awareness of the current position

and progress that’s been made,’ he says. ‘They are much more analytical in understanding the impact of their work and are therefore focusing on the right issues and right priorities.’

‘There’s a much more open culture and a transparency between partners. You can see that in the way they use data and information to challenge one another and hold each other to account. There’s also more of a sense of joint working on key areas of intervention.’

Although much has been achieved, all involved are only too aware that the process of improvement is an ongoing challenge.

Sandwell Council leader Councillor Darren Cooper said: ‘We have come a long way in turning around our children’s services. It’s not been easy but I am confident the action we took 18 months ago was the right thing to do, although we took some criticism for it at the time.’

‘We have broken a vicious circle of failure, improvement, then failure again. However, we cannot and will not take our eye off the ball – we are building on strong foundations but there is still work to do to ensure children’s services are the best they can be.’