

Report to Cabinet

16 October 2024

Subject:	Sandwell Children’s Trust (SCT) Annual Review 2023/2024
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Children and Education, Councillor Jalal Uddin
Director:	Director of Children and Education, Sally Giles
Key Decision:	Yes
Contact Officer:	Sally Giles, Director of Children and Education Sally_giles@sandwell.gov.uk Mandip S. Chahal, Interim AD for Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement Mandip1_chahal@sandwell.gov.uk

1. Recommendations

For the reasons set out in report, it is recommended that Cabinet -

- 1.1 in its capacity as the body responsible and accountable for the discharge of the relevant children’s social care services functions:
 - a) formally receives the Sandwell Children’s Trust Annual Review 2023/24;
 - b) notes the progress made to date by Sandwell Children’s Trust in delivering services as set out in the contract between the Council and the Sandwell Children’s Trust, as set out in the Annual Review 2023/24; and

- c) notes the feedback from the Department for Education (DfE) following its recent 6-month review of Sandwell Children’s Trust.

2. Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The Service Delivery Contract (the Contract) between the Council and Sandwell Children’s Trust (SCT) requires that an annual review of services is completed and presented to the Council. At the Cabinet meeting on 22 March 2017, it was agreed that the Cabinet, in its executive role, will perform this function on behalf of the Council and agree certain ‘reserved matters’ that are set out in the Contract.
- 2.2 This report presents SCT’s Annual Review for 2023/24. Consideration of the Annual Review by the Cabinet forms an important part of the governance of SCT; providing assurance to the Council in its capacity as the body that is responsible and accountable for the discharge of the relevant children’s social care services functions.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan

<p>Growing Up in Sandwell</p>	<p>SCT works with families, foster carers, schools, statutory and voluntary providers to support the achievements of vulnerable children and those in the care of the council.</p> <p>SCT works to ensure that children in the care of the Council receive the support and opportunities that any parent would give their child.</p>
<p>Living in Sandwell</p>	<p>SCT ensures coordination between social care and the NHS to better protect vulnerable children.</p> <p>SCT supports families to improve children’s life chances.</p> <p>SCT works closely with the police to ensure that children are protected from the impact of crime, domestic violence, and all forms of exploitation.</p>

4. Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 The Contract has a comprehensive programme of governance arrangements. The Contract requires that the Executive Director of Children's Services, together with Council senior officers from finance and legal services, and the Chief Executive of SCT meet on at least a monthly basis to consider performance and operational matters. In addition, each quarter, the Lead Member for Children's Services and the Chief Executive meet with the Chair of the SCT Board and the Chief Executive of SCT, at a Strategic Partnership Board.
- 4.2 The Contract specifies that representatives of SCT should attend Council meetings when reasonably requested, specifically referencing attendance twice a year at the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board and at the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board if requested.
- 4.3 The Contract requires SCT to provide a comprehensive annual review for consideration by the Operational Partnership Board, the Strategic Partnership Board and then by the Cabinet. Progress against the performance indicators for the period 01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 is set out in the Annual Review, together with information about financial, workforce, and other performance areas.
- 4.4 Since April 2018 SCT has been the subject of seven monitoring visits from Ofsted as well as a focussed visit, three inspection visits of the fostering service, a full inspection under the Ofsted's framework and guidance for inspecting local authority services for children (ILACS) in May 2022 and most recently an inspection of adoption services.
- 4.5 The judgement following the inspection undertaken in May 2022 was one of 'requires improvement to be good'. With the judgement of 'good' received by the fostering service in August 2021 and a judgement of 'good' for the adoption service in December 2022 there is a clear trajectory of service improvement.

- 4.6 SCT has an Improvement Plan in place, based on the feedback provided by Ofsted following ILACS inspection with an aim of becoming a ‘Good’ or better organisation.
- 4.7 The delivery of the improvement plan is overseen by the Improvement Board, which is chaired by DfE appointed independent chair, and progress monitored as part of the Council’s contractual monitoring processes.
- 4.8 The DfE carried out a 6-monthly review and following its visit on 19th March 2024 was satisfied that progress was being made. They noted that *‘The working relationship and commitment to continual improvement was evident...’*, it was also acknowledged by DfE that there need to be *‘further discussions around the conditions needed for lifting the statutory direction and removing intervention’*, this was based on the positive progress that had been made since the statutory direction was initially made prior to the creation of the Trust The review was attended by Council representatives: Chief Executive and Director of Children’s Services.
- 4.9 SCT presented the Annual Review to the Children’s and Education Scrutiny Board on 9 September 2024.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 At its meeting on 19 October 2016, Cabinet was advised of the Government’s Statutory Direction (under Section 479A of the Education Act 1996) to set up a new arrangement in the form of a children’s trust to deliver children’s social care services. As a result, Sandwell Children’s Trust started operating on 1st April 2018. Any alternative to the current arrangement must be agreed by the Secretary of State for Education.

6 Implications

Resources:	Sandwell Children’s Trust received £74.475m to deliver the Council’s statutory responsibilities for children’s social care, and to provide targeted early help services in 2023/24. The contract sum for 2024/25 was agreed by Cabinet in February 2024 at £80.8m.
-------------------	--

	<p>The Contract Sum amount that SCT receives is agreed annually in line with mechanisms set out in the Service Delivery Contract.</p>
<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<p>The Council retains statutory responsibility and is accountable for the discharge of the relevant children’s social care services functions.</p> <p>At its meeting on 19 October 2016, Cabinet was advised of the Government’s Statutory Direction under section 479A Education Act 1996 to set up a new arrangement to deliver children’s social care services.</p> <p>Subsequently, SCT was created and began operating in 2018 under the terms of a service delivery contract put in place between the Council and SCT.</p> <p>The service delivery contract sets out a comprehensive programme of governance arrangements and, in particular, Schedule 3 of the service delivery contract requires that an annual review is presented to the Council each year.</p> <p>The delivery of this report and the Annual Review 2023/24 to the Council, therefore, fulfils SCT’s obligations in this regard under the terms of the service delivery contract.</p>
<p>Risk:</p>	<p>The Council’s strategic risk register previously identified a red risk relevant to this report, regarding improvements required in children’s social care services.</p> <p>As a result of the last ILACS judgement, this was reviewed, and the risk assessment was decreased from 16 (red) to 8 (amber). Based upon the progress to date, the risk assessment continues to be assessed as amber.</p>

Equality:	An Equality Impact Assessment screening is not required for this report. However, the improvement in children's services will have a positive effect on the lives of vulnerable children, young people and families in Sandwell, including those with protected characteristics.
Health and Wellbeing:	SCT continues to support children and families in Sandwell and as the quality of service that they deliver improves so does the impact they have on improving the health and wellbeing of children and families.
Social Value	<p>SCT supports children to achieve, feel safe, be supported and access opportunities. SCT supports care leavers to access education, employment and training.</p> <p>SCT supports community resilience through the recruitment of local residents as foster carers, helping children to remain close to communities they are from and to thrive in Sandwell.</p>
Climate Change:	There are no climate change implications attached to this report.
Corporate Parenting	Ensuring that SCT continues its improvement journey will support the Council in delivering its corporate parenting responsibilities.

7. Appendices

1. Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review 2023/24

8. Background Papers

None