

Annual Review

2023-2024



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Foreword

First, we must take this opportunity to thank Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith for her years of dedicated service as Chair of the Board. Jacqui's unique and significant contributions have been instrumental in the creation, establishment, and ongoing success of the Trust. We extend our heartfelt congratulations on her peerage and wish her well in her new role as Minister of State at the Department of Education.

The Annual Review offers a chance to reflect on another year of progress and achievements for the Trust, set against the backdrop of public sector financial challenges and a placement market on the verge of crisis.

The Trust continues to improve year by year, emerging as a confident, outward-looking organisation. It stands shoulder to shoulder with its partners, taking a leadership role when necessary. The introduction of the Sandwell Deal, supported financially by the Council, and a flourishing Social Worker Academy, ensures that staff choose to join and stay with the Trust, building careers across the organisation. The stability of our workforce and management team, along with the number of permanent staff, indicates that we have changed the narrative about working in Sandwell, becoming an 'employer of choice.'

We celebrate our diversity by encouraging staff to bring their whole selves to work and share their stories and experiences. Our ethos is brought to life daily through the words and actions of our staff, making us better equipped to support our families.

Our practice continues to improve, evidenced by practice reviews and observations. Social Workers benefit from comprehensive training, good supervision, and are encouraged to participate in reflective sessions and Practitioner Forums, which are well attended and foster mutual support and development.

The Sandwell Partnership is in a strong position following wide-ranging discussions to develop our collective response to Working Together to Safeguard Children. With unparalleled clarity of purpose and consensus on where to focus efforts and resources, there is a golden opportunity to realign around families and bring services into the heart of their communities, intervening sooner and more effectively.

Looking ahead, the Trust recognises the many challenges it and its partners will face. New legislation, policies, and statutory guidance, such as the Children's Social Care: National Framework, Working Together to Safeguard Children, National Framework Championing Kinship Care, and Data & Digital Strategy, will present rigorous tests. However, we are confident that with our refreshed Transformation Programme and a renewed focus from partners to develop Sandwell's Family Help offer, we have strong

foundations in place to meet these challenges and deliver better outcomes for our children, young people, and families.

Sandwell Children's Trust was created in 2018 with the clear purpose of improving the lives of children and young people. This ambition is shared by the Sandwell partnership, particularly our strategic partners Sandwell Council, with whom the Trust has a contract to deliver social care services to children, young people, and families.

This contract review document outlines the steps we have taken to deliver these improvements and the Trust's performance against key performance indicators. It is a detailed document that should be considered alongside the performance data in the appendices.

We thank the staff, leaders, and partners from across Sandwell for their contributions to the progress made since the creation of Sandwell Children's Trust and look forward to continuing to work together to further improve our services.



Linda Sanders
Interim Chair
Sandwell Children's Trust



Emma Taylor
Chief Executive
Sandwell Children's Trust

Executive Summary

Creation of the Trust

The Trust was created following the Government's Statutory Direction (under Section 479A of the Education Act 1996), in 2016, to set up a new arrangement in the form of a Children's Trust to deliver children's social care services. The statutory direction was issued in response to a long period of inadequate provision of children's social care services delivered by the council. The Statutory Direction set out the requirement to establish a new and distinct legal entity to provide children's social care services in Sandwell on behalf of the council. The Trust has day-to-day operational independence in the management and delivery of these services and is managed by a board of non-executive and executive directors. The council commissions the Trust to deliver statutory children's social care and targeted services, as specified in the Service Delivery Contract.

The Trust commenced operations on the 1 April 2018 with day-to-day operational management overseen by the Executive Management Team, who are accountable to the Trust Board.

The Trust Board

Chaired by the Right Honourable Jacqui Smith, until July 2024, the Trust Board is both supportive and challenging. The Board is complemented by 3 committees: Finance and Infrastructure, Workforce and Audit and Risk, each focussing on key matters that impact on the day to day running of the Trust. There is a strong sense of the ambition for children amongst all members; and there is good oversight of Trust activity, with regular, detailed reports that cover all aspects of the Trust, e.g., workforce, practice and performance, finance. The Chair is well sighted on strategic and relevant operational matters and key decisions are made swiftly after thorough scrutiny. The Chair of the Board was originally appointed by the Department for Education and regularly provides written reports, to the Parliamentary Under- Secretary for Children, on the Trust's performance and progress adding a further element of scrutiny and challenge.

Governance

A comprehensive programme of governance arrangements is in place. The Trust and council officers meet at least monthly at the Operational Partnership Board (OPB), to consider performance and operational matters.

The OPB is chaired by the Trust Chief Executive. On a quarterly basis, the Chair of Sandwell Children's Trust and the Trust Chief Executive meets with the Lead Member

for Children's Services and the Director of Children's Services at a Strategic Partnership Board (SPB). The SPB is chaired by SMBC Chief Executive.

Living our purpose and ethos

To complement the Trust's purpose of improving the lives of children and young people, staff from across the Trust have collaborated to articulate and embed our ethos which sets out the ways in which we achieve this, with specific focus on our children and families and ourselves and partners.

Our Ethos

Children and families

- We have high aspirations for our children, we make a difference and change children's lives for the better.
- We place children at the heart of everything we do.
- We keep families safe, keeping them together where possible.
- We work alongside our families, guided by their needs.
- We empower and work with the whole, extended family.
- We only use language that our children and young people can understand.
- We celebrate our children and enable them to smile, laugh, play, and succeed.

Ourselves and our partners

- We support and look after each other.
- We make meaningful connections and collaborate effectively with the wider Sandwell family.
- We share a common understanding of our responsibilities.
- We encourage each other to learn, develop, and reflect.
- We embrace diversity and celebrate each other's differences.
- We promote the positives - we are advocates for the Trust.

Our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy

ED&I has a high profile across the Trust, and there has been significant progress since the Trust was created, but there is still a lot more to do. We continue to listen, learn, and change. We all play a part in championing a diverse workforce, recognising, and addressing any attitudes or behaviours that do not reflect our ethos. We want to be responsive to national and regional events that could have an emotional impact on our diverse workforce and the families we work with. We need to understand how these have affected different communities and develop actions to help deal with them.

Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) was created in 2018 with a clear purpose; to improve the lives of children and young people in Sandwell. Founded on core principles of excellence, equality and opportunity for all, Sandwell Children's Trust is resolute in creating an environment that recognises and celebrates differences, designs services to meet the diverse needs of our children, young people and families attracts and retains the best staff. What we gain from our diverse communities and workforce is immeasurable.

We are striving to be an organisation that values differences and inclusiveness, where everyone can reach their full professional potential free from any form of prejudice and in turn create a workforce that is knowledgeable about the communities, we support so we can connect directly with our young people and families and be responsive to their needs. Led by our Chief Executive and with the full support of our Trust Board, promoting equality, valuing diversity and maximising inclusivity is about recognising that we all have our part to play.

The children and families of Sandwell along with our staff and partners are important contributors to our continuous development, learning and the overall success of what we do. Therefore, we will ensure that we provide equality of opportunity for all so that meaningful ways of collaboration, participation and contribution can flourish, and we strive to strengthen our cultural competences and embed it as an employer, an organisation and in practice.

The Trusts ED&I Strategy, along with the Trust's Workforce Strategy is in the process of being refreshed. This process includes consultations with our people, leadership hub, executive team and union colleagues.

The Trust now has an ED&I task group, that includes Ambassadors for LGBTQ+, Disability, Heritage, Women, Faith, Families and Environment, who have been provided with training that enables them to support and signpost and ED&I issues. All individuals now have a career pathway and specific training has been provided to support underrepresented groups at various leadership levels as well as on-going training through induction, ED&I Specific training, HR manager training modules and our leadership hub. Communication is important and there are regular updates across the Trust, further feedback is obtained and analysed through the Trust's Employee Engagement survey run in 2023.

Significant work has taken place with our families and communities including rephrasing our language, through our early help strategy, strengthened corporate parenting board, the creation of diversity fact sheets and providing increasing support documents and books in relation to ED&I activity for our families and children.

Work has also taken place on the Trust's buildings with all areas within the Wellman Building being accessible to everyone, additional disability bays have been created and there are dedicated prayer and contemplation rooms. The Trust is now also better able to analyse and report ED&I data and going forward will better use it to identify any concern areas that need to be addressed.

Overview of Sandwell and our children

Sandwell is an urban area lying in the centre of the West Midlands conurbation, made up of six small urban towns. It ranks as the 15th most deprived authority in the country for income deprivation that affects children, with this deprivation spread across the borough.

Sandwell has an estimated population of 344,210, which has risen year on year since the 2011 census. 85,824 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Sandwell. This is 24.9% of the total population in the area. There has been an 14.98% increase in the number of children and young people living in Sandwell since 2011, which has required the creation of 5,300 new primary school places and 3,915 secondary school places.

Sandwell is a diverse borough with 30.1% of the total population from black and minoritised ethnic groups. This percentage increases for children and young people from minoritised ethnic groups, who account for 49% of Children aged 0-17, compared with 26.2% in England. The largest minoritised ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are of Indian (8,246) and Pakistani origin (5,917).

Many of Sandwell's children and young people experience poor outcomes. Approximately 25% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years are living in low-income families. Around 7 in 1,000 children die before their first birthday, levels of teenage pregnancy are higher than the national level and 28.2% of 11-year-olds are classified as obese.

The number of children entitled to free school meals has increased by 30.2% since March 2020 with 20,209 children currently in receipt of a free school meal, which



equates to 33.2% of the school population. The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language in primary schools is 32.4% (the national average is 20.9%); in secondary schools it is 29.2% (the national average is 17.2%). Over 3,100 children are subject to an Education, Health and Care Plan. This figure has risen significantly since 2019 and continues to rise.

As of 31 March 2024, there were 808 children we care for, with 453 children subject of a child protection plan and 658 Children in Need. The rate per 10,000 of children we care for has stabilised over the last 12 months and currently stands at 94.1. This is an improving trend, and now below statistical neighbour average (96.7 per 10,000). We currently have a transformation plan and financial plan to reduce the number of children in care further. The rate of children on a children protection plan has increased over the previous 12 months.

Introduction

The Annual Review is a formal requirement of the Trust's contract with the council. The aim of the review is to look back over the previous 12 months and understand how far we have achieved our goals. The review is the first strategic document of the year, informing our business plan and our improvement plan.

The Service Delivery Contract allows for the Trust to be 'relieved of its obligations to provide its services as a result of a "Relief Event'. A Relief Event is an event such as a fire, storm, accidental loss or damage to the Trust premises, power failure, or the failure by the council to fulfil the council dependencies.

Schedule 3 of the Service Delivery Contract outlines the matters that are to be reported on as part of the Annual Review. These are addressed in the following sections:

- Section (a) The Improvement Plan
- Section (b) Performance of Services against the Performance Targets in the preceding Contract Year
- Section (c) The thematic findings of any Audits and Surveys carried out by the Trust during the previous Contract Year
- Section (d) The outcome of any Ofsted monitoring visits and/or Ofsted inspections
- Section (e) Performance against budgets in the preceding Contract Year
- Section (f) Demand analysis in respect of the Services against assumptions and models in respect of the preceding Contract Year
- Section (g) The outcome of any Agreed Action Plan and/or Rectification Plan that was agreed in the preceding Contract Year
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- Section (i) Any proposed changes to the Services Specification, the Financial Mechanism and/or the Performance Indicators for the following Contract Year
- Section (j) The contractual governance arrangements set out in Schedule 19 (Governance)
- Section (k) Such other matters that the Parties may agree from time to time

Section (a)

The Improvement Plan

Sandwell Children's Trust is an independent organisation owned by Sandwell Council. Day to day management is overseen by its Executive Management Team, which is accountable to the Trust Board.

As part of our improvement journey, we have a robust improvement plan which outlines progress and evidence against the seven recommendations from the ILACs inspection in May 2022. These recommendations can be seen on page 31.

The current context is still one of a national shortage of social workers, where almost all areas have been affected. There has been a disproportionate impact on the Trust, given its difficult history, workforce stability remains one of the Trust's biggest challenges. Despite this, efforts to improve continue at pace. There is a clear sense of direction and strong ambition for the Trust's future, which is underpinned by our five priorities. In early 2022 our locality model was established, whereby three Heads of Service oversee three social work localities, alongside borough wide services for children we care for/care experienced young people, disabled children and fostering. The model is now well embedded. Further modelling around our Front Door MASH and Children we Care for Service is well underway.

The Trust Board is both supportive and challenging. There is a strong ambition and high expectations from all members; and there is good oversight, with the Board receiving regular detailed reports regarding all aspects of the Trust's work, e.g., workforce, practice and performance, finance. The Chair is well sighted on strategic and relevant operational matters and key decisions are made swiftly after thorough scrutiny.

There is a positive partnership approach between the Trust and the council and there is evidence that children are prioritised in Sandwell; and whilst there is appropriate challenge through our governance arrangements, there are constructive relationships between officers and politicians across the Trust and council.

There is a clear sense of direction and oversight across the wider partnership, as well as clarity about our priorities which are overseen by the Children and Families Strategic Partnership. These include early help, mental health, and children we care for.

Our Strategic Leadership Team has been established for three years now and is developing well. It is clear on its remit which is to deliver on our priorities, addressing any issues collectively so we continually improve. Likewise, our wider Operational Leadership Hib comes together regularly, both to reflect on practice but also to spend time learning and coaching together as leaders and helping to shape improvements - all part of our inclusive and collective culture.

Our ethos underpins our whole approach and there are clear expectations about how everyone should behave and live our values. This links closely with our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion strategy. Overseen by a Strategic Governance Group, there is a strong commitment to excel in this area. Not only do we want to deliver on the strategy’s action plan but make the strategy a ‘state of being’ for everyone in the Sandwell Family.

Transformation Programme

The Trust’s Transformation Programme has become well established in its first 2 years clearly mapping out an ambitious programme of projects continuing the transformation of the Trust into the child and family focused, efficient, effective and compassionate organisation that we aspire to be. All staff are familiar with the priorities and ambitions for the programme and are able to see how they have contributed to the many successes so far.

However, a successful and responsive transformation programme needs to be dynamic, reflective of changing circumstances and adaptable. With this in mind, the Chief Executive led the Strategic Leadership team through a review of the programme in the final quarter of the year. Reflecting on key pieces of legislation and guidance, and on the ambition of the Strategic Partnership to deliver on the aspirations agreed when developing the Families First Pathfinder bid.

Consequently, the Transformation Programme has been completely refreshed – using the strong foundations and successes of its first stage to provide a base to build higher aspirations. The former Prevention and Partnership priorities have been combined into a single priority, Partnerships – Families First, which is focused on the Partnership developing its Early Help into a Family Help offer. Focussing on families’ strengths and enabling them to make decisions about their lives, multi-agency teams will work in the community providing support early.



A refreshed programme based on our 5 priorities will continue to provide the narrative of how the Trust continues to transform. Ensuring our resources are prioritised and focused in the right areas to maximise impact with activities aligned and co-ordinated towards shared ambitions.

Priorities and their ambition statements



Priority 1 – People

“A place where our people are proud to be part of a skilled Sandwell family by being respected, supported, nurtured and empowered to thrive”



Priority 2 – Practice

“To improve the lives of children and young people through caring, compassionate support and proportionate high-quality interventions based on each child’s needs”



Priority 3 – Partnerships – Families First

“To develop integrated services for children and transform the way we help families in their communities at the earliest opportunity. With bespoke, community driven multi-agency services, we want to empower families, enabling them to improve their own lives”



Priority 4 – Integrated Approach to Care

“To recognise and understand the needs of the children and young people we support by ensuring services are designed to best meet those needs, enabling children and young people to fulfil their potential”



Priority 5 - Striving for Excellence

“To create the environment that transforms the Trust into an intelligence led, innovative, aspirational and confident organisation”

Section (b)

The Trust's performance of the Services against the Performance Targets in the preceding Contract Year

Over the course of the year, we have reported our key contract performance on a monthly basis and are pleased to say, we have maintained good performance in many areas.

Performance in a few areas dipped in the first half of the year due to staff shortages and recruitment issues of Social Workers, many of the Contract KPIs improved in the second half of the year.

As of 31 March 2024, the SCT has met 12 of our KPI targets, a further 2 are within the contract tolerance no indicators within failure zone.

Throughout the financial year a number of measures have seen a decline in the earlier part of the year, however improvements have been made and include:

- Percentage timeliness of Contact to MASH within 24 hours (PI1)
- Percentage of Initial Child Protection Conferences within 15 working days of the strategy discussion (PI3)
- Timeliness of Single Assessments within 45 working days (PI4) Children unallocated longer than 5 working days (PI5)
- Child Protection Supervision in last 4 weeks (PI8)
- Missing Return Interviews (PI9)
- Children in Need Visits within the last 4 weeks (PI10)
- Social Worker permanent vacancy rates (PI13)
- Social Worker Workloads (PI14)

Measures which have declined throughout the latter part of the year include:

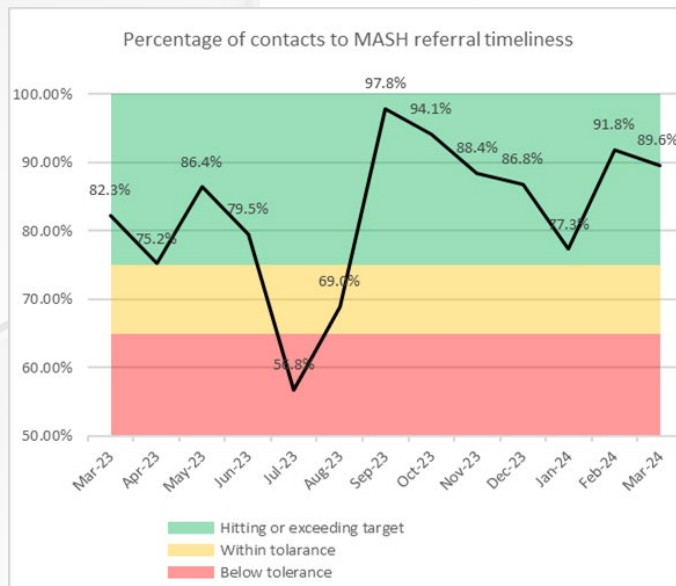
Children in Care Visits and Reviews within Statutory Timescales (PI11 and PI12) and Child Protection Numbers and Rates (PI2)

Below is the individual performance of the key performance indicators specified within the contract:

PI1 - The percentage of contacts accepted as a MASH referral within 24 hours

Target: > 75% **Tolerance:> 65%** **Failure: < 65%**

This measure is important as it shows how efficiently our front door is operating and how quickly we are responding to referrals where threshold is not immediately clear.



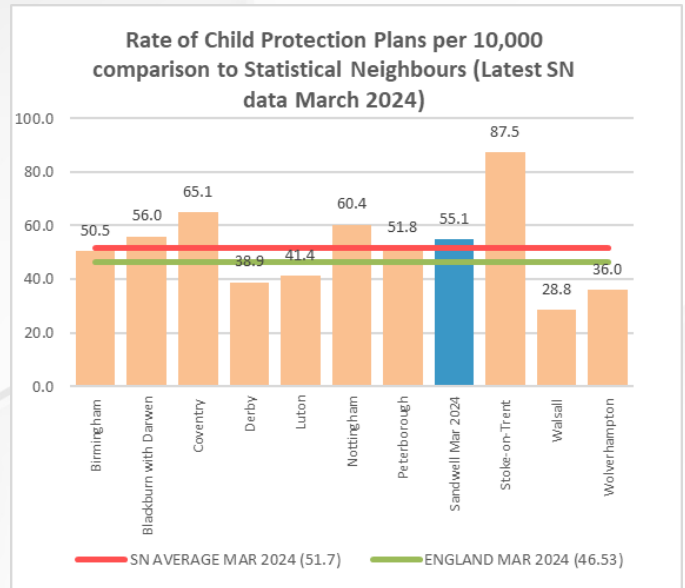
Throughout financial year 2023-24, performance fluctuated between 66.8% in July 2023 up to 97.8% in September 2023, with an average of 82.7% throughout the financial year (performance was above target for 10 reporting periods, within tolerance for 1 reporting period and within failure for one reporting period).

PI2 - The rate of Children who are the subject of a Child Protection Plan (per 10,000) of our child population

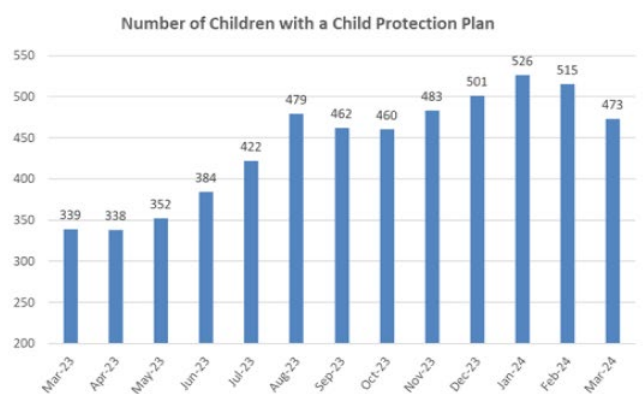
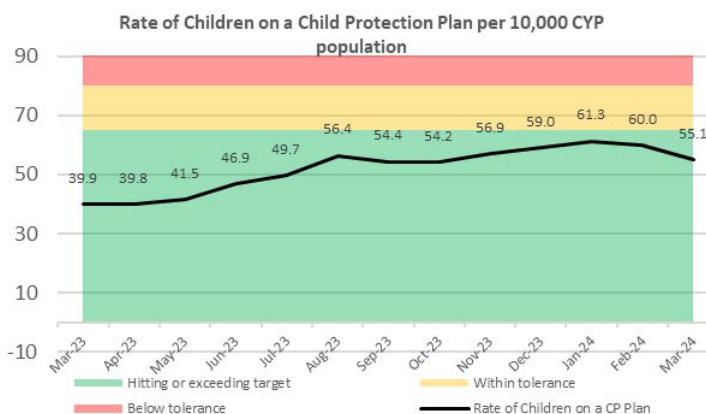
Target: <65 Children per 10,000 **Tolerance:** < 80 Children **Failure:** > 80 Children

This measure gives us a sense of our demand, how we are handling this demand and how we are applying our thresholds for children where there are child protection concerns.

Our statistical neighbour average is 51.7 and the England average is 46.53 (measured at March 2024).



Throughout the year we have worked hard to ensure that the threshold for child protection has been applied consistently and with the stark increase between July 2023 and January 2024 the QAS and Operational Service worked together to review Children on CP plans for 12+ months alongside thresholds for S47 enquiries and Initial Child Protection conferences, following the work undertaken CP plans now is on a downward trajectory but still above statistical neighbour average of 51.7 and England Average of 46.53, the rate of Children on a Children on a Child Protection Plan as of 31st March 2024 was 55.1 (473 Children on a Plan) (performance in this measure has achieved target in last 12 reporting periods)

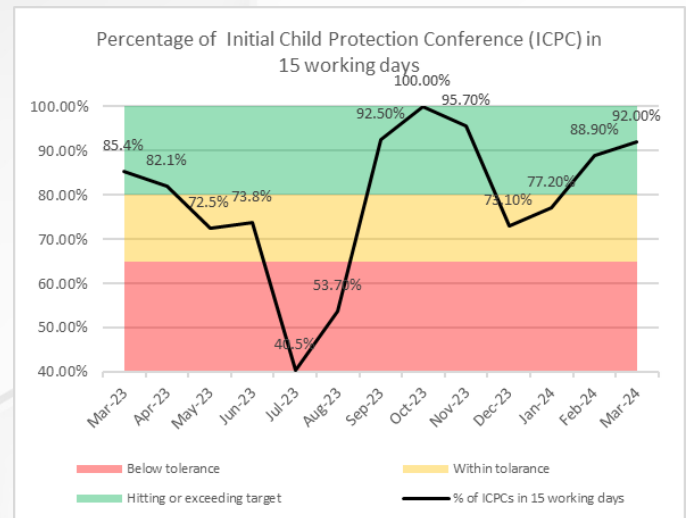


PI3 – The percentage of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC’s) held within 15 working days of the strategy discussion that agreed S47 enquiries were necessary

Target: > 80% **Tolerance:> 65%** **Failure: < 65% Section**

This measure shows how timely we are when we are completing S47 enquiries and organising Initial Child Protection Conferences for children.

It gives us a sense of how we are managing demand in this area and how quickly we can bring together a group of professionals to make decisions for children who are potentially at risk of significant harm.



Performance in this indicator fluctuated between 40.5% in July 2023 to 100% in October 2023, as of 31st March 2024 performance was 92% which was above all 2023 comparators below

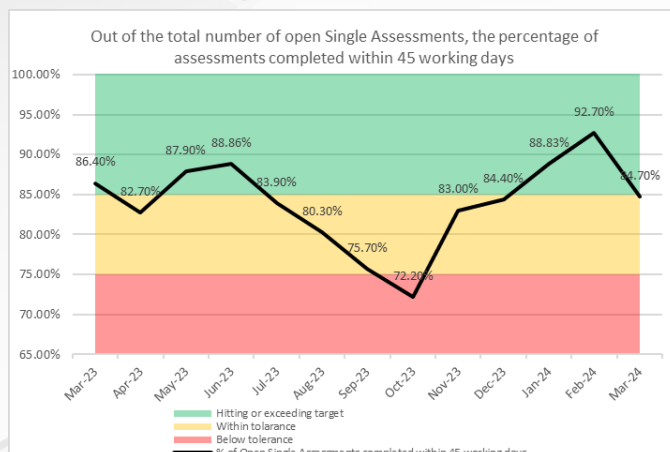
- Statistical Neighbours – 82.8%
- England Average – 79.4%
- West Midlands Average – 81%

(This measure has been above contract target for 7 months of this financial year, within tolerance for three months and failure for two months)

PI4 - The percentage of Single Assessments completed within 45 working days

Target: > 85% **Tolerance:> 75%** **Failure: < 75%**

This measure shows how timely our Single Assessments are for children (in line with the statutory maximum expectation of 45 working days). Most Single Assessments are completed by Social Workers within Locality Services, but a significant amount is completed across other service areas as part of updating/review assessments for children.



We saw a dip in performance in the middle of the financial year, which coincided with workforce fragility, performance improved significantly between October 2023 and March 2024 and above our comparators:

- West Midlands – 81.2%
- Statistical neighbour – 81.5%
- England Average – 82.5%).

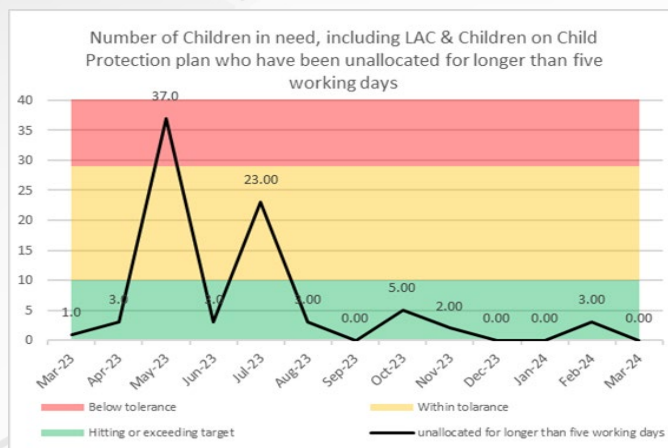
(This measure has been above contract target for 5 months of this financial year, within tolerance for six months and failure for one month)

PI5 - The number of children unallocated for longer than 5 working days

Target: <10 **Tolerance:** < 30 **Failure:** >30

This measure helps to demonstrate how well we have oversight on every child's situation, and how well we are handling throughput at the Front Door and other transfer points.

Poor performance in this area would mean children do not have a social worker for lengthy periods of time, which could be a dangerous situation.



There are circumstances where having children unallocated for a short period of time is reasonable, but this should be kept to a minimum.

As can be seen our performance in this area has consistently been better than our target this year, with just one month below target and tolerance, in May and July 2023 we had a higher number of children unallocated for longer than 5 working days than we would of liked, this was due to workforce stability issues. A clear plan was implemented to manage allocations and transfer of work which has continued and driven higher performance since July 2023.

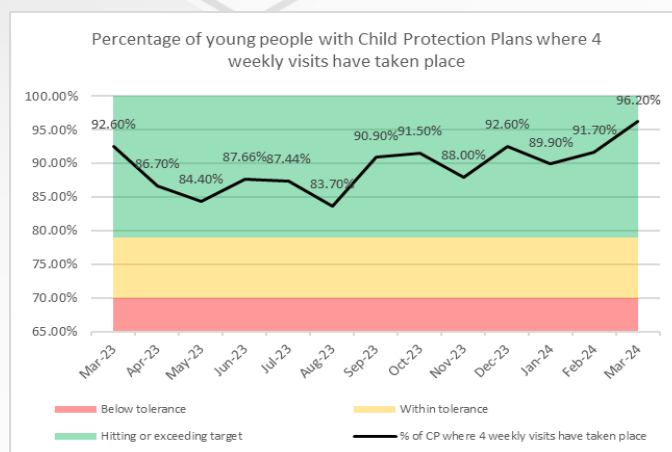
(performance above target for 10 out of 12-month reporting cycle).

PI6 - The percentage of Children subject to a CP Plan visited within 4 weeks

Target: >80% **Tolerance:>70%** **Failure: <70%**

This measure provides part of our understanding of how well we are interacting with children and families under Child Protection.

The frequency of visiting children under these circumstances is locally defined, and in Sandwell we expect social workers to visit children subject of a Child Protection Plan at least every 4 weeks.



Alongside this measure, it is important to understand the quality of these interventions through practice reviews and management oversight. Good performance in this area contributes to demonstrating purposeful intervention and safeguarding.

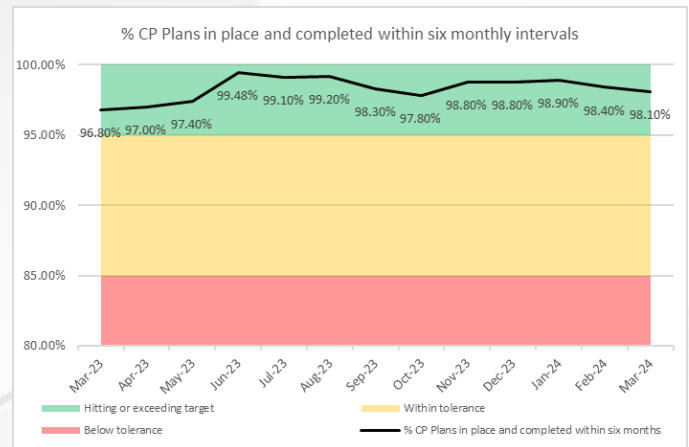
Performance in this area has remained strong throughout the financial year with performance remaining above target for all 12 reporting cycles.

PI7- The percentage of Children whose Child Protection Plan has been updated within the last six months

Target: >95% **Tolerance:>85%** **Failure: <85%**

This indicator shows how often we are reviewing and discussing children’s plans and our interventions.

Good performance in this area would help to show we are ensuring our interventions are having the desired impact, and making changes where warranted.



Plans that are not updated are normally an indicator of drift and delay within our interventions.

This measure is linked to how often Social Workers are holding / recording their Children’s Core Group Meetings and Conference Chairs their Review Child Protection Conferences.

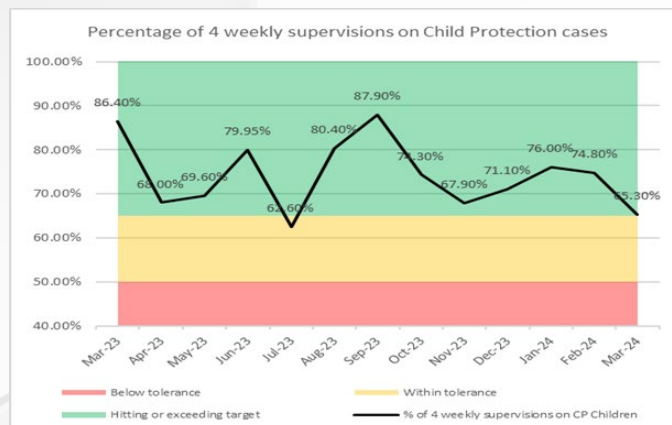
Performance has been relatively consistent – between 96.8% and 99.48% throughout the year this has remained above our target for all 12 reporting months in 2023-24.

PI8 – Of all children subject of a Child Protection Plan, the percentage who have evidence of formal case supervision within the previous 4 weeks

Target: >65% **Tolerance:>50%** **Failure: <50%**

This measure helps to demonstrate formal management oversight for this cohort of children.

Good performance in this area shows that Team Managers are regularly considering progress in these cases and providing social workers the opportunity for reflection on a child-by-child basis.



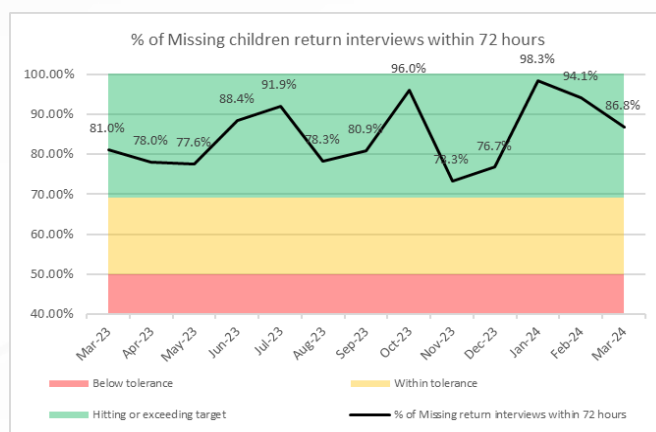
Our performance over the financial year has fluctuated between 62.6% in July 2023 and 87.9% in September 2023 and above target for 11 out of the 12 reporting months.

PI9 - The percentage of young people returning from a missing episode who have had a return interview within 72 hours

Target: >70% **Tolerance:>50%** **Failure: <50%**

This measure helps to understand how well we are responding to children at risk of exploitation after they return from being missing.

Good performance would mean we are gathering information / intelligence from children at the earliest opportunity that would help us safeguard them better now and during future safeguarding concerns

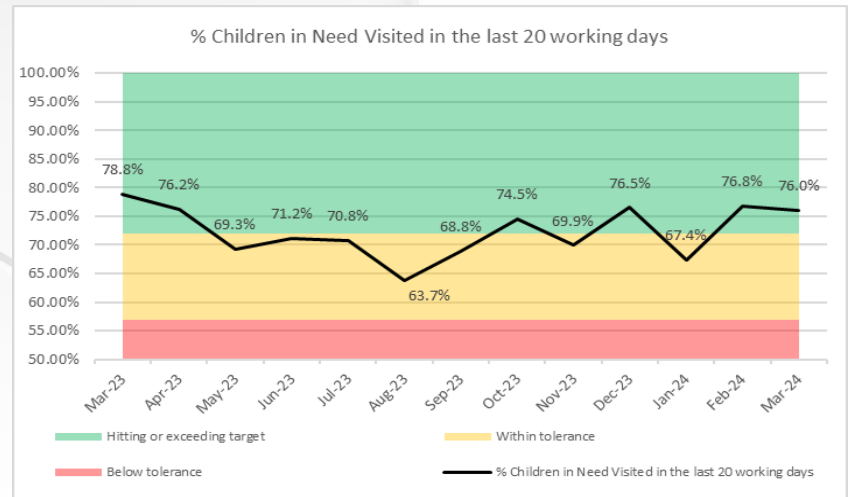


Our performance in this area has been good, although the relatively small sample sizes per month mean there can be variance month to month (performance has ranged between 73.3% and 98.3% and above target for all 12 reporting months).

PI10 - The percentage of Children subject to a Children in Need Plan visited within the previous four weeks

Target: >73% **Tolerance:>58%** **Failure: <58%**

This measure provides part of our understanding of how well we are interacting with children and families under Child in Need.



The frequency of visiting children under these circumstances is locally defined, and in Sandwell we expect social workers to visit children subject of a Child in Need Plan at least every 4 weeks.

Alongside this measure, it is important to understand the quality of these interventions through practice reviews and management oversight.

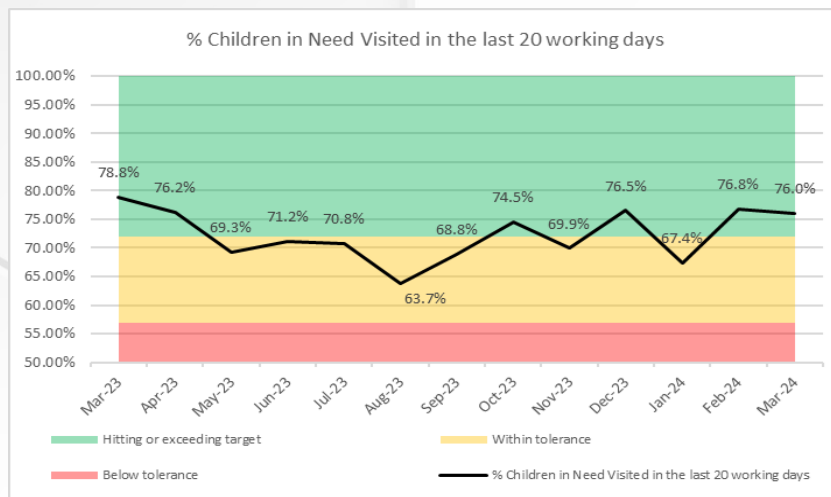
Performance in relation to Children in Need visits has improved significantly over this financial year in comparison to 2022-23 ranging between 63.7% and 76.8% this has been maintained above target over 6 reporting periods, with 6 reporting periods within tolerance.

PI11 – The percentage of Children we Care for visited in accordance with statutory requirements

Target: >90% **Tolerance:>80%** **Failure: <80%**

This measure provides part of our understanding of how well we are interacting with Children in Care.

The frequency of visiting children under these circumstances is defined through statute.



Good performance helps to show we have established relationships with our Children in Care, know their needs and meet their needs, driving permanence and robust planning.

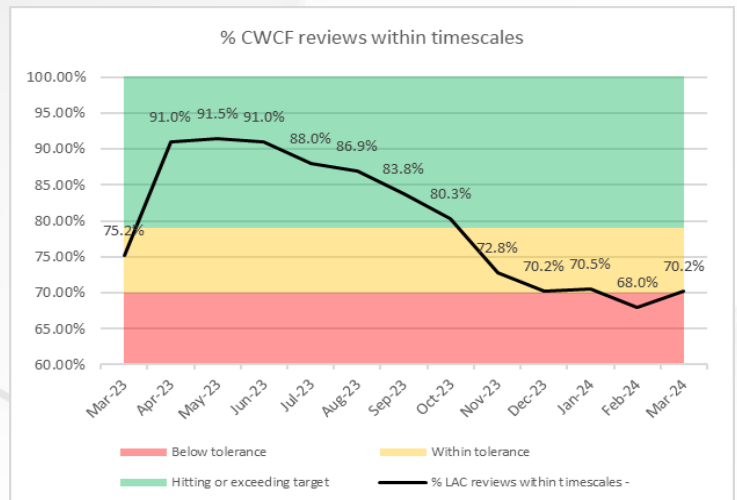
Many Children in Care are placed in stable situations and are secure with their carers. Therefore, statutory visits range between 4-12 weeks based on Child needs and stability.

Performance has ranged in this measure from 81.7% in August 2023 and 90.1% in April 2023, out of the 12 reporting months CIC visits has been within contract tolerance for 11 months. Performance in localities (where main staffing issues have been) has ranged between 70-85% during the year with CIC service between 80-95%.

PI12 - The percentage of Children we Care for Reviews held within statutory timescales

Target: >80% **Tolerance:>70%** **Failure: <70%**

This measure shows the timeliness of Children we Care for reviews, and contributes to our understanding of how well we monitor the progress of Looked After Children's plans, and ensure that we are doing what we say we will.



Good performance in this area will show that we independently review children's plans on a regular basis, at least every 6 months. This is a cumulative measure across the financial year starting in April each year.

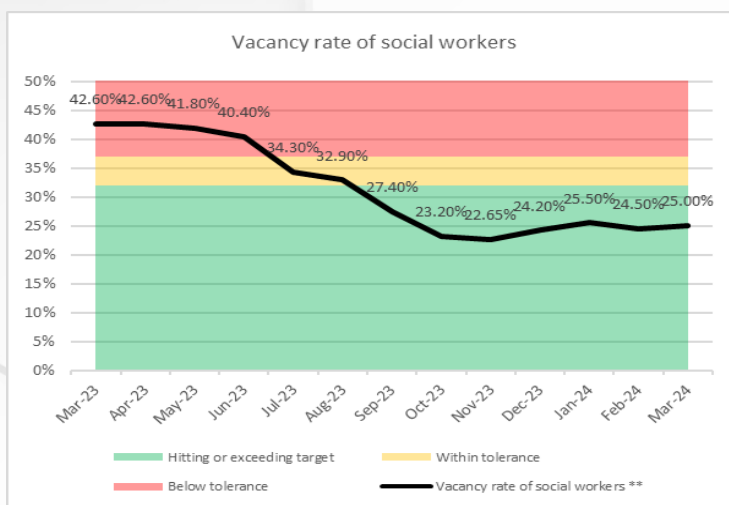
Our performance in this area has been above tolerance and target for 7 out of 12 reporting months, within tolerance for four months and below target and tolerance for one month (February 2024) although performance is 5% below same period in previous year (March 2024), this is primarily due to the period of workforce instability where CWCF reviews needed to be re-convened between June and August 2023 impacted as this measure is cumulative throughout the financial year. At the end of the financial year this was 0.2% above tolerance.

PI13 - The vacancy rate of permanent front line Social Workers

Target: >32% **Tolerance:>37%** **Failure: <37%**

This measure helps us to determine the stability of our case holding workforce.

Whilst agency social workers are essential for an organisation to quickly meet fluctuations in demand, a stable, permanent workforce is also critical for long term improvement.



During the financial year there has been a national crisis in relation to recruitment of permanent Social Workers including a 2 tier agency workforce agenda consisting of high-cost agency workers within project teams driving a national problem. This measure impacted directly on poorer performance on a number of other contract KPIs during the start and middle of the financial year for 2023-24.

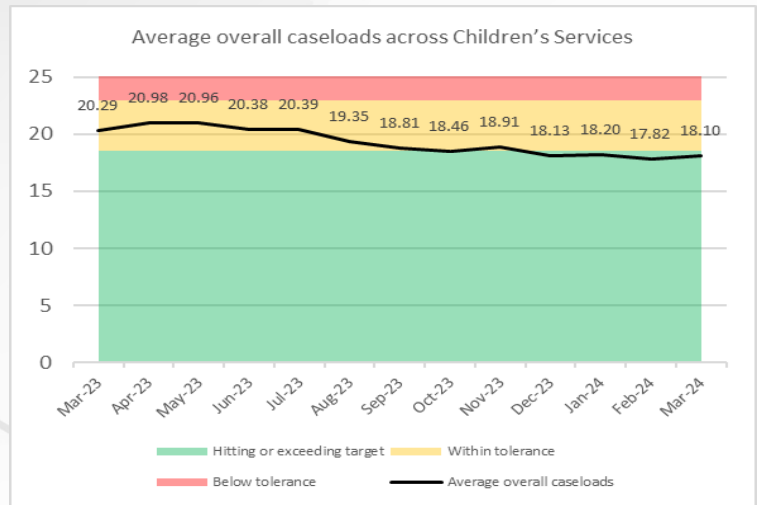
During the financial year the social work establishment was reviewed through thorough analysis of number of Children and Young people referred and assessed within Social Care Teams based on level of need and ended up on Children in Need, Child Protection or in Care, establishment model was split between assessment and intervention services and court and CP teams within the locality services, reducing the social worker establishment from 203 Social Workers to 187 in July 2023.

Throughout the financial year our permanent vacancy rate has been on a downward trajectory starting in April 2023 at 42.6% reducing to 25% at end March 2024, with lowest position in November 2023 at 22.65%. We continue to drive recruitment and retention within the Trust with a number of different initiatives to attract a more permanent workforce.

PI14 - Average case loads across the service

Target: >18.5 **Tolerance:>23** **Failure: <23**

This measure helps us to understand the changing demand within our organisation so that we can target our recruitment and retention activities and adjust our establishment.



Over the previous 12 months you can see that caseloads started with an average of 20.98 in April 2023 this decreased to 17.82 in February 2024 and steadily increased up to 18.1 at end March 2024.

Although fluctuations have been between 17.82 and 20.98 within the financial year, performance has remained better than target and tolerance and improvements have been seen since August 2023. It is worth noting that whilst 18.1 children is the average workload per Social Worker, a more detailed review of senior social workers especially within the Locality Services (A&I and CP and Court) (not ASYEs) are carrying higher than average child workloads.

ASYE caseloads range between 12 and 18 based on the where they are within their assisted year of employment and their level of experience. Please see table below.

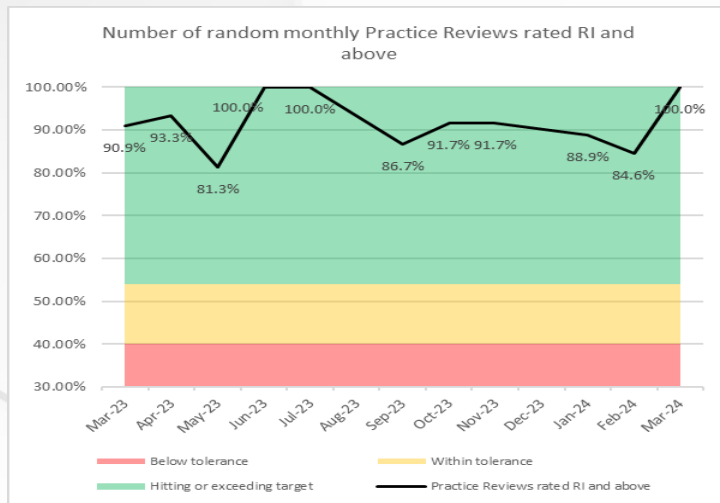
Length of Time ASYE	Children's Workload Numbers
Up to 3 months	12
3-6 months	14
6-9 months	16
9-12 months	18

PI15 - The percentage of practice reviews that are rated Requires Improvement or better

Target: >55% **Tolerance:>40%** **Failure: <40%**

This is a very important indicator as it shows the progress of practice improvement across Practice Reviews.

Good performance is an indication that our assessments, plans and interventions with children and families are improving.



The quality of our work has been consistent according to our random monthly practice reviews. During the financial year performance has remained above target for whole year April 2023 – March 2024 ranging from 81.3% to 100%.

During April 2023 and March 2024, the Trust undertook 138 practice reviews and 109 thematic reviews.

Please note that no practice reviews took place in August 2023 and December 2023 focusing on practice learning events these were:

- Learning from QA/Compliments and complaints activities in August 2023
- Learning from QA activity from PLO in December 2023

Section (c)

The thematic findings of any Audits and Surveys carried out by the Trust during the previous Contract Year

Over the last few years the Quality Assurance (QA) framework has continually developed to strengthen our practice through learning identified from the variety of QA activities. Our approach recognises the need to have a range of QA activities aimed to measure and evaluate the quality of services delivered to children and families. The framework enables us to capture feedback from children, families and our staff which shapes and validates our practice and service delivery. Our practice and thematic reviews, dip sampling, external reviews and Practice Observations enable the Trust to evaluate practice and identify areas that require further strengthening whilst identifying areas of good practice.

Through a robust closing the loop process and feedback mechanisms, the findings from all the QA activities are shared with all relevant practitioners, managers and executive management team to ensure actions are taken at both individual child but also at a more strategic level, if required.

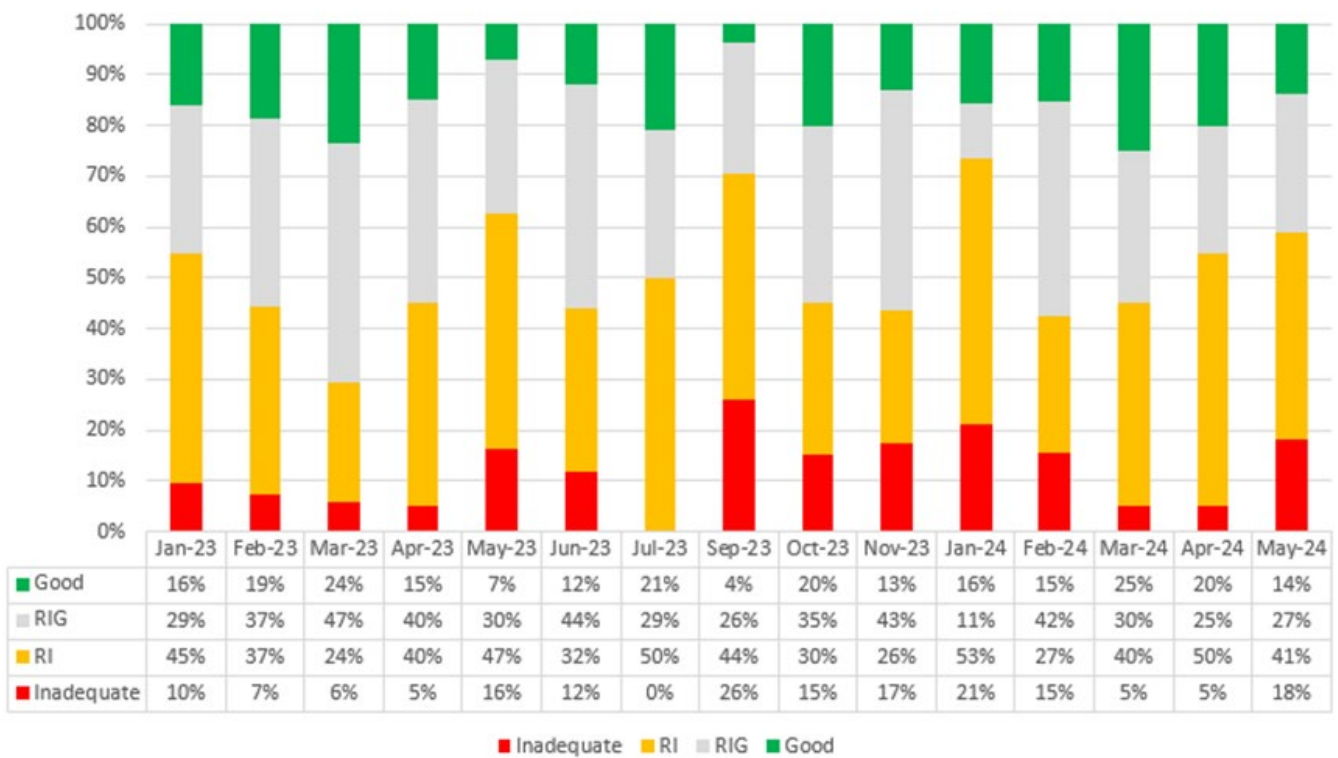
This targeted approach not only assists managers to support individual practitioners to address any gaps in practice, but also provides evidence and informs and shapes further systems changes at a more strategic level.

Alongside understanding our performance better, our approach of sharing findings from our Quality Assurance activities enables the staff to continually cultivate a work culture where improving practice is business as usual. We have established a culture where managers and social workers are held to account through performance boards, performance surgeries, senior management meetings including Children's Management Team and the Practice Improvement Board. This approach has been successful for most teams and we have seen marked improvements. However, there is still much to do to ensure practice is consistently improved with all service area/teams. We have streamlined our performance reporting to ensure Team Managers and Senior Management have the right performance information to drive improvements and so they are not overwhelmed with the volume of information they receive. Examples of this include daily locality dashboards which include key performance for each locality drilled down to a team level in one singular report.

The key themes from our practice/thematic reviews during April 2023 to March 2024 were as follows:

Areas of strength	Areas for development
IRO letters to children	Evidence of tools used e.g. Graded Care Profile and DARAC to inform Assessments.
Carers supporting Children’s Diversity needs and contact with wider family	Children’s Plans are written in a format they understand in line with our ED&I strategy and Practice model
Evidence of a detailed cultural genogram and detailed child summaries.	Life and Memory work/Direct work
Family Group conferences	Contingency Planning
Step down process to Strengthening Families	Reflective supervisions that drive planning and support staff in working with families

% of Practice & Thematic Reviews rated RI & Good
Jan 23 - May 24



Section (d)

The outcome of any Ofsted monitoring visits and/or Ofsted inspections

The table below outlines the outcome of Ofsted's Visits and Inspections in 2022/24:

Inspection / Visit	Date	Judgement
ILACS Full Inspection	9-20 th May 2022	Requires Improvement to be Good https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80549
VAA Adoption Inspection	5-9th December 2022	Good https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/7/1264707
SEND Inspection (Council, ICB and SCT)	3-7 th July 2023	Level 2 https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80549

ILACS Full Inspection 9th to 20th May 2022 Inspection Highlights

The ILACS inspection took place in May 2022. Feedback from inspectors was as expected, we have areas of strength and areas for continued improvement. The current biggest issue to sustained improvement is recruitment and retention of experienced Social Workers, which is a national issue.

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires Improvement to be Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires Improvement to be Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires Improvement to be Good
Overall Judgement	Requires Improvement to be Good

Ofsted reported that, "Services for vulnerable children and families in Sandwell have improved since the last inspection in November 2017, when they were judged to be inadequate. Since April 2018, children's services have been delivered by Sandwell Children's Trust on behalf of the local authority. New strategic leadership, which includes the chief executive of the Trust, has increased the pace and trajectory of improvement over the last year. Stronger strategic leadership has led to improvements in much of the service, through changes such as the move to a locality model, implementation of an early help strategy, a social work career pathway and high-quality specialist services."

Many of children’s needs are well met by social workers who collaborate effectively with partners in other services."

ILACS Inspection – Recommendations

- OR1 - The application of thresholds by partners when referring to children’s social care, to ensure that children and families receive the right service.
- OR2 - Consistent threshold decision-making, particularly when escalating statutory involvement at the ‘front door’ when the criteria are met for child protection enquiries.
- OR3 -Management oversight and support, including the process of escalation and challenge by independent chairs to ensure timely progression of children’s plans.
- OR4 - The effective application of the Public Law Outline (PLO) and decision-making, to achieve timely permanence for children who come into care.
- OR5 - Life-story work for all children in care, to support their understanding of the reasons for them being in care.
- OR6 - The range of suitable placements for older children and those with complex needs.
- OR7 - Timely transition planning to prepare children in care, including those with disabilities, for adulthood.

Adoption Inspection (VAA) – 5th to 9th December 2022 Inspection Highlights

HMI Ofsted inspectors visited us on 5th to 9th December 2022 to undertake a VAA inspection for our Adoption service the findings were as follows:

Judgement	Grade
Overall experiences and progress of service users taken into account	Good
How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected	Good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Requires Improvement to be Good
Overall Judgement	Good

The Trust progresses early permanence for children when adoption is identified as a part of a child's care plan. The Trust works closely with the regional adoption agency to progress early permanence as a result the number of Children placed in foster to adopt placements has increased

- Children build positive relationships with adopters
- Children are introduced to adopters in a planned and sensitive way
- Children's social workers work collaboratively with the Regional Adoption Agency to ensure that children and adopters, once matched and placed, are supported well. As a result, there have been no disruptions for children who have been placed by the Trust

The Trust has developed a governance structure that enables leaders to maintain some good oversight of the delivery of the adoption service provided by the Regional Adoption Agency

The culture of the Trust is characterised by high expectations and aspirations for all children. This is demonstrated in their desire to achieve permanence for children and stability in placements.

VAA Inspection - Recommendations

- Ensuring we encourage and gather feedback and consider the wishes, feelings, and views of children to help them improve the service
- Ensuring that life story books are personalised to each and every child consistently
- Ensuring that the later-life letter is individual and personalised to each child and that the prospective adopters receive the letter within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony
- Ensuring children are introduced to prospective adopters in a timely way that is child focused and without delay
- Ensuring that training and assessment of prospective adopters are non-judgemental
- Ensuring that we seek feedback from adopters about the experience of the adoption process from beginning to end and that we implement any learning from this.

SEND Inspection 5-9th July 2023 (SMBC, SCT and ICB inspection)

SEND HMI Ofsted inspection team visited SMBC between 5th and 9th July 2023 and we achieved a Level 2 status.

SEND Inspection Recommendations

- Area leaders should strengthen multi-agency working across the partnership, between education, health and social care, so that children and young people's needs are identified and assessed in a more efficient and timely manner.
- Area leaders should develop co-production with children and young people with SEND at a strategic level so that children and young people play a key role in developing improvement strategies and plans.
- Area leaders should increase the number and range of short break opportunities to support the needs of all children and young people with SEND, including those with complex needs and post-16 young people.

Section (e)

The Trust's Performance against budgets in the preceding Contract Year

Financial Context

The finances provided to the Trust consists of funding from SMBC (the Contract Sum) and contributions from third parties. The basic contract sum was £74,475,000, and the 'third party' income was £8,753,055 which consisted of:

- ICB health contribution Education funding for placements Supporting Families claims
- DfE funding
- Home Office funding
- Hardship funding

Additional sums from SMBC amounted to £1,450,163 consisting of the funded salary settlement (£509,144), market supplement and retention payment (£341,019) and funding for high cost agency workers (£600,000). This makes a total income of £84,678,218.

We also had an opening deficit of £6,977,292. The deficit for 2023/24 is subject to audit but provisionally stands at £4,253,670 making the cumulative deficit £11,230,962 at year end.

Contract Sum

A one year Contract Sum settlement has been agreed between the Trust and SMBC. Contract Sum funding for 2024/25 has been agreed at £80,800,000. The Trust aim to achieve a breakeven position against the Contract Sum. This would be achieved through the delivery of cost savings totalling £2,500,000.

Medium Term Financial Plan

The Medium Term Financial Plan is a rolling three-year strategy to manage our finances whilst addressing our deficit. We review this on an annual basis in line with the review of our business plans.

The key aspects of the Medium Term Financial Plan are:

- Introducing more efficient ways of working
- Ensuring that we manage the demand for our work as efficiently as possible
Ensuring we get best value for services
- Ensuring we take advantage of invest-to-save initiatives Delivery of savings aligned to our Transformation programme.

SMBC and the Trust have jointly agreed to commission support to examine the prospects of meeting the Budget Shortfall over the next 5 years and to bring forward recommendations to assist the Trust and SMBC in forming a sustainable Medium Term Financial Strategy and Plan.

The Trust has linked the delivery of a Medium-Term Financial Plan to the wider delivery of the Trust's Strategic Transformation Programme. The Trust's Cost Saving Programme which is an integral constituent part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan contains specific, defined actions which are all closely associated with the five strategic priorities that make up the Transformation Programme. This enables enhanced governance around the delivery of the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Year End Position

Income totalling £84,678,267 was received for 2023/24, and expenditure was £88,931,888, meaning the Trust has achieved a £4,253,670 provisional deficit, which was £4,996,156 below the aims outlined within the Medium Term Financial Plan. This was due to continued cost pressures on residential and supported accommodation placements for Children in Care.

The number of residential placements has increased from 49 in March 2023 to 68 in March 2024. Combined with an increase in average cost of 17.6% but partially offset by higher contributions from Health partners, this has created a budget pressure of c. £5m. Increases in the number of young people being housed in supported accommodation partially driven by an increase in UASC, a further £1.5m of budget pressure has crystallised. The Trust has been able to make cost savings of £1.5m in year to reduce the full impact of these pressures.

This Trust is working closely with SMBC on planning to mitigate this deficit throughout the course of the remaining contractual period. This plan will consider the development of a well governed strategy tackling demand, supplier management and staffing permanence.

The Trust has undertaken work to understand the comparative position of a number of other Children’s Trusts. This has shown that Sandwell has demonstrated a comparatively strong level of spend control in terms of absolute value of care costs and also in terms of managing increasing care costs per head of population in the Children’s Services sector.

The below table highlights the provisional full-year outturn for - 2023/24.

Provisional full-year outturn	23/24
Income	£84,678,218
Expenditure;	(£88,931,888)
Staffing	(£32,434,958)
Placements	(£48,565,330)
Overheads	(£7,931,600)
Deficit for the Financial Year	(£4,253,670)

This year, some of the key points are:

- We received funding of £1.45m from SMBC to fund the salary settlement, market supplement, retention payments and high cost agency workers
- Contributions to placement costs from health partners have increased as a result of complexity of need and cost of living pressures.
- Key cost pressures remain within placement demand and cost increases (particularly external residential provision and supported accommodation) and also high cost transportation.
- Cost savings of £1.5m were delivered against staffing, placements and overheads.

Section (f)

Demand analysis in respect of the Services against assumptions and models in respect of the preceding Contract Year

3.1 Workforce and Child Workloads

3.1.1 Workforce

It is important to acknowledge that Sandwell Children's Trust employs over 600 staff, of which around a third are social workers. If not for the range of specialist and support staff within the Trust, social workers would not have the foundation and infrastructure to work effectively with children and their families. Nevertheless, our focus continues to be to ensure we have a stable 'case holding' workforce, as it is the consistency and skill of this workforce that will bring about the improved outcomes we expect for our children and families.

There are a range of models we can use to determine how many social workers we need to work with our families, some more complex than others. However, we continue to have a very simple calculation for this, which is:

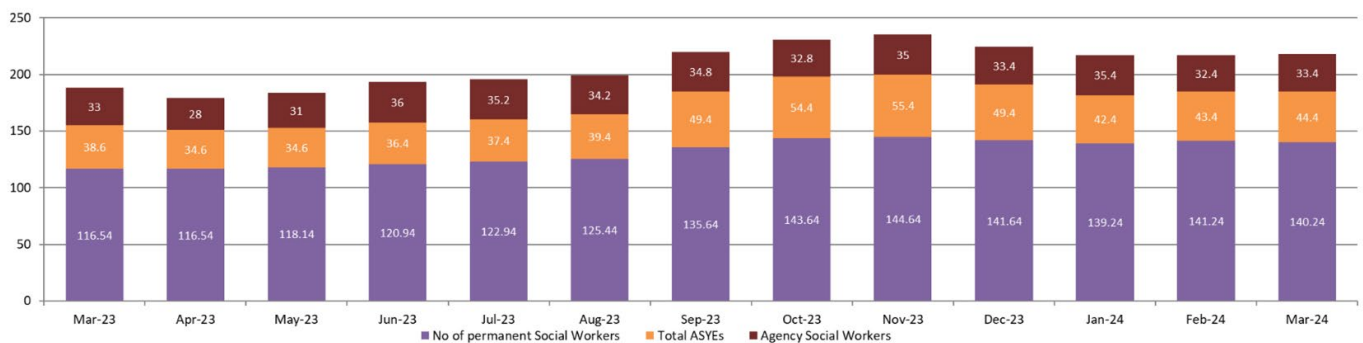
1. For social workers working with Children in Need and those with a Child Protection Plan (within Localities), an average of 18 children.
2. For social workers working with long term Children we Care for (within the Children we Care for Service), an average of 15 children.
3. For Social Workers in their Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE), there is a reduction of 20% within these average caseloads (although this is profiled across the year).

Case-holding Social Workers

We have an agreed establishment of 187 Full Time Equivalent social workers, based upon our current demand, and considerations within the Medium Term Financial Plan. This is made up of permanent social workers, agency social workers and those within their Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE's).

	Mar-23	Apr-23	May-23	Jun-23	Jul-23	Aug-23	Sep-23	Oct-23	Nov-23	Dec-23	Jan-24	Feb-24	Mar-24
Total Workforce - Level Needed	203	203	203	203	187	187	187	187	187	187	187	187	187
Total Social Workers	149.54	144.54	149.14	156.94	158.14	159.64	170.44	176.44	179.64	175.04	174.64	173.64	173.64
No of permanent Social Workers	116.54	116.54	118.14	120.94	122.94	125.44	135.64	143.64	144.64	141.64	139.24	141.24	140.24
Permanent Excluding ASYE	77.94	81.94	83.54	84.54	85.54	86.04	86.24	89.24	89.24	92.24	96.84	97.84	95.84
% Permanent (Excl. ASYE)	52.12%	56.69%	56.01%	53.87%	54.09%	53.90%	50.60%	50.58%	49.68%	52.70%	55.45%	56.35%	55.19%
Total ASYEs	38.6	34.6	34.6	36.4	37.4	39.4	49.4	54.4	55.4	49.4	42.4	43.4	44.4
% Total ASYEs	25.81%	23.94%	23.20%	23.19%	23.65%	24.68%	28.98%	30.83%	30.84%	28.22%	24.28%	24.99%	25.57%
Agency Social Workers	33	28	31	36	35.2	34.2	34.8	32.8	35	33.4	35.4	32.4	33.4
% Agency SWs	22.07%	19.37%	20.79%	22.94%	22.26%	21.42%	20.42%	18.59%	19.48%	19.08%	20.27%	18.66%	19.24%

Staffing Levels (Permanent SWs, ASYE and Agency)

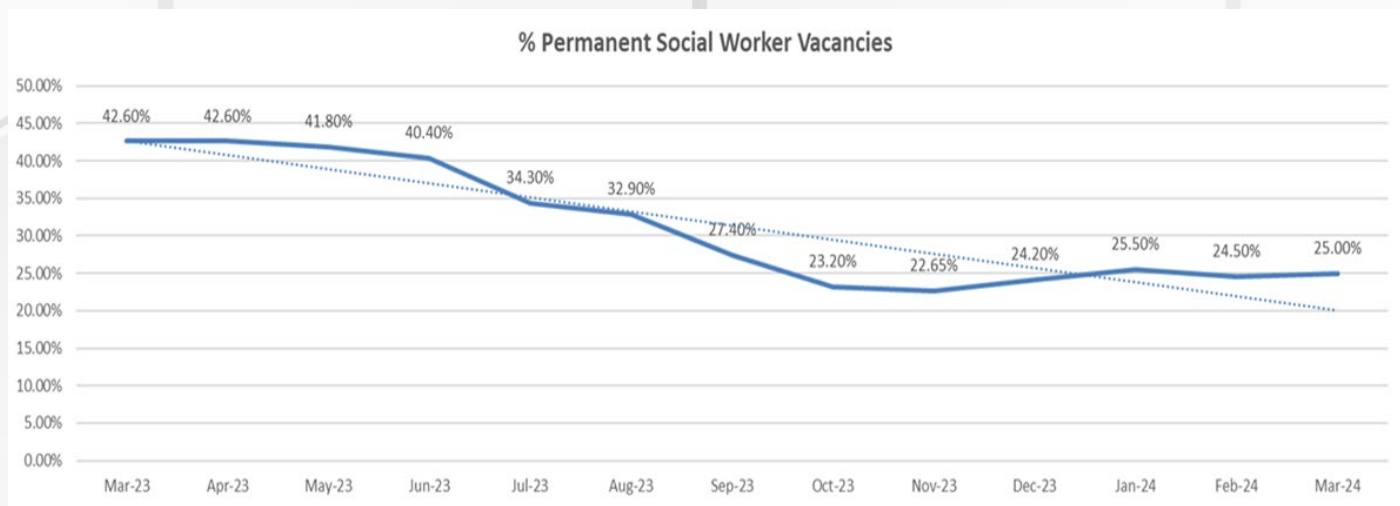


Our Social Work establishment following throughput analysis reduced from 203 to 187 in July 2023, between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 there has been a net increase of 29.1 Social Workers in the financial year from 144.54 to 173.64 the breakdown is a follows over the period;

- Permanent Social Workers has increased from 116.54 to 140.24 (net increase of 23.7)
- Permanent Social Workers – increase from 81.94 to 95.84 (net increase of 13.9)
- Permanent ASYEs – increase from 34.6 to 44.4 (net increase of 9.8 workers)
- Agency workers has increased from 28 to 33.4 (net increase of 5.4 workers)

“PI13 Vacancy Rates of Permanent Social Workers” as stated above SCT has (at 31 March 2024) 140.24 permanent workers, compared to an establishment of 187. This number has increased significantly since April 2023 (116.54) with our permanent vacancy rate sitting now at 25% (46.76 permanent vacancies).

- 44.4 ASYEs
- 34.84 Social Workers
- 61 Senior Social Workers



Our real time vacancy rate including agency social workers as of 31 March 2024 is at 7.1% with 173.64 workers in post over the establishment of 187 (13.36 real time vacancies), this has increased from 144.54 (22.7%) in April 2023 (vacancy rates have decreased over the last 12 months).

Current Background- National and Regional Context

- The Trust continues to struggle to both recruit and retain permanent and agency staff due to national workforce crisis.
- The independent review of Children’s Social Care (May 2022) have recognised the staffing pressures faced and recommended that investment is made in the social care workforce to address high vacancy and turnover rates
- ADCS and NCAS conferences raised national pressures on resources within social care and confirmed that this is being felt nationwide by all local authorities and Trust.
- The significant area of concern falls within the Court and CP activity
- The majority of West Midland Local Authorities now offer a financial incentive for permanent practitioners between £2,000 - £10,000The HR Team and Members of the EMT regularly meet with peers from other Trusts, Local Authorities and the DFE to discuss recruitment and retention concerns.

Our Strategic Approach

Transformation Programme – Priority 1 is People Recruitment, retention and career development

Creating a safe working environment and embedding culture of staff wellbeing Refocus and improve activity in relation to ED&I

In April 2022 the Workforce Strategy 2022-2025 was released. The Workforce Committee, Chaired by Jacqui Smith- plus Trust Board members, EMT and Officers meet quarterly to oversee progress of Workforce Strategy

The Workforce Strategy, provides a strategic approach to recruitment, retention, development, leadership, the provision of a safe working environment and the creation of a learning organisation- plus detailed operational activity

In April 2022, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy 2022-2025 was released. The Workforce Committee also provides progress oversight and challenge to the Trust ED&I activity.

Key activities FY23/24

- The Stability of the management team within the Operational Directorate
- The creation of the Sandwell family 'deal'. This supports the Trust's 12 Reasons to Work in Sandwell bringing together all the Trusts employment benefits into one single document.
- The Trust has created a leadership hub that is driven by all managers and leaders across the Trust, supporting the Trust ethos and culture
- The introduction of service level induction plans, building on the Trust's corporate induction plan
- The exiting of high cost agency social worker project teams.

Key Areas of Focus

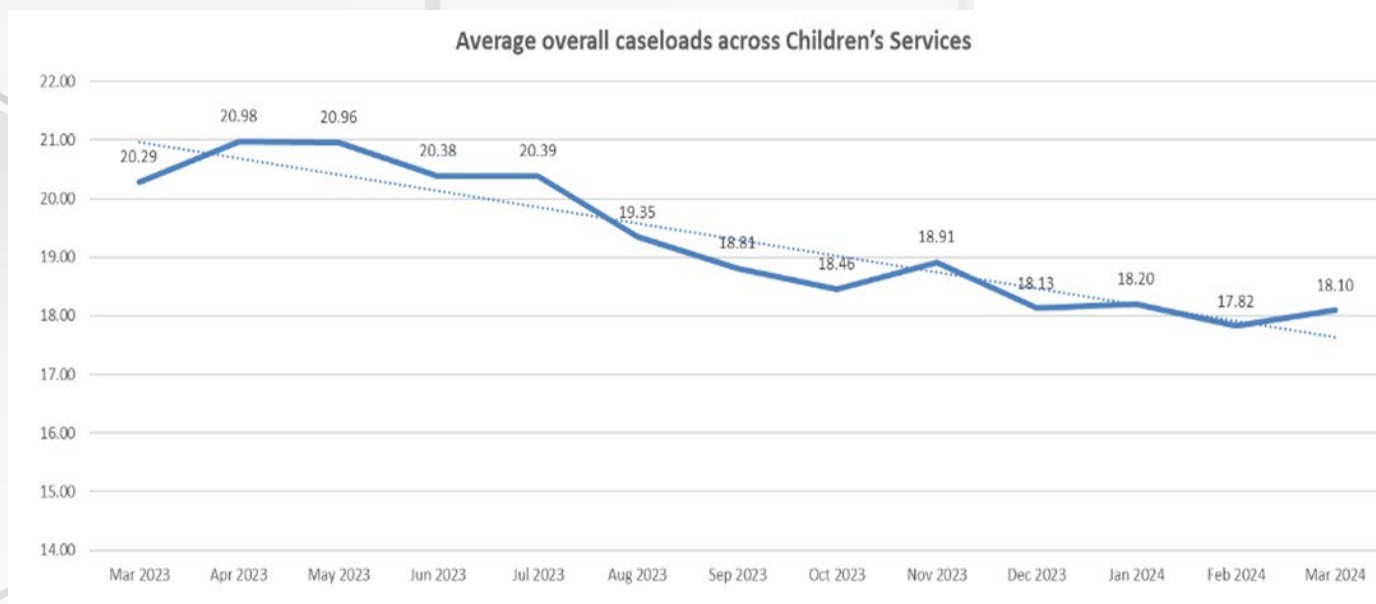
Given the Trusts significant progress against both the Workforce and ED&I action plans, it is in the process of refreshing both strategies

Following the development of career pathways for everyone across the Trust, the development and release of an Aspire programme for aspiring leaders at every level.

The on-going development of our Social Work Academy, with the recruitment of 20 Approach to Social Work, 3 social worker apprentices and the offer of employment to 23 ASYE's

The creation of a specific court and child protection academy to safely develop new social workers into this area.

3.1.1 Workloads



SCT SW workload average 31 March 2024	18.1/per SW
Statistical Neighbour average	15.8/per SW
England average	16/per SW

The concern remains the high workloads held by some localities' Social workers. This issue in conjunction with the difficulties to recruit experienced SW contributes to the Trust's vulnerability.

3.2 Our Children

Since March 2018, we have seen an increase of 22 Children open to Sandwell Children's Trust (these are primarily Children open undergoing a Social Care Assessment increase of 320 Children). In relation to early intervention and targeted early help there has been an increase of 202 Children open to the Strengthening Families Service* with Social Care statutory services seeing a reduction of 180 Children over the same period.

The Trust have reduced the number of children and young people open to Children’s Social Care from a total of 3,203 (including Care Leavers) to 3,023, which is a reduction of 180. This is due to our continued focus on progressing children’s plans where there has been historic drift; and ensuring that more children are appropriately in the social care system when they need to be.

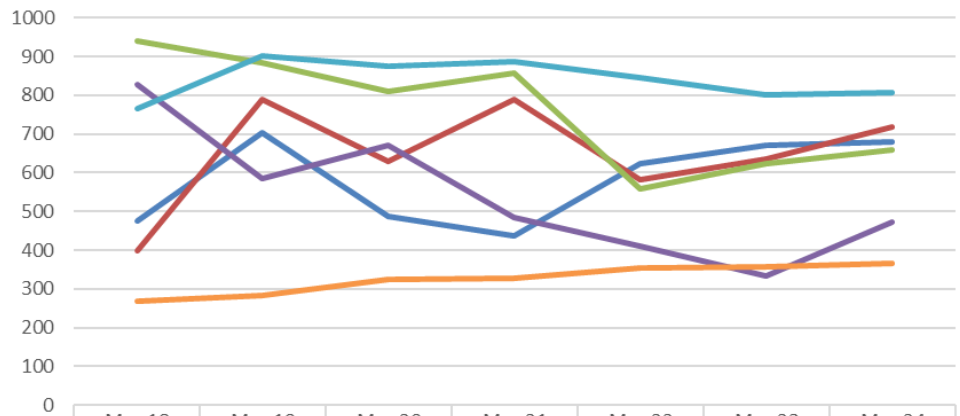
Breakdown of children and care leavers 2018 – 2024

Service	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-23	Mar-24	Difference Mar 2018 to Mar 2024
Children open to Targeted Early Help teams	477	702	486	436	624	670	679	+202
Children undergoing an assessment	398	788	630	789	582	635	718	+320
Children in Need with an active CIN Plan	941	883	810	856	558	624	658	-283
Children with an active CP Plan	829	584	671	485	409	333	473	-356
Children in Care	767	901	874	888	844	802	808	+41
Care Leavers	268	282	324	328	355	356	366	+98
Total	3680	4140	3795	3782	3372	3420	3702	+22

* Strengthening Families is a non statutory service providing support and advice to families in order to prevent the need for statutory intervention.

As of 31 March 2024, we had 658 children with a Child in Need Plan, 473 children with a Child Protection Plan and 808 Children we Care for. We have less Children we Care for than our Statistical Neighbour comparators and more with Children on Child Protection Plans.

Children Open to Sandwell Childrens Trust



	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-23	Mar-24
Children open to Targeted Early Help teams	477	702	486	436	624	670	679
Children undergoing an assessment	398	788	630	789	582	635	718
Children in Need with an active CIN Plan	941	883	810	856	558	624	658
Children with an active CP Plan	829	584	671	485	409	333	473
Children in Care	767	901	874	888	844	802	808
Care Leavers	268	282	324	328	355	356	366

Comparison with Statistical Neighbours

	Sandwell (31 March 2024)	Statistical Neighbour Average March 2024	England Average March 2024
Children with a Child Protection Plan	55.1 per 10,000	51.7 per 10,000	46.5 per 10,000
Children we Care for	94.1 per 10,000	96.7 per 10,000	77.1 per 10,000

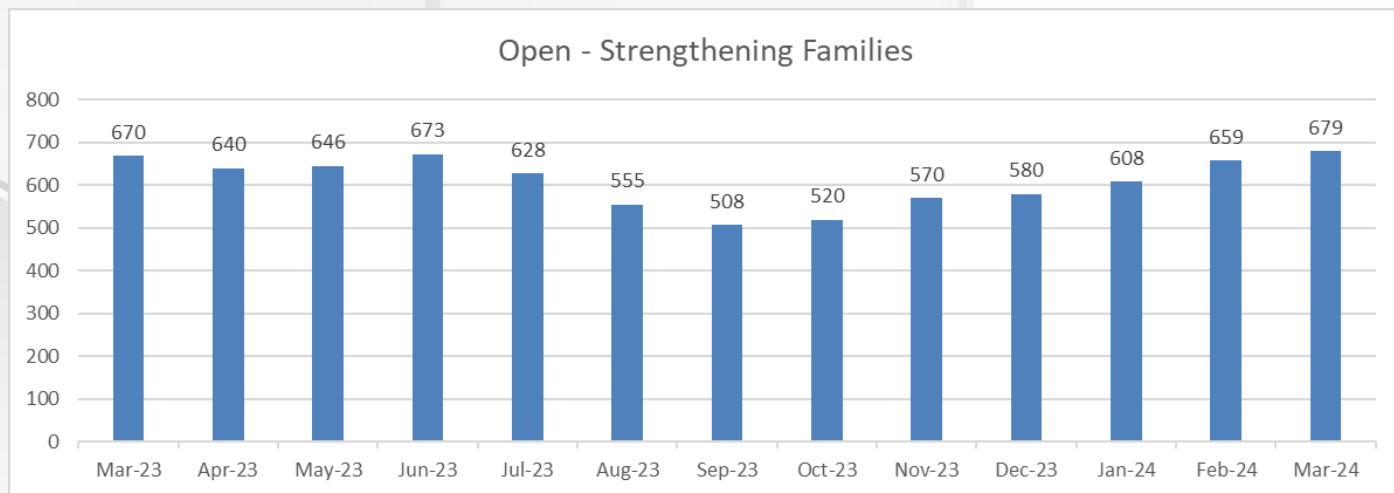
Referrals, S47s and ICPs

	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
Referrals	6,301	6,377	5,402	4,454	4,194	4,434
Referrals Rates Per 10,000	759.20	768.36	650.88	536.66	494.1	516.6

The increased referral rate to the Trust in 2018/19 (759 per 10,000 children) continued throughout the first two years increasing further to 768 at the end March 2020. The last four years has seen a downward trajectory to 516.6 per 10,000 as at the end March 2024 this is below our Statistical Neighbour and England averages of 638 and 545 per 10,000 and is also lower than West Midlands Average of

527 per 10,000. The reduction is primarily due to workers and partners better applying threshold criteria for statutory services and managing risk.

We are seeing more children stepping down to targeted family support in our Strengthening Families Service over the last 2 years in comparison to previous years, in addition we have more Children supported by Strengthening Families as both a shared service 106 last year to 154 this year and more Children Open to the service. There is still more work to do in relation to thresholds for referrals. Single Assessment outcomes of No Further Action (NFA) has reduced from 45% between April 2020-March 2023 to 37.1% this year.

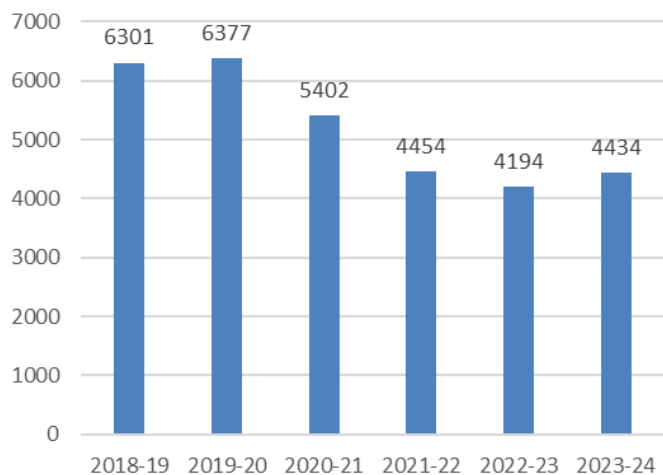


Around 22% (decreasing slightly from 24% in previous three years) of our assessments over the last 12 months are being stepped down to Strengthening Families or Universal Agencies and 40% are escalated onto a Child in Need, Child Protection or Child in Care Plan (33% previous three years).

20.9% of children have been re-referred within the previous 12 months, this has decreased since March 2023 (23.1%), and now in line with our comparators. Remedial work and reinforcement of our practice standards have seen an improvement and the approach to duty has also been changed.

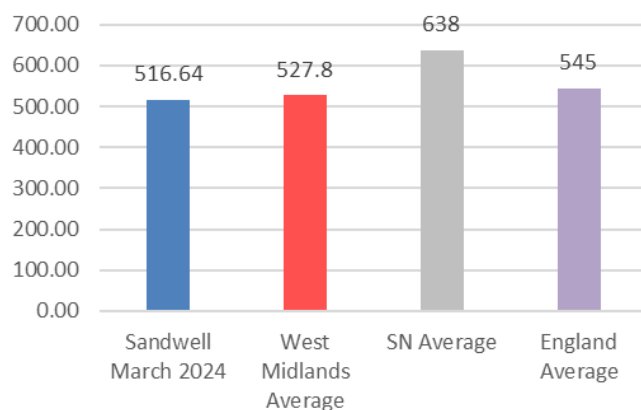
The rate of S47 enquiries per 10,000 has reduced from a rate of 279 in March 2019 although a slight increase in comparison to last year at a rate of 200.2 per 10,000 in March 2024 (185 last year), this continues to be lower than our Statistical Neighbours and in line with England and West Midlands averages. This shows that the Trust continues to consistently purposeful when we are faced with deciding whether to proceed with S47 enquiries. Decision making and application of thresholds are more robust in this area to ensure that risk is assessed and Children and Families have the right outcome needed. There was an increase in S47 and ICPCs in summer months but following internal threshold discussions this has reverted to normal levels (hence increase in rate for 2023-24)

Referrals April 2018 - March 2024



Referral Rates

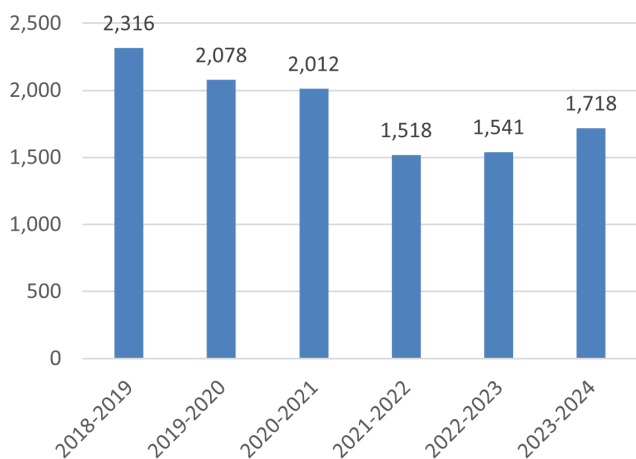
Number of safeguarding referrals made to Children's Social Care



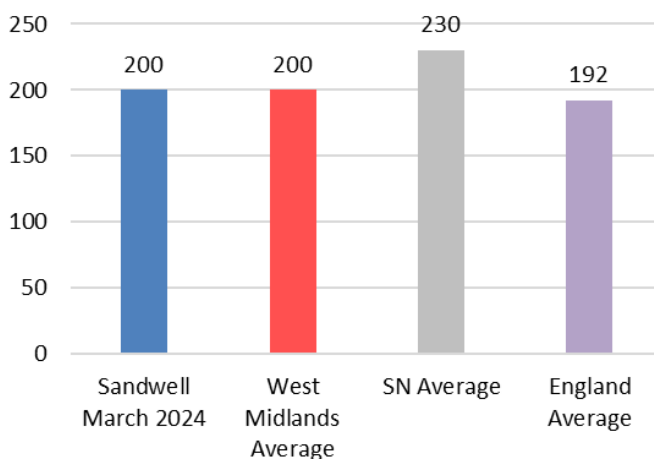
Summary of S47s 2018 - 2024

	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
S47s	2,316	2,078	2,012	1,518	1,541	1,718
S47 Rates Per 10,000	279.05	250.38	242.42	182.9	185.67	200.2

S47s April 2018 to March 2024



S47 Rates

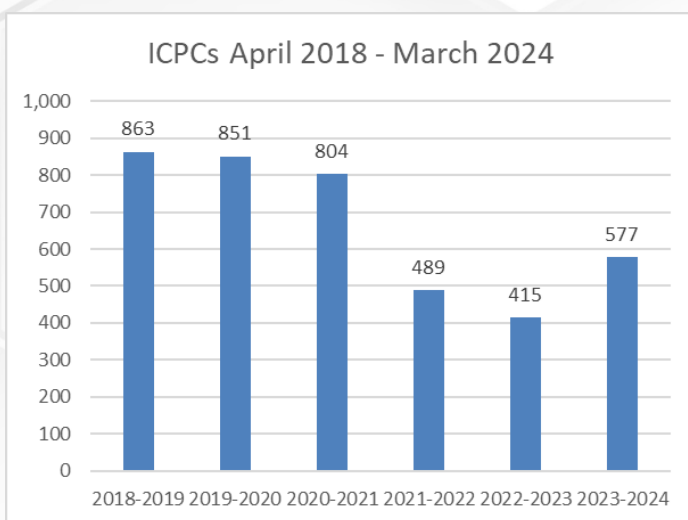
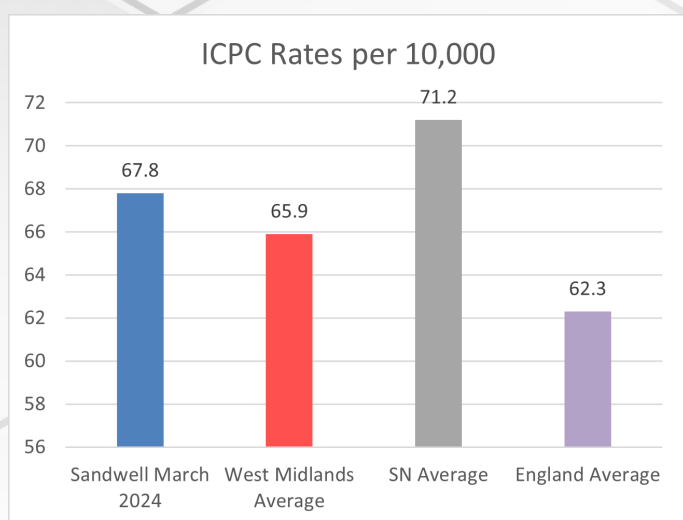


The rate of Initial Child Protection Conferences per 10,000 has also reduced from 103.98 in March 2019 to a rate of 67.23 per 10,000 in March 2024 (although an increase from 2021-22, and 2022-23, 58.92 and 51.29 per 10,000). Current ICPC rate is now below Statistical Neighbour although slightly above England and West Midlands Average. In addition, the latest conversion rate from ICPC to CP Plan is healthier and has improved to 87.3% over the last financial year in comparison to 68% in 2020 (and slightly above last year 83%).

The threshold discussions between Conference Chairs and Social Workers are ensuring that the right Children are going into conference and onto CP Plans. During the period of June- August 2023 we saw an increase in ICPC increasing the number of Children on a CP plan at the end of 2023, this has since reduced gradually.

Summary of ICPC and ICPC rates per 10,000

	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
ICPCs	863	851	804	489	415	577
ICPC Rates Per 10,000	10.98	102.54	96.87	58.92	51.29	67.23

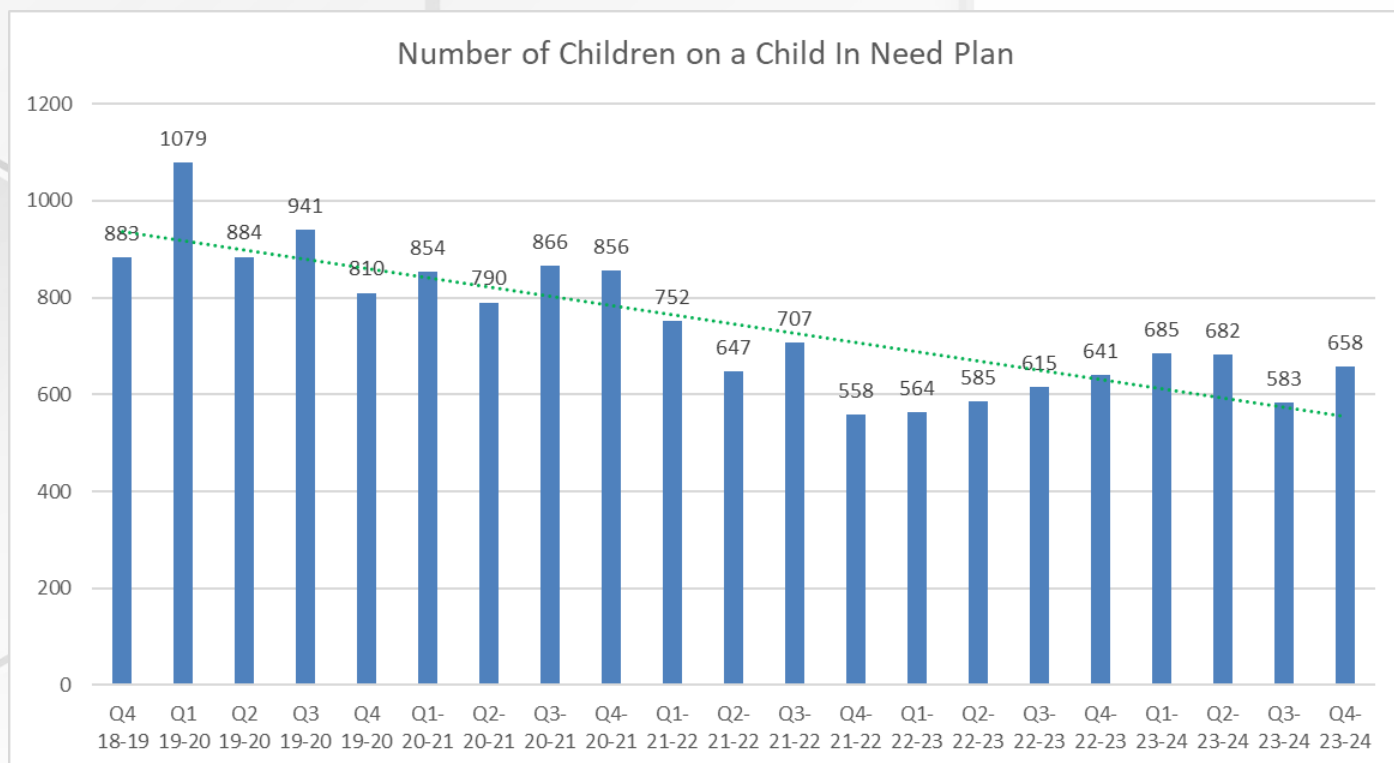


Overall, alongside the continued dip sampling of assessments, S47’s and ICPC’s the above measures provide clear evidence that we are acting more confidently and consistently when applying thresholds for our services and working in a more timely and consistent manner.

Children in Need

We began the contract on 1 April 2018 with 941 children in need and quickly recognised that this was an area to better understand and reduce drift and delay in progressing children’s plans. Following a short review of these children, it was clear that some of the children did not require a statutory service. As a consequence, there was a clear focus on progressing case closures. Since December 2018 the service robustly monitors and reviews Children on Child in Need Plans at 9 months to ensure a safe step down to targeted early help or universal services regular updating of assessments takes place and support to reduce drift and delay with better decision making for our Child in Need cohort.

The graph below demonstrates a significant reduction of Children on Child in Need plans from a high point in June 2019 of 1,079 Children to 558 Children as end March 2022, although a slight increase to 658 in March 2024 (reduction of 421 Children since June 2019). This is an area kept under constant review (to note we currently have less Children on a Child in Need Plan over 9+ months than in March 2023 106 (16.5%) to 97 (14.7%))

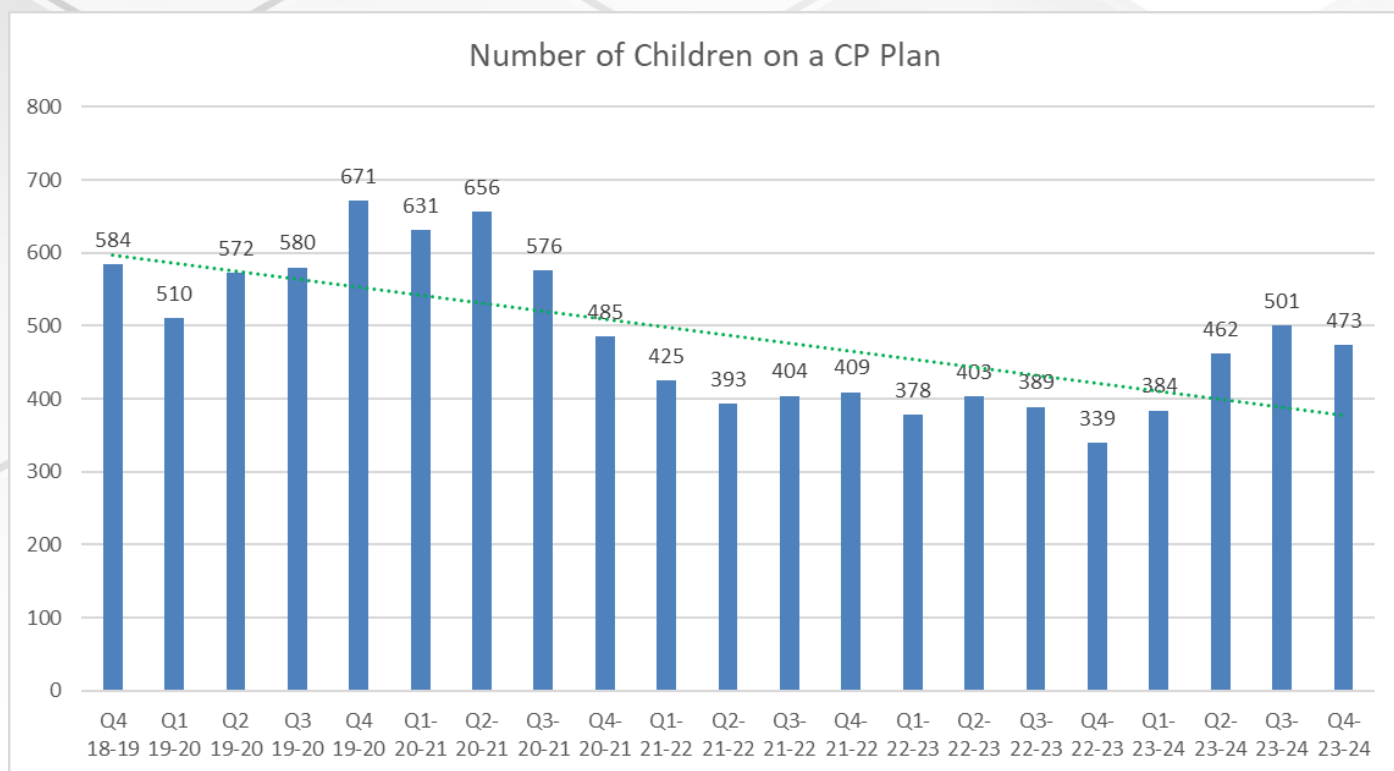


Children with a Child Protection Plan

In April 2018, the Trust had 798 children who were subject to a Child Protection Plan, and across the course of the five years the number had reduced to 339, this number has increased to 473 at the end March 2024, which is now above SN Average of 51.7 per 10,000 and higher than England and West Midlands Averages.

It was identified that there was drift and delay in progressing children’s plans in 2018. To address this, we held a panel to ensure these children’s plans were being progressed which contributes to the continued decrease of Children on Child Protection Plans.

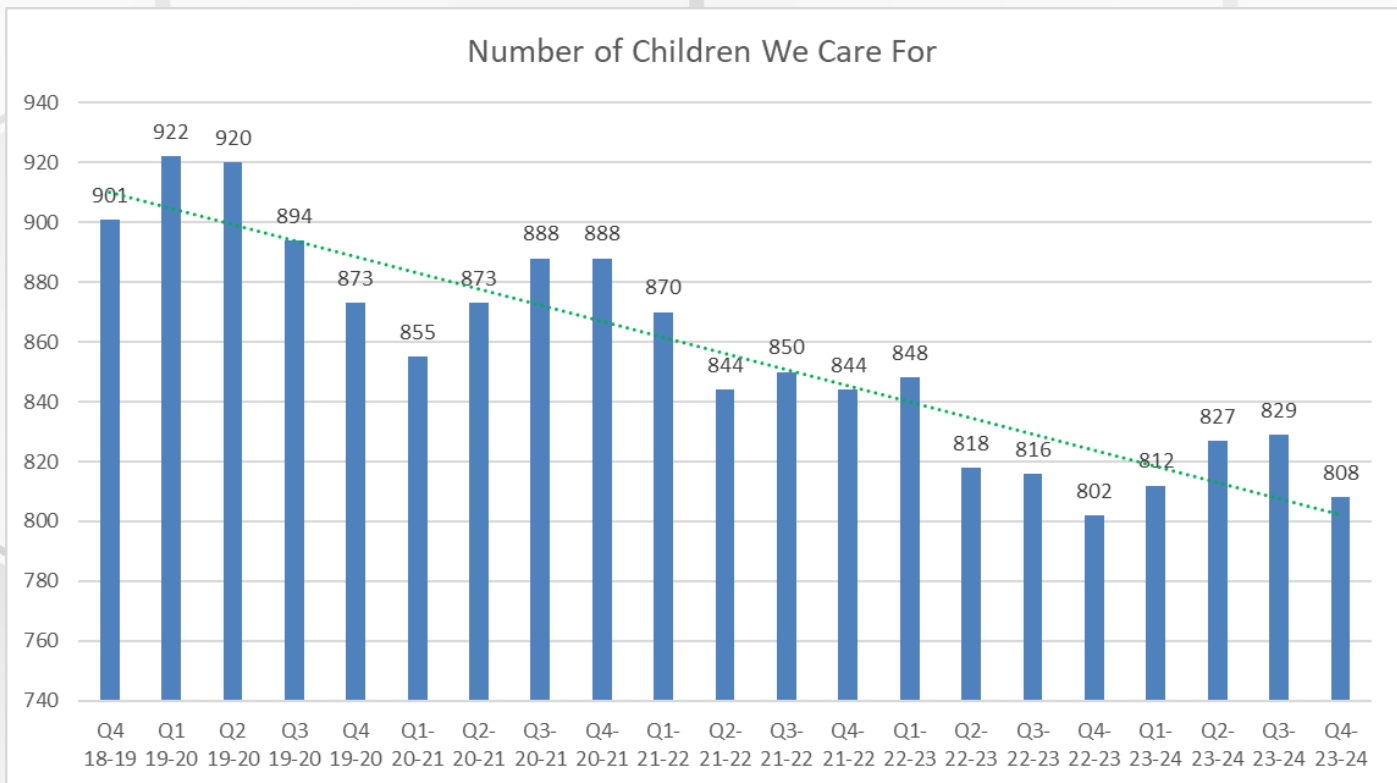
This has led to more Children ‘stepped down’ to a Child in Need plan, or a decision made to secure their long-term welfare. We have seen less Children stepping up from Child Protection to Care over the period. The service is regularly reviewing Children on Child Protection Plans for longer than 12 months to reduce the risk of drift and delay and to ensure Children’s plans are progressed safely and robustly. As of 31 March 2024 we currently have 22.7% of our Children on a Plan for 12+ months which is now more in line with our Statistical Neighbour and National averages than earlier in the financial year and 3.4% on a plan for 2+ years (16 Children, in line with SN Average of 3%). The below graph shows the downward trajectory of Children on a Child Protection plan over last 4 years (although an increase in 2023-24)



Children we Care for

We began the financial year 2018/19 with 778 children in care and saw a sharp increase in the first 18 months up to 937 mid July 2019.

As of 31 March 2023, the number of Children in Care had reduced to 802 Children we Care for (14.4% decrease), this financial year has stabilised at 808 Children we Care for as of 31 March 2024, this is primarily due to the increase in UASC between April 2023 and March 2024 from 15 to 42 (180% increase)



RIAA data is available up to March 2024. Our March 2024 data can be compared in line with our Statistical Neighbour Group up to this date, this gives you more up to date analysis to compare our performance at present time. As you can see we are below the average for these Local Authorities (although Stoke on Trent is a significant outlier regionally and nationally). Based on our latest Statistical Neighbour Average at 96.7 per 10,000, Sandwell are currently 2.5 per 10,000 lower than our comparator group, although we continue to be higher than England Average of 77.1 per 10,000.

Children we Care for March 2024 Statistical Neighbour Rates per 10,000

	Rates
Birmingham	79.7
Blackburn with Darwen	86.3
Coventry	87.7
Derby	101.5
Luton	62.3
Nottingham	100.6

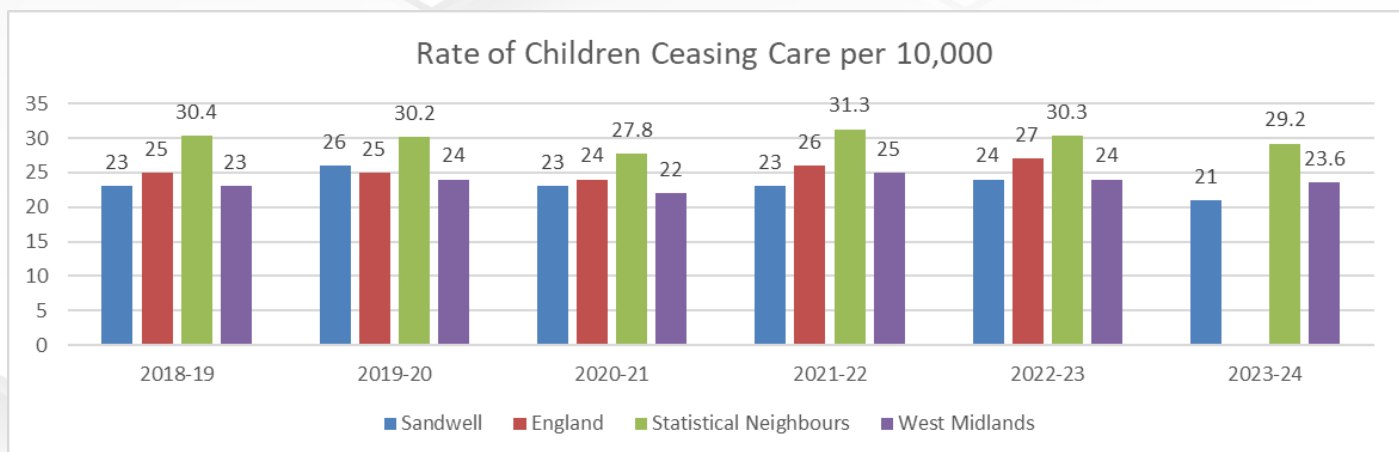
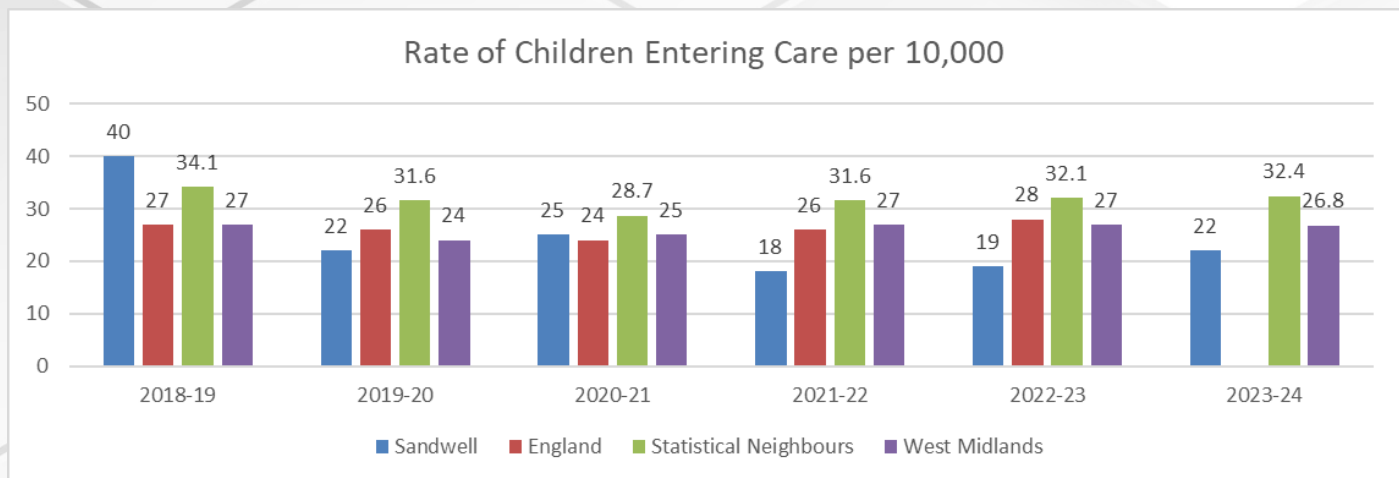
	Rates
Peterborough	76.6
Sandwell March 24	94.1
Stoke-On-Trent	195.0
Walsall	96.1
Wolverhampton	81.8
SN Average	96.7

Children Entering and Ceasing Care

Between the 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024, the number of Children Entering Care was 188 with 179 Children Ceasing Care.

Summary of Becoming Looked After (BLA) and Ceasing Care by year

	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
BLA by year	362	194	226	163	161	188
Ceasing Care by Year	215	242	218	201	208	179



The tables below compare our number of Children Entering and Ceasing Care against our latest Statistical Neighbour, West Midlands and England comparator data. Apart from April 2018-March 2019 you can see that the number of Children entering care is below our Statistical Neighbour comparators (this year a rate of 22 Children per 10,000 have entered Care), this is also the case for Children exiting care apart from year April 2019 - March 2020 (this year rate of 21 per 10,000 exiting care). This suggests that lower numbers are exiting the Care system than should be. We continue to undertake work in relation to children exiting care, this includes a bespoke exiting care project team which are reviewing children progressing to SGO and placed at home with parents. This will improve efficiency of children exiting care. Furthermore, our improvement in our approach to Permanence will also increase the number of Children exiting care with greater robust planning and management oversight.

Table 9: Summary of Becoming Looked After and Rates per 10,000

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Latest SN Average	Latest WM Average	Latest England Average
BLA by year	362	194	226	163	161	188			
Rates per 10,000	44	23	27	18	19	22	32.4	26.8	27

Table 10: Summary of Ceasing Care and Rates per 10,000

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Latest SN Average	Latest WM Average	Latest England Average
Ceasing by year	215	242	218	201	208	179			
Rates per 10,000	26	29	26	23	25	21	29.2	23.6	28

Demand for Foster Placements for Children in Care (Internal and External)

The Fostering Service was inspected by Ofsted in August 2021 and assessed as providing a ‘Good’ Service, with all elements of the inspection individually rated as ‘Good’, improving the service from the previous rating of ‘Requires Improvement’. Generally impressed with the service the inspectors judged that children are well matched, with good placement stability and foster carers build positive relationships with children developing a strong sense of belonging which helps children to settle well. Managers have a good focus on care planning and permanency for children, and were judged to be implementing significant changes to drive up standards and ensure that they have a good operational overview of the impact of outcomes for the children, the foster carers and staff.

The table shows the number of Children in Internal Foster Placements between 31 March 2023 and 31 March 2024, as you can see that there has been a slight decrease in Children Placed in Internal Mainstream/Connected carer placements from 288 to 285 (reduction of 3 Children), furthermore there has been a similar reduction of Children placed in External Foster Care Placements from 316 to 300 (reduction of 16 Children). Over the same period there has been an increase in Children placed in residential placements from 51 to 62.

Children in Internal and External Foster Care

	Mar 23	Apr 23	May 23	Jun 23	Jul 23	Aug 23	Sep 23	Oct 23	Nov 23	Dec 23	Jan 24	Feb 24	Mar 24
Foster Placement Trust Carers	288	290	293	294	295	290	295	291	304	299	296	293	285
Foster Placement External	316	313	314	313	312	314	308	306	304	302	296	307	300

Recruitment Activity

Recruitment of Foster carers continues to be a focus of the Trust making use of a range of media and marketing opportunities . Recent activity has meant that the number of new enquiries for the year of 2023-24 was 124 (due to a change in process of capturing enquiries) 19 application within the year and 5 foster carer mainstream approvals (application to approval 31%).

Section (f)

We did have 19 mainstream de-registrations over the same period so in theory a net decrease of 14 mainstream carers this financial year. Although there has been a net decrease in mainstream foster carers for 2023-24 there has only be a decrease of 3 Children placed in Mainstream and Connected Placements at 31st March 2024, this will be due to the service utilising mainstream placements better within the service (This is helped by the number of vacant or not available placements reducing from 42 last year to 23 this year). On the 31 March 2024 we had 84 mainstream foster carer households and 86 connected carer households.

Furthermore, our approach to residential care is progressing at pace in order that we can make better use of local residential provision for when this is the right option for children. Following a number of engagement events with private providers, relationships have improved and the Trust and council are aiming to access up to 9 beds locally through local providers which should impact positively on children being placed in their own communities.

Care Experienced Young People

	Mar 18	Mar 19	Mar 20	Mar 21	Mar 22	Mar 23	Mar 24	Variance Mar 18 – Mar 24
Care Leavers	268	282	324	328	355	356	366	98

Our care experienced young people service provides a service to children who are 16 or over who are still in our care, with the expectation of a steady transition into Care Leavers 18+ service. This cohort has steadily increased over five years from 268 to 366 (an increase of 98 Care Experienced Young People) with a slight increase from March 2023-March 2024 (356-366). From April 2018, a change in legislation meant that we have a statutory responsibility to support care leavers until they are 25 years of age which has resulted in a steady increase in the number of young people within this service area. Consequently, workloads have increased from approximately 18 to 21 young people per worker. We also have a process in place to allocate Children in Care aged 16+ years old to a PA to co-work and support robust transition into Care Experienced service.

The May 2022 Ofsted inspection observed that Care Leavers are well supported to find good-quality accommodation, that the Trust is focused on ensuring that Care Leavers receive the opportunities they are entitled to and that care leavers that become parents are well supported.

Section (g)

The outcome of any Agreed Action Plan and/or Rectification Plan that was agreed in the preceding Contract Year

There were no formal action plans or rectification plans in the Contract year 2023/24.

Section (h)

Any Changes to the Agreement agreed between the Parties in the preceding Contract Year pursuant to the Change Control Procedure

Changes to Service Delivery Contract

- Market Supplement 2022/23
- Revision of Contract Review Timetable
- Additional Funding – Staffing 2022-23
- Transport Extension 2023 to 2024

Changes to Support Services Agreements

There were no changes to the support services agreements during the year, apart from extension for support level agreement for transport.

Other significant changes

On 15th July and 8 September 2023 Cllr Peter Allen and Gillian Douglas ceased as company directors. On the 15th of July 2023 Cllr Pam Randhawa was added as SCT company director.

Section (i)

Any proposed changes to the Services Specification, the Financial Mechanism and/or the Performance Indicators for the following Contract Year

There are no proposed changes to the Services Specification or Financial Mechanism in the next contract year.

Section (j)

The contractual governance arrangements set out in Schedule 19 (Governance)

KPI Changes

SCT and SMBC agreed new contract KPIs which went live in April 2024 full list is below;

	Contract KPIs May 2024 2024	Green	Amber	Red
1	Out of the total number of Single Assessments, the percentage of assessments completed within 45 working days	≥85.0%	>70.01%, <84.99%	≤70.0%
2	% of visits for CiN taking place within 20 working days	≥73.0%	>57.0%, <73.0	≤57.0%
3	% children becoming subject of a CP Plan for the second or subsequent time (within two years)	≤15.0%	<15.0%, >22.0%	≥22.0%
4	Rate of Children on a Child Protection Plan at period end (Rate per 10,000)	≤45.0	<55.0%, >45.0	≥55.0
5	% of children open to the Trust's CwD Team with an updated assessment within the last 12 months	≥90%	>80.0%, <90.0%	≤80.0%
6	% of children with a permanence plan by the 2nd review	≥95%	>85.0%, <95.0%	≤85.0%
7	Rate of Children we Care for at period end (Rate per 10,000)	≤94.0	<100.0, >94.0	≥100.0
8	% of CYP that have had 3 or more placement moves in the last 12 months	≤9%	<12.0%, >9.0%	≥12.0%
9	For children in care for 2.5 years or more, the Percentage that have been in the same placement for at least 2 years	>-70-<77.99%	>65.0% <69.99% >78.0% -100%	<65.0%
10	% of Care Experienced YP (aged 18-21yrs) with Pathway plans updated in the last 12 months	≥93%	>83.0%, <93.0%	≤83.0%
11	% of children on a Child Protection plan for over 2 years	≤3%	3% -5.0%	≥5.0%
12	Vacancy Rate (% of case holding social worker posts not filled by a permanent employee)	<34%	≥34% <40.0%	≥40.0%
13	% of children open for longer than 8 weeks that have been discussed in supervision in the previous 8 weeks	≥80%	>70.0%, <80.0%	≤70.0%
14	% of CiN at 9 months who have been reviewed by a senior manager	≥80.0%	>70.0%, <80.0	≤70.0%
15	% usage of mainstream carer placements available against all real time vacancies (excluding carers on hold and specific vacancies)	≥92%	>88.0%, <92.0%	≤88.0%

Section (k)

Such other matters that the Parties may agree from time to time

There are no additional matters in this report that have been agreed by both parties.