

# Report to Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

24 March 2025

<b>Subject:</b>	Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update
<b>Director:</b>	Director of Children and Education, Sally Giles
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## 1 Recommendations

- 1.1 Scrutiny Board considers and comments on Sandwell Children's Trust performance update.

## 2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 Sandwell Children's Trust is required to report to the Scrutiny Board twice each year as part of the obligations set out in the contract between the Council and the Trust.
- 2.2 The purpose of the item is to provide an update for consideration and discussion regarding Sandwell Children's Trust

### 3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	<p>Best start in life for children and young people</p> <p>Ensuring that children have the Best Start in Life is a key driver for Sandwell Children’s Trust; ensuring that children are safeguarded, protected and, when unable to live with their parents, are effectively cared for.</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>
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### 4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 The contract with SCT is underpinned by comprehensive governance arrangements. The contract requires that the Director of Children and Education, together with council senior officers from finance and legal services, and the Chief Executive of the Trust meet on at least a monthly basis to consider performance and operational matters, this occurs at the Operational Partnership Board meeting. 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 and DCS, at a Strategic Partnership Board.
- 4.2 The contract with the Trust specifies that representatives of the Trust 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 regular performance updates for consideration by the Operational Partnership Board, the Strategic Partnership Board and then by the Cabinet.

4.4 Since April 2018, the Trust has undergone several key Ofsted inspections and visits, with notable progress across all services. Seven monitoring visits and three focused visits have taken place. In May 2022, a full inspection under Ofsted's ILACS framework was conducted resulting in a judgement of 'requires improvement to be good'.

<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Current Judgement</b>
ILACS	Requires Improvement to be Good (2022)
Adoption	Good (December 2022)
Fostering	Good (October 2024)

4.6 The 'requires improvement to be good' judgement from May 2022, along with 'good' ratings for the fostering service in October 2024 and the adoption service in December 2022, indicates a positive trajectory of service improvement.

4.7 In January 2024, SCT was subject to a LGA Peer Review. The purpose of the review is to provide an external view on the effectiveness of the strategic response and quality of practice, jointly identify strengths and areas for consideration and provide feedback from engagement with the partners.

4.8 The Contract between the Council and Sandwell Children’s Trust includes a suite of 15 Key Performance Indicators against which SCT are required to report monthly. As of 1st April 2024, new contract KPIs have been introduced, with three existing KPIs. All new KPI’s had a three-month grace period, with 1 KPI, which measures long-term placement stability having a six-month grace period.

4.9 Since September 2024, only one KPI relating to ‘*For children we care for 2.5 years or more, the % that have been in the same home for at least 2 years*’ has been in the performance failure zone, for more than a 3-month period. It has been agreed, following discussions with the DfE appointed independent improvement board chair, to review this KPI and evaluate its reporting, considering the findings related to positive moves experienced by children, tolerance levels, and the age range of the children cohort. This work is now underway and will be updated in the Q4.

- 4.10 The 2024/25 financial performance is being measured against the agreed 2024/25 Contract Sum. Cabinet approved the contract sum, £80.80m for 2024/25 which was an increase of £6.325m or approximately 8.5% compared with 2023/24.
- 4.13 The average weekly cost of a residential placement rose from £6,508 in March 2024 to £6,701 as of December 2024. Whilst this has stabilised from the increases that were seen in 2022/23, based on 74 currently in residential this will be a cost of £24,270m.
- 4.14 Compared to the five statistical neighbours who are deemed to be most similar to Sandwell, there are fewer children in residential care in Sandwell as a percentage of the total number of children we care for, 9% of Sandwell children are in residential compared to 10% on average for the five statistical neighbours. Sandwell also has fewer children in residential care compared to the national average of 11%.
- 4.15 For 2023/24 the total expenditure on children's social care per head of population (0-17), as per the Council's Revenue Outturn reported to Government, was the lowest across Sandwell's statistical neighbours.
- 4.16 As of December 2024, there continues to be a positive ratio of permanent (83.7%) to agency social workers (16.3%). The vacancy rate has decreased from 12% in June 2024 to 7.2% in December 2024. The permanent vacancy rate has dropped from 27.7% to 21.5% over the same period.

## **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. The Service Delivery Agreement includes a contractual requirement to attend Children and Education scrutiny twice per year. Any alternative to the current arrangement must be agreed by both the Council and the Trust and go through a formal contract variation process.

## 6 Implications

<b>Resources:</b>	<p>The Council agreed a contract sum for 2024/25 of £80.80m to deliver the Council's statutory responsibilities for children's social care and to provide targeted early help services. In addition to this, SMBC has commissioned an emotional wellbeing service for children we care for and care experienced young people at a cost of approximately £250K.</p> <p>The Contract Sum amount that SCT receives is agreed annually in line with mechanisms set out in the Service Delivery Contract.</p>
<b>Legal and Governance:</b>	<p>The Service Delivery Contract between the Council and SCT is performance managed via a monthly Operational Partnership Board, a quarterly Strategic Partnership Board, and SCT is required to attend up to two Children's Scrutiny Board meetings and a Budget Scrutiny meeting each year. There is a partnership Improvement Board independently chaired by a DfE appointed consultant. Additionally, the Trust is required to submit its Annual Review to the Council.</p>
<b>Risk:</b>	<p>The Council's strategic risk register identifies no red risks relevant to this report. Following the inspection in May 2022 and the improved Ofsted judgement the previous red risk was moved to amber. This risk is regularly monitored and reported to the Council's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.</p>
<b>Equality:</b>	<p>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</p>
<b>Health and Wellbeing:</b>	<p>SCT continues to support children and families in Sandwell and as the quality of service that they deliver improves so</p>

	does the impact they have on improving the health and wellbeing of children and families.
<b>Social Value</b>	SCT supports children to achieve, feel safe, be supported and access opportunities. SCT supports care leavers to access education, employment and training. Having strong governance and oversight supports SCT to achieve service improvement and better support children and families in Sandwell.
<b>Climate change</b>	There is no direct climate change impact associated with this report.
<b>Corporate Parenting</b>	SCT continues on its to support the Council in delivering its corporate parenting responsibilities.

## 7. Appendices

None

## 8. Background Papers

None