

Scrutiny Board :	Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board
Report Title	Sandwell Children's Trust 6 month Performance Update
Date of Meeting	Monday, 23 March 2026
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Lead Officer	Executive Director Children and Education Sally Giles
Wards Affected	(All Wards);
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Choose an item. N/A
Appendices (if any)	N/A

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) presents their biannual performance update to the Children and Education Scrutiny Board in line with their contractual requirements. The review outlines progress across key service areas, including safeguarding, fostering, adoption and workforce. Ofsted inspections highlight significant improvements across the Trust supported by strong partnership working between the Trust, Council and wider partners.
- 1.2 The Trust's performance continues to be monitored through robust governance arrangements, including monthly operational performance board and quarterly strategic partnership board, as well as through its own internal governance structures and Practice Improvement Board. Improvements in service delivery have led to a reduction in strategic risk ratings and, importantly, better outcomes for children and families.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Scrutiny Board notes Sandwell Children's Trust's biannual performance update, as required under the contract between the Council and the Trust.
- 2.2 That the Board considers and comments on Sandwell Children's Trust performance update.

3. Background and Context

- 3.1 The contract between Sandwell MBC and SCT has comprehensive governance arrangements. This includes monthly meetings between the Director of Children and Education, senior finance and legal officers, and the Trust Chief Executive and Executive Team to review performance and operational matters. Quarterly Strategic Partnership boards are held with the Lead Member for Children's Services, the Chief Executive of the Council, the Chair of the SCT Board and the Chief Executive of SCT.
- 3.2 The contract requires SCT 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.
- 3.3 SCT provides regular performance updates for consideration by the Operational Partnership Board, the Strategic Partnership Board and then by the Cabinet.
- 3.4 Since April 2018, the Trust has undergone several Ofsted inspections and focused visits with notable improvements tracked in all areas. In October 2025, the Trust was notified by Ofsted of a full ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services). The previous full inspection in May 2022, judged as requires improvement to be good in all areas.
- 3.5 In the October 2025 inspection, Ofsted recognised that most services have significantly improved. Inspectors highlighted sustained leadership, stronger partnerships, and effective governance and strategic alignment between the Trust and the Council as key factors enabling senior leaders to make tangible improvements that are making a positive difference to children's lives. As a result, Ofsted rated Children's Services as Good, acknowledging the substantial progress achieved.
- 3.6 Ofsted identified 4 key improvement areas identified for further improvement, which SCT has already started to address:
 - How well children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, understand their rights and entitlements about coming into care and accommodation options.
 - The pace of leaders' actions to achieve timely permanence for some children in care.
 - The relationships and contact that personal advisers (PAs) have with children both before and after leaving care to support their preparation for adulthood.
 - The quality, accessibility and timeliness of pathway plans for some children in care and care leavers.

3.7 In February 2026 Ofsted also undertook an inspection of the Trust's Voluntary Adoption Service. Feedback was positive with notable improvements in all areas and importantly, positive outcomes for children and adopters. The formal report will be published once the factual accuracy process has been completed.

3.8 Sandwell Children's Trust has been subject of Ofsted several inspections, with notable progress observed across all services. The table below notes inspections that resulted in a graded outcome over the last 5 years:

Inspection/Visit	Date of Inspection visit	Judgement Focus area
Adoption - Full Inspection	16 February 2026	Good Awaiting Report to be published
Children Services inspection	13- 24 October 2025	Good https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80549
Fostering- Full inspection	14-18 October 2024	Good https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/4/1267324
Children's services inspection.	09 May 2022	Requires improvement to be good https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50187562
Monitoring Visit	16 November 2021	Assurance Visit – No Judgement https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50175282
Fostering – Full Inspection	02 August 2021	Good https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50168804

3.8 The DfE six monthly review took place in October 2025, it highlighted continued progress being made by the Trust across service areas and positive working between the Council and SCT. Following the positive Ofsted outcome, officials prepared advice for ministers on ending the intervention. Whilst it was noted that it could no longer be justified given current service performance, Josh MacAllister Minister for Childrens and Families has

confirmed that there is an expectation now for the Trust and Council to maintain momentum, embed sustainable improvement, and ensure that the conditions are in place for statutory intervention to be safely and confidently withdrawn.

- 3.9 As of 1st April 2024, new contractual KPIs agreed between Sandwell Children Trust and Sandwell MBC came into effect. As of December 2025, SCT met 11 KPI targets and a further 4 are within the contract tolerance.
- 3.10 The number of children we care for reduced slightly between August and January 2026, falling from 816 to 809. Over the same period, Sandwell's under-18 population increased from 86,835 to 88,593. During this time, 100 children entered care and 102 ceased to be looked after. Of those leaving care, 12 were adopted and 5 became subject of Special Guardianship Orders. A further 56 young people turned 18 and moved into adulthood, while 24 returned home to live with their families. In addition, 5 children returned home for other reasons.
- 3.11 As of January 2026, 87 children were placed more than 20 miles from Sandwell, a figure that has remained stable for the past year. Placement stability continues to be strong, with 66.3% of children living in the same home for at least 2.5 years, the highest level recorded in the last 12 months. Only 9.6% of children experienced three or more placement moves, which remains lower than both the national rate (10%) and the statistical neighbour average (10.8%). SCT recognises that some moves are planned and made in the child's best interests to secure long-term stability.
- 3.12 There were 71(8.7%) Sandwell children in residential care as of January 2026. Sandwell also has fewer children in residential care compared to the national average of 12%.
- 3.13 The Trust continues to work closely with Sandwell MBC to deliver the Families First reform programme, using the Children's Social Care Prevention Grant to strengthen early intervention and expand preventative services.
- 3.14 The Families First Programme aims to reform children's social care by establishing a more joined-up, preventative, and family-focused system. It focuses on delivering early help services through Family Help teams, creating dedicated multi-agency child protection teams, and using family networks to keep children safely at home. This initiative developed from the Government's Stable homes, Built on Love strategy and its subsequent policy paper aiming to overhaul children's social care. The Children's Well-being and Schools Bill are now in its final stages in the House of Lords before reaching Royal Assent and becoming legislation.
- 3.15 The Oldbury Families First Pilot launched in August 2025 and is testing the new Family Help model through the integration of the Oldbury Assessment & Intervention team and the Strengthening Families team. Recruitment to the new structure is progressing, although some specialist roles remain difficult to fill, alternative approaches are being explored to strengthen workforce capacity.

- 3.16 Sandwell MBC continue to make progress towards their target of recruiting 100 apprentices. Recruitment and engagement events generated over 1300 apprenticeship applications, leading to more than 85 apprenticeship offers with recruitment activity still ongoing. 9 care experienced young people were interviewed between October and December with 7 receiving apprenticeship offers to date and 2 not being successful but have received further support on interview skills and applications for alternative positions. They join an additional 5 Care Experienced young people who commenced apprenticeships with Sandwell council and Sandwell schools in 2025.
- 3.17 As of 31 January 2026, the Trust's social work establishment continue to improve, with 87% of posts now filled by permanent staff and 13% by interim workers. This represents the highest level of permanent staffing in the past 12 months and a 5.1% increase since July 2025. Turnover has reduced to 12.74%, reflecting a more stable and sustainable workforce position.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Sandwell Children's Trust presents to the Scrutiny Board as part of its contractual obligation to report biannually on performance.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Following extensive negotiations between SCT and SMBC, agreement has been reached on a Contract Sum for 2025/26 and a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) up to 2027/28. The sums agreed include an additional amount each year to fully repay the Trust's cumulative deficit by the end of 2027/28. In addition, the Trust has budgeted to receive £11.3m from Grants and Partner Contributions in 2025/26.
- 5.2 As of the end of January 2026 the Trust reported a year-to-date expenditure of £96.72m which is an overspend of £2.64m. The Trust is forecasting full-year expenditure of £115.39m, which is £2.62m overspend above the contract sum. The Trust are developing a mitigation plan to address this overspend position which will be shared with the Council.

6. Legal and Governance Implications

- 6.1 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.

7. Risks

- 7.1 There are currently no red risks on the Council's strategic risk register relevant to this report. The previous red risk, identified following the May 2022 inspection, was downgraded to amber after the improved judgement. Following the recent Good Ofsted judgement, discussions are underway to determine whether this risk can now be reduced to green. The risk continues to be monitored and reported through the Council's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

8. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

- 8.1 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.

9. Other Relevant Implications

- **Workforce and Human Resources (HR) implications**

The Council agreed a contract sum for 2025/26 of £93.9m 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 and £551K to fund the Sandwell Deal.

- **Corporate parenting:** SCT continues its to support the Council in delivering its corporate parenting responsibilities.
- **Social Value:** 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.

10. Background Documents

N/A

11. How does this deliver the Outcomes in the Council Plan?

- **Growing up in Sandwell**
Children remain in Sandwell and grow up in familiar surroundings, supported by people they trust and the services they need and at a time they need it.
- **Living in Sandwell**
Children and young people are supported to remain, where possible, in Sandwell, with access to familiar local services and trusted support networks.

- **Healthy in Sandwell**
Our commissioned wellbeing service ensures children we care for and care-experienced young people receive the right support at the right time.
- **Thriving Economy in Sandwell**
The apprenticeship programme gives young people access to local opportunities, helping them build skills, improve long term outcomes, and contribute to Sandwell's economy.
- **One Council One Team Approach.**
Close collaboration between the Council and the Trust ensures aligned priorities, shared accountability and sustained improvement. Strong governance and joint working underpin the progress which has been recognised by Ofsted.