2020/21

Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review

Sandwell
Children's Trust

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Foreword

We are very pleased to present Sandwell Children's Trust's third annual review report, which details our progress over the last year. The Trust was set up in April 2018 to improve services for the most vulnerable children and families in Sandwell and we are proud of the progress we have made year on year, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have done our very best for our children and families under these enormously challenging circumstances and our staff have shown great dedication and resilience in keeping children safe during a very difficult period.

This report forms part of our contractual arrangements with Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, and is a 'look backwards' to all our continued successes and challenges within our third year of operation. This report is a review of the financial year 2020/21, throughout which we have had to align our resources as necessary to respond and adapt to the pandemic. The report will show how we have worked together with our partners and particularly colleagues from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, our commissioners to do our best for children despite the challenges brought from the pandemic. In doing do we demonstrate our financial performance against the contract sum, our medium term financial plan, and how we have managed this against our demand for providing services to the children and young people of Sandwell. We set out our financial challenges and present a summary of our end of year accounts.

We also show the progress we have made on our improvement journey, against all aspects of our improvement plan, and highlight what others have said about us in a year where external regulators have sought assurance from us. We present the findings of surveys and feedback from children and families, and the themes of quality assurance activity. Finally, we set out where we have made joint changes to our contractual arrangements with the council.

We have continued to develop and mature as an organisation and have a clear vision for how we will strengthen the few areas where improvement is needed and also to build on our successes to become even better in the areas where we have improved. Our overall aim has not changed, which is to provide good services to children and families by 2022 and better services beyond this.

As we said last year, we see the annual review as one of three key strategic documents, the others being our Improvement Plan, and our Business Plan. Each year, the annual review is a useful opportunity to take stock, reflect on our journey and allows us to see the progress we have made.

We continue to be proud of the family we have created in the Trust which includes a dedicated team of social workers, administrators, support services staff, social care assistants, personal advisors and managers with a shared goal of improving and delivering excellent services for children and young people. We want to place on record our admiration and thanks for their efforts at such a challenging time.

The Right Honourable Jacqui Smith
Chair of Sandwell Children's Trust

Emma Taylor
Chief Executive of Sandwell Children's Trust

Executive Summary

Sandwell Children's Trust went live in April 2018 as a new and distinct legal entity commissioned to provide children's social care services in Sandwell on behalf of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council; created a result of a statutory direction from the government, and for the period of this intervention the Department for Education assigns a representative to act on behalf of the secretary of state, who has a range of powers in relation to the governance of the Trust.

The Trust has day-to-day operational independence in the management and delivery of these services, has the aim of providing 'Good' services to our children and families' by 2022 and is governed by a Board of Directors, chaired by the Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith, and is comprised of the Executive Directors, Independent Non-Executive Directors and council-appointed Non-Executive Directors.

Financial Context

The finances provided by SMBC to the Trust in 2020/21 is £65,328,000 and our 'third party' income was £7,149,794

We had an opening deficit of £5,814,000. The deficit for 2020/21 is subject to audit but provisionally stands at £1,861,144, making the cumulative deficit £7,675,144.

As outlined in our Medium Term Financial Plan our aim is to make financial savings over the next three years (with this year being the second year), and expect to deliver a cumulative breakeven by the end of 2023/24.

Improvement

In addition to managing our financial position, the Trust came into being to provide better services to the children and families of Sandwell. It is fair to say that traditional improvement activities slowed whilst all staff were responding to the pandemic. However, we believe that improvements are always found and made through necessity, and we have therefore strengthened some of our infrastructure and created greater strength and resilience amongst our leaders.

Some of our key, specific achievements within this financial year are:

- Continued practice improvement in all areas as outlined within our audits
- Continued strengthening of performance analysis
- Infrastructure to strengthen permanence and matching
- Improved oversight and challenge by Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference Chairs (through midpoint reviews and threshold discussions)
- Continued development of services for exploited children
- Development of relationships across the partnership, for example housing, to put into place joint working protocols for homeless children
- Life work officers are in place to promote best practice in this area

There is more to do, which is why we have refreshed our improvement plan, in line with our aims to become good and outstanding in the achievable future.

Coronavirus

The impact of the pandemic has been significant, and we have risen to the challenge of maximising children's safety and welfare, whilst also balancing the safety and welfare of our staff. This has not been without it's challenges, and we have had to be resolute in the face of changing guidance, emerging issues and new developments as they arise. It cannot be under stated how our staff at all levels adapted. This report will outline all of the specific business continuity arrangements, risk assessments and mitigating actions we put into place to make SCT as safe as we could.

External Inspections

Despite remaining under DfE intervention and having the badge of 'Inadequate', we did not have formal monitoring visits or a full inspection from Ofsted. However, we did receive inspectors in November 2020 for a fostering assurance visit, and then in March 2021 for a wider assurance visit. Both visits were positive, praised our approach to managing services during the pandemic, and confirmed the areas we knew we need to focus on as part of our improvement journey.

Introduction

The Annual Review is a contractual obligation of Sandwell Children's Trust in its reporting to the Council and interested parties such as the senior civil servant (while a Statutory Direction is in force). First and foremost, the aim of the review is to look back over the previous 12 months and understand how far we have achieved our specified goals within that year. The review should therefore be the first strategic document of the year, that informs our business plan and our improvement plan.

This year in **Section (a)** we begin with a summary of our actions to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Service Delivery Contract allows for the Trust to be 'relieved of its obligations to provide such part of the Services and from any liability for not providing such Services and/or for any consequences of such non-performance to the extent required as a result of the Relief Event'. Once it was clear that the pandemic would have a significant effect on how services could be delivered in line with Coronavirus regulations it was agreed with the Council that the Relief Event clauses were applicable. This has meant that for the duration of the relief event, currently to the end of September 2021, that performance would continue monitored in line with the relief event clauses of the Service Delivery Contract.

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 (b) the Improvement Plan (where applicable);
Section (c) performance of Services against the Performance Targets in the preceding Contract Year;
Section (d) the thematic findings of any Audits and Surveys carried out by the Trust during the previous Contract Year;
Section (e) the outcome of any Ofsted monitoring visits and/or Ofsted inspections;
Section (f) performance against budgets in the preceding Contract Year;
Section (g) demand analysis in respect of the Services against assumptions and models in respect of the preceding Contract Year;
Section (h) the outcome of any Agreed Action Plan and/or Rectification Plan that was agreed in the preceding Contract Year;
Section (i) any Changes to the Agreement agreed between the Parties in the preceding Contract Year pursuant to the Change Control Procedure;
Section (j) any proposed changes to the Services Specification, the Financial Mechanism and/or the Performance Indicators for the following Contract Year;
Section (k) the contractual governance arrangements set out in Schedule 19 (Governance); and
Section (l) such other matters that the Parties may agree from time to time.

Section (a) – Our response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

This has been our highest priority this year and we have been resolute in the face of this extended crisis. In their assurance visit in March 2021, Ofsted inspectors noted this as a clear strength and representatives from the DfE have commented that our response has been as good as anyone nationally.

Our leadership team has remained strong throughout the pandemic. Our management and governance structures have been robust and stable and virtual working throughout the breadth of the organisation has become business as usual – we have not suffered any significant breaks in the chain of command because of COVID-19. We have made measured and considered decisions with every challenge we have faced, we have been able to continue to work safely and did not have to significantly change the service and support provided to children, young people and families. We considered the flexibilities in legislation and only some have been adopted in exceptional circumstances.

Robust organisational structures, effective partnerships and resolute officer commitment have ensured that the organisation has repeatedly met the challenges posed by COVID-19. The organisational pillars of ICT, communications, HR, Finance, Performance, Business Support and others, have provided a stable platform from which front line staff have continued to support young people. We have played a crucial role in local partnerships, often leading the way in key strategic and operational meetings.

Frontline service practice has remained under constant review, and we have maintained a register of instances where we have significantly amended practice.

Risk registers and Business Continuity Plans were approved by the Executive Management Team on 11 March 2020 and additional risks have been added to the register relating to the pandemic. In addition to their standard business continuity plans, SCT managers had also developed several Business Continuity "Plans on a Page" (PoPs) and then subsequently 'surge plans' examining the potential for a swell in demand across service areas linked to the national picture of lockdowns, local arrangements and school closures. These documents provided a snapshot of key functions for individual service areas and assured Directors and managers of function resilience. These live working documents continue to be reviewed and updated by their owners on a 3-4 weekly basis, during the pandemic.

A fundamental tenet of our work has been that we should continue to visit children and families face to face based upon their needs and the safety of staff. In order to do this, we created a pre-visit risk assessment for social workers to use prior to any visit, which has been an evolving document taking into account evolving legislation and national guidance. Despite the initial national shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), by working closely with SMBC and suppliers throughout the pandemic, the Trust managed to acquire sufficient stock to meet its needs. Equipment was checked to ensure that it meets the quality levels defined by Public Health, usage is monitored weekly and plans are in place to reorder when only 8 weeks of stock remain, to allow for a continuity in visits for children and families. Formal processes were established for the allocation of PPE, which also evolved over time based upon availability and staff need.

Regular communication and meaningful engagement with staff has been of the utmost importance, and we believe we have risen to the challenge of making decisions and delivering advice and direction to staff consistent with ever changing government guidance, in consultation with Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC), with engagement with staff and trade unions every step of the way. Some of the ways in which we have tailored our approach in this area are:

- An 'Ask Us' facility for staff and an evolving frequently asked questions section on the intranet for staff reference.
- Daily COVID-19 message from the Chief Executive eventually was replaced with a midweek blog and an 'end of week' round up from Directors
- Engagement via several "stocktake" events where the Chair, Chief Executive and Directors talked about our journey since becoming a trust and how the pandemic has impacted us all, and a reflective session, focusing upon the need for staff to give themselves permission to 'take a moment'
- At the "Keeping yourself and others safe" sessions, the Chief Executive and Directors talked about how everyone can play their part in keeping colleagues and the children, young people and families we work with safe
- Staff have been invited to vaccination information sessions with a Public Health Consultant
- Staff have been invited to individual sessions with Educational Psychologists
- Teams have had advice and information sessions from Occupational Health

A key opportunity for staff engagement and feedback is the Practitioner Improvement Board. This is a group of staff from across all services within the Trust who meet monthly and have acted as a forum for consultation, particularly in regard to our approach to the pandemic. It has been immensely useful in developing practical ways of implementing our strategic aims. An example of this is when PPE became more available, this group suggested a more efficient and trusting way of distributing it to staff.

All Trust buildings were initially closed in response to the pandemic, with the sole exception of Oldbury Council House which hosted MASH/SAAT. A small admin team was maintained in the Council house to provide core functions that allowed the wider service to operate remotely. This team was available to process incoming and outgoing mail, print and send out necessary documentation of ICPC and review meetings, support staff to access ICT equipment and issue PPE as required.

An ongoing dialogue has been maintained with SMBC Facilities Management and Health and Safety colleagues regarding new ways of working, to consider current and future strategies. The Trust is a member of the council's weekly accommodation group and is aligned to the council's approach on all matters relating to accommodation. In consultation with staff from across the Trust, we have responded to this evolving situation by maintaining essential services. However, we prioritised the recommencement of Family time, ensuring staff, children, carers and families were safe and supported as the Hollies family centre was reopened. The services that were office based are:

- The Wellman Building being opened once a week to allow staff to collect equipment and resources, enabling them to work at home, and latterly to pick up PPE and Christmas presents for children.
- Safe indoor family time at the Hollies.
- A community venue (Windmill Community Centre) and latterly Unity Walk was reopened to undertake Parent Assessment Manual (PAMS) assessments.
- Family time at the Hollies, extended to the Metsec Building to allow additional capacity while maintaining safety for all participants
- Weekly access to the Wellman building to allow staff to collect equipment, to facilitate remote working, and the collection of bulk PPE supplies
- Unity Walk was reopened to allow the continuation of some direct work with young people and court directed PAMs assessment
- Utilisation of both the Wellman and Metsec for the roll out of an organisational wide ICT refresh
- Use of the Wellman building in December 2020 to distribute Christmas presents to all children in care.

Mechanisms were put in place to ensure all expenditure incurred specifically due to the pandemic were recorded, with this information being shared with the Council, fortnightly. This allowed the Trust to make a claim against the additional COVID related funding that had been provided by central government.

With the arrival of COVID-19, the HR team refocused their attention on workforce tracking and planning. Project work ceased whilst the team gathered and built data sheets ensuring that it was clear which staff was unavailable due to either having contracted Covid or having to self-isolate in line with government guidance. Key data was fed to the Performance Team, assisting with the planning of cases/activity. Recruitment and retention remained a key focus during the pandemic. Market conditions saw a fall in both agency and permanent applicants.

Policies were kept under review and amended in line with national guidelines, with a particular focus on staff welfare and support during the pandemic. We undertook individual staff risk assessments which identified 13 individuals whose work activities required special consideration. In addition to this we asked 21 individuals to remain shielding after central government ceased this, and 1 individual who had identified care concerns. The HR Team has maintained support for individuals who are identified as high risk, shielding and who have caring responsibilities with monthly welfare calls.

In February 2021, following active engagement with Public Health Sandwell and the local CCG, staff were able to access the vaccination hub in Walsall. HR continues to monitor vaccination uptake to assist resource planning.

At the beginning of 2021, due to increasing resource concerns caused by a spike in COVID-19 absence, increased agency leavers, long-term sick, maternity leaves and a static recruitment market, several additional measures were implemented to ensure that children and young people's cases were appropriately managed. These included, the HR team meeting daily with each of the operational teams to understand resources. The information gathered is then shared with the Quality and Operations team who make sure that cases are appropriately re-allocated. The business continuity process was initiated, with the creation of a pool of social workers from within the Quality & Performance team. Resources were moved from the

SAAT team to care management. In addition, a Brief Intervention Team was created to swiftly progress timely intervention and the safe closure of some of our children in need.

The Trust's transfer to working virtually rested firmly upon the quality and resilience of its ICT infrastructure. A significantly strengthened ICT infrastructure was needed and arrangements were put in place to make sure that SCT staff had the equipment necessary to work from home and that this equipment worked consistently:

- To ensure that the Front Door remained open, a review of its telephony was required.
- The evolution of Liquidlogic systematic forms, case notes, hazard markers and banners, as well as quick reference guides for staff were undertaken as the pandemic began.
- A review of mobile telephone capability took place to improve front line workers engagement with service users via the most appropriate devices and new handsets were provided.
- It was also agreed to bring forward SCT's Hardware Refresh and Technology Modernisation Programme and all staff received a new Windows 10 device by November 2020.

For the first few months of the pandemic, the performance team worked on several new developments relating to COVID-19, which meant that new processes were implemented, increasing the amount of manual reporting. For example, children's attendance at school – datasets that have not been linked before.

In order to respond quickly to the need for pandemic-related management information, a COVID-19 dashboard was created, which brought together information to identify which children were flagged as highest risk, being visited face to face or virtually, which children had a recent management oversight, and which children had a recent pre-visit risk assessment or education status form. This has been invaluable in identifying those teams that are performing well and those who required additional support, it also allowed managers to identify those children who were most vulnerable and required more immediate actions.

Throughout the pandemic, we have needed to invoke business continuity arrangements on three separate occasions, where staff in particular areas were sick, self-isolating or where staff had handed in their notice. This included the redeployment of staff, particularly qualified social workers, to visit and undertake discrete pieces of work related to safeguarding children. This was achieved through a dynamic 'pool' of staff with a central senior manager co-ordinating this.

Intervention through visiting and the impact of COVID-19 on visiting

Throughout the pandemic, our approach has been that we visit children and young people face to face, based upon presenting needs of children, and staff safety, utilising PPE. It can be seen that we have maintained good levels of visiting both virtually and face to face, after an initial drop in face to face visits in May / June. Consistently, the new DfE return evidences that the Trust is doing well, when compared to statistical neighbours, and regionally and nationally, in relation to children being seen or contacted by their SW within a 4-week period.

Practitioners are continuing to seek to see children alone during virtual visits, through the use of video messaging; the oversight and assurance of this happening is more of a challenge but where possible, the participation and involvement of children continues. There is increasing evidence of the use of direct work seen on children's case files; however, this is variable and inconsistent. It is recognised that practitioners working with children who are non-verbal need alternative ways of communicating with children and further exploration, although there are some very good examples of innovative ways of communication with these children, more work is needed in this area.

The use of video messaging has increased as a result of COVID-19 and creativity in ensuring the voice of the child. However, this has led to an acknowledgment that for some children, using technology as a means of participation is more successful and is preferred. Whilst it should not, and does not, replace face to face statutory visiting expectations, practitioners are recognising the use of technology as a further means of effective communication with children and young people, who often prefer to be involved in their care planning through this medium.

- Some of the barriers here have been:
- Multi-agency working has been more restrictive, services only working virtually, professionals not completing home visits and children not attending school
- Due to the lack of services completing direct work, this impacted upon plans for children moving forward and at times, Social Workers have been the only professional visiting the home

- Reduced the access of the Local Offer to families in Sandwell. Many provider agencies are having difficulty recruiting staff to provide social activities in the local community. This has resulted in families struggling to access resources via the Local Offer making referrals to social care for an assessment for support services, therefore, having an impact on the Trust considering paying for services outside of the Local Offer
- The overnight short breaks unit Norman Laud closed December 2020, leaving 10 children and families without short breaks for several months. To address this, the team identified and sourced other short breaks units to cover the children without a resource.

Nevertheless, we have prioritised children at highest risk, ensuring all children have had the intervention they need based on their level of risk; we have progressed care planning to ensure safeguarding needs are met and we have been able to review families that could access support in other services – enabling us to work with only those who meet our threshold.

Review of plans

CP Conferences took place via telephone conference, enabling them to be recorded, and then used to produce minutes. Whilst it is accepted that moving to virtual methods of meetings was not ideal, it ensured that despite the pandemic, plans for children were being reviewed. There was some feedback to suggest that some families preferred this mechanism of meeting, and some young people engaged more fully in their process. Others have felt more isolated using these methods. Part of the work moving forward into the next year will be to review all of the methods of interventions and engagement and ensure families are able to use the methods most suited to their needs. It is clear that partner agencies have found it easier to engage in virtual meetings as this has reduced the time they are spending travelling to and from meetings, it has also improved engagement form professionals that would normally struggle to attend meetings e.g. GP's. As we move to a position of considering how meetings can return in person, the lessons learnt from virtual meetings will still be taken forward.

The review of children's plans has been a significant factor in the work of the safeguarding unit, and there has been scrutiny throughout the year on those plans that have been in place for a long time, or appear to be drifting. The recent Ofsted assurance visit (March 2021) questioned the evidence on some children's files of the impact of the IRO or Conference Chair on progressing plans and challenging drift and delay. This is an area of practice that will be a high priority in the coming year and part of the future improvement plan. Since the launch of the revised Challenge and Resolution process in October 2020, IROs and CPCCs have more consistently utilised informal challenges, working with operational staff and trying to build relationships to bring about resolution, rather than formal challenges.

The quality of plans and planning has been an area of work throughout this year. There have been task and finish groups that have included managers and practitioners from within the service, and also work undertaken within the service to develop and trial a Plan on a Page – which aims to be a document that is simple and clear for parents and children to understand and refer to. This has now been used by a few IROs and a CPCC and the aim is to take this into the next year and into the improvement plan with a view to full role out. Service User feedback on the few cases has been very positive in helping families to understand their plans an importantly what they need to do and what will help to make things better for the child. This work will go alongside plans now to reduce the record of meetings to succinct summaries and analysis and focus more of improving the quality of plans and planning.

The Trust made changes to the reporting expectations for Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPC) and it became an expectation that an updated assessment was completed in advance of all RCPCs. The compliance in this area is variable and this has been recognised as an area for improvement. Managers have reflected on this and consider that the communication to staff about this expectation may not have been as robust as it could have been and currently, discussions are taking place for a "re-launch" of this expectation.

Some of the barriers here have been:

- Not having direct/in person contact for some families has been challenging and this at times has led to taking more gradual steps to include and involve them. Some service users may have felt disengaged by not being able to meet people talking about them or their children.
- Reduction in visits has meant that some children have not been seen as regularly as we would have liked or have become harder to reach.
- Ensuring a more collaborative way of working with all partners and SWs – who is seeing a family – and co-ordination of contacts to minimise risk of infection whilst ensuring that children are safe and their plans have progressed.

- Greater support to children in their placements to avoid movements and changes for them.

However, our work has:

- Ensured meetings have taken place so their plans have been reviewed
- Brought in Threshold discussions to ensure that only those children who have needed an ICPC go through that process
- We have engaged some children and families who had felt marginalised from being in rooms of professionals (engaging them in their home or virtually for some has increased their engagement)
- We have reduced the number of multiple moves for looked after children
- We have maintained and improved the stability of placements over 2 years for looked after children
- We have been systematically reviewing those children on CP Plans and have reduced these numbers by nearly 200 in the last 12 months, utilising other services and supporting families in a relationship based way

Section (b) - The Improvement Plan

We have come a long way in the last three years since we began as a Trust, and have made some good improvements within that time, including ensuring the resilience of our infrastructure when responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has laid quality foundations for future improvements. Coming out of the pandemic, we are ready for the next stage of our journey, so at the end of this financial year it was the right time for us to refresh our improvement plan with the aim of becoming a 'Good' or better organisation.

It is fair to say that traditional improvement activities slowed whilst all staff were responding to the pandemic. However, we believe that improvements are always found and made through necessity, and we have therefore strengthened some of our infrastructure and created greater strength and resilience amongst our leaders.

Some of our key, specific achievements within this financial year are:

- Continued practice improvement in all areas as outlined within our audits
- Continued strengthening of performance analysis
- Infrastructure to strengthen permanence and matching
- Improved oversight and challenge by Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference Chairs (through midpoint reviews and threshold discussions)
- Continued development of services for exploited children
- Development of relationships across the partnership, for example housing, to put into place joint working protocols for homeless children
- Life work officers are in place to promote best practice in this area

Our new improvement plan and governance

We know there is still a lot for us to do in a challenging field, with staffing and demand pressures regionally and nationally. The landscape for children's services following the pandemic is ever-changing, so our approach is with this in mind. We have also had several visits from Ofsted and have taken advantage of practice improvement partners from Doncaster, Essex and Camden to provide external validation of our work. We know the areas where we need to improve to achieve our aims, which are People, Practice and Partnerships:

People

Ensuring we recruit and retain good quality staff through:

- Comprehensive and supportive induction that prepares staff to do the job they came to do
- Offering genuine opportunities for career development and progression from within
- Developing the best managers and senior leaders
- A good learning and development offer for all levels of staff

Practice

We will ensure that:

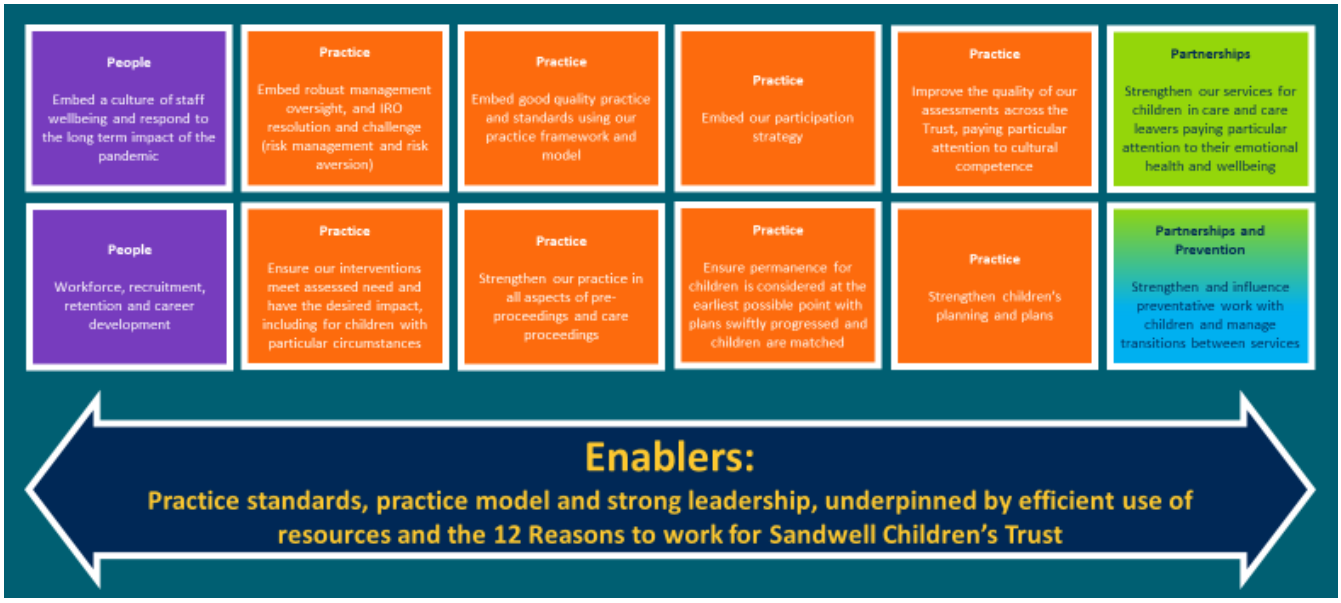
- When we intervene with families, this is done with the benefit of high-quality analytical assessments which balance children's wishes and needs with parental capacity and motivation to change
- Intervention with families are proportionate, and we minimise delays in decision making
- Where we can, we prevent needs and risks increasing and empower families and communities to build on their strengths and meet their own needs
- When we work with families we do so in a relationship-based way, understand the impact of trauma on children and families, build on strengths and address the root causes of needs and risks
- We routinely analyse practice and trends, we know the value and impact of our interventions and can provide evidence for this
- We have a culture of genuine reflection and promote a cycle of learning and practice improvement, which can be evidenced

Partnership and Prevention

We will ensure that:

- We work with partners so that Early Help promotes prevention at every level
- Ensuring the most relevant partners are integral in every child's assessment and plan, actively support families and where decisions are made on behalf of children
- Capitalising on the six towns in Sandwell to ensure that a localised community approach is taken, helps to identify and intervene early and swiftly, building relationships and empowering families
- There is a robust, safe and efficient interface between levels of need
- Work with early help partners so that they can adopt aspects of our practice framework and model
- Targeted Services provided by SCT manage risk effectively and contribute towards a whole Sandwell approach to Early Help

As a result of our latest self-evaluation, our performance data, quality assurance activity and intelligence, bolstered by external feedback, we know where more specific improvements need to be made. These are set out below:



Enablers

Good progress has been made in these three categories of the previous improvement plan, and we believe these key enablers provide a strong foundation for our next stage of improvement. They are:

***Leadership**:* Strong leadership ensures that we maintain progress as all services and all staff have a shared understanding of our vision and expectations, there is a culture of accountability for the work that we do and staff feel safe to learn, improve and innovate.

Efficient use of resources: An efficient service lends itself to being a good service as staff are focussed on the right things for children and families, are not overly distracted or burdened by meaningless activity and have the space to be creative.

12 Reasons to work for Sandwell Children's Trust: Our workforce strategy and delivery programme is key to deliver most, if not all of the improvements within this plan, as we are reliant upon good quality staff, social workers and managers to deliver the best for our families. The 12 reasons also set out our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

People

1) *Embed a culture of staff wellbeing and respond to the long-term impact of the pandemic*

After the last 12 months when staff have had to respond to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe it is crucial to ensure that our staff are offered the best emotional and practical support possible to be able to give their best to children and families, throughout the remainder of this crisis and beyond. This will include:

- Evolving our working style to meet staff and business needs
- Ensuring our accommodation and technology needs are met following the pandemic
- Ensuring staff have access to emotional wellbeing services broadly and individually
- Ensuring staff welfare is at the forefront of any service decisions
- Continue to engage with staff, listen to their feedback, and respond in a timely way

2) Workforce, recruitment, retention and career development

Referred to within the key enablers, having a good quality and stable staff base is essential in ensuring continued improvements can be made, as staff who leave take their learning elsewhere and new staff may need investment of training and development. Instability within teams and services also contribute to instability for children and families, drift and delay, and 'start again syndrome'.

- Offering genuine opportunities for career development and progression from within, with clearly articulated pathways
- Ensuring our financial and overall package is attractive to new and existing staff, and competitive in the local market
- Ensuring we explore every avenue to obtain quality social workers and other support staff and do all we can to sell ourselves
- Ensuring there is a comprehensive and supportive induction that prepares staff to do the job they came to do
- Developing the best managers and senior leaders through established leadership programmes
- Ensuring we maintain a good learning and development offer for all levels of staff
- The embedding of the social work academy in Sandwell and maintaining a stream of interested students and ASYE's to bolster our future

Practice

3) Embed good quality practice and standards using our practice framework and model

Our practice framework and model underpins everything we do for children and families, as such it is important that all staff are equipped with a consistent way in which to practice, informed by research and helps maximise the success of our interventions.

- Ensuring when we intervene with families, this is done with the benefit of high-quality analytical assessments which balance children's wishes and needs with parental capacity and motivation to change
- Intervention with families are proportionate, and we minimise delays in decision making
- Where we can, we prevent needs and risks increasing and empower families and communities to build on their strengths and meet their own needs
- When we work with families we do so in a relationship-based way, understand the impact of trauma on children and families, build on strengths, and address the root causes of needs and risks
- We routinely analyse practice and trends, we know the value and impact of our interventions and can provide evidence for this
- We have a culture of genuine reflection and promote a cycle of learning and practice improvement

4) Embed our participation strategy

We are proud of our 'Four I's' participation strategy (Invest, Inform, Involve and Influence) and are well on the way to be accredited for our work in this area. Having services designed in collaboration with children gives us the opportunity to see things from their point of view. Engaging children in a meaningful way, at every step of the way, is of the utmost importance to us and allows us to tailor our interventions for maximum success.

- Ensuring meaningful participation of children and young people in decision making meetings
- Ensuring our staff are equipped to engage with children and young people of all ages and developmental needs
- Ensuring children and young people are involved in our QA processes and help us to learn
- Ensuring we obtain feedback from children and young people wherever we can
- Ensuring services are developed with children and young people

5) Improve the quality of our assessments across the Trust, paying particular attention to cultural competence

We are a diverse borough in Sandwell. Our families have wide range of ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, ages, sexualities and gender identities, often layered on top of each other. As such, each family has its own culture, often complex and with its own cultural norms, which we have to understand if we are going to get our interventions right for them. Staff also need to understand their own experiences, values and identities and how these might affect the way in which they practice. Therefore, our aim is for all staff should be culturally competent.

- Ensuring we have clear diversity policies, statements of intent and expectations are communicated to all staff
- Ensuring cultural competence throughout all levels of the organisation, no matter what the role, and that it is a key consideration of assessing and intervening with families
- Ensuring we considering diversity and culture within all the work we do

6) Strengthen children's planning and plans

Without a good analytical assessment and a clear plan, setting out clear expectations for all involved our interventions with children and families are less likely to be a success. We know we have not yet done all we can to improve the quality of our plans, so this priority area is an essential in the first year of this plan, to be further built on beyond that.

- Ensure we have a fit for purpose design for SMART plans that is well understood, used to drive quality interventions that address the root causes of problems
- Develop plans that help families to know what is expected of them, relevant and drive good quality and meaningful intervention
- Ensure that staff know what a good plan looks like and develop a bank of good practice examples
- Progress made in line with children's plans are measurable and analysed

7) Embed robust management oversight, and IRO resolution and challenge (risk management and risk aversion)

Without strong, proportionate management oversight, clear direction and independent challenge, children are less likely to receive consistent and effective interventions. Delays, poorer practice and potential problems are not foreseen or identified quickly enough and in turn are not resolved quickly enough.

- Intervening in a child's life should be proportionate to their assessed need, and when risks are reduced, decisions are made for a more appropriate intervention in a timely way
- We have a consistent and shared approach to risk
- Ensure managers understand their own performance and know their strengths and areas for improvement
- Ensure managers identify potential problems as soon as possible and rectify any problems immediately
- Ensure the footprint of IRO's and CP Conference Chairs are routinely seen, and challenge and resolution has a positive impact on children's outcomes
- Scrutiny, challenge and reflection takes place at every level of management

8) Ensure our interventions meet assessed need and have the desired impact, including for children with particular circumstances

Whenever we work with children and families, everything we do should be meaningful, purposeful and our interventions make a difference to a child's life. Our social workers and practitioners are agents of change in their own right and are crucial in helping families to reduce risk or better meet need – taking advantage of specialist resource where the need arises. We also have a range of children with specialist circumstances in Sandwell, including those where their immigration status is unresolved (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and those with No Recourse to Public Funds), those who are at risk of exploitation, and those where their disability necessitates a service. For these children, we need to tailor our interventions, making best use of the skillset of our staff.

- Ensure there is a good support infrastructure and clear performance reporting for staff who work with children with disabilities, so that practice is consistent for all children requiring a service due to their disability
- Ensure that the strong work of the exploitation teams in Sandwell continue to be developed

- Consolidate our intervention with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, those with No Recourse to Public Funds and those who require British citizenship, ensuring consistent practice for these children and families

9) Strengthen our practice in all aspects of pre-proceedings and care proceedings

Where care proceedings are a possible outcome of our involvement with a family it is essential that we enter into clear dialogue with parents through the Public Law Outline. We know that our work in this area has been variable, with some good pockets of work identified by courts and our regulators. However, on average, children spend too long in Care Proceedings in Sandwell, and our assessments and evidence does not always lead to the outcomes we seek in court.

- We should do whatever it takes for a child to remain safely within their family, which means family options are explored at the earliest opportunity
- Review and ensure processes for pre-proceedings are robust, that parents are well-informed and expectations are clear to them from the outset
- Incorporate pre-proceedings and court processes into case management systems and utilise performance reporting to maintain an accurate tracker of this activity
- Address the historic delay within existing care proceedings and ensure there is a mechanism to review and drive progress for those children who entered into care proceedings more recently
- Engage with the judiciary and CAFCASS and ensure we maximise our influence in regional forums so Special Guardianship can be considered as a viable permanence option

10) Ensure permanence for children is considered at the earliest possible point with plans swiftly progressed and children are matched

Children deserve to know where they are going to live permanently as soon as possible, and these permanent placements should be made without delay, as part of an informed decision from a senior manager. In Sandwell, we need to consistently achieve this for our children.

- We should do whatever it takes for a child to remain safely within their family, which means family options are explored at the earliest opportunity
- Ensure that children in our care have a plan for permanence at the earliest opportunity
- Ensure that initial placements for children are made with due consideration of their needs, and their profile
- Ensure that children's long-term placements are made with robust matching considerations and decisions to maximise the success of these placements

Partnerships

11) Strengthen our services for children in care and care leavers paying particular attention to their emotional health and wellbeing

Children in Sandwell have access to a range of support for their emotional and mental health, but the effectiveness of these services is not as well understood as it could be. We need to be able to influence and develop clear pathways for emotional and mental health support for our children, in particular those for whom we have or have had parental responsibility.

- Develop clear performance analysis and reporting in this area
- Respond to the 2021 review of mental health services for care leavers to ensure good quality transition to adult mental health services
- Improve relationships and partnership working in this area to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children
- Commission services that meet the emotional needs of our children in care and care leavers, where a mental health service threshold is not met

Prevention

12) Strengthen and influence preventative work with children and manage transitions between services

- We work with partners so that Early Help promotes prevention at every level

- Ensuring the most relevant partners are involved in every child's assessment and plan, they actively support families and contribute to decisions made on behalf of children
- Capitalising on the six towns in Sandwell to ensure that a localised community approach is taken, helps to identify and intervene early and swiftly, building relationships and empowering families
- There is a robust, safe and efficient interface between levels of need
- Work with early help partners so that they can adopt aspects of our practice framework and model
- Targeted Services provided by SCT manage risk effectively and contribute towards a whole Sandwell approach to Early Help

Demonstrating impact

We know we need to measure our progress through a range of methods, which include performance metrics, intelligence, feedback from children, families and our partner and most importantly our quality assurance activity. We do this through our single overarching plan / impact workbook which is governed through our Practice Improvement Board.

Quantitative Measures

- A greater percentage of the workforce is permanent and staff turnover, sickness and vacancies reduce.
- We take less time to appoint staff and improve satisfaction with our induction programme, which leads to improvements in practice.
- A greater percentage of staff have one to one supervision within the month and managers are providing quality direction to social workers
- Our re-referrals and repeat plans decrease, indicating interventions are longer lasting and are likely to have been more successful.
- More staff utilise assessment tools, research and direct work tools to engage with children and families.
- Children are subject to a Child in Need or Child Protection plan for less time, where intervention in their lives is more purposeful.
- Plans are updated in a more timely manner, are reviewed in collaborative forums with families and key professionals and focus on reducing risk.
- We understand where exploitation activity takes place, and can evidence disruption actions are reducing exploitation, with a trajectory of reducing risk over the long term once the baseline is understood.
- Agency, Parent and Child attendance at MACE meetings increase.
- There is a greater proportion of children with a plan of permanence, and who are formally matched to their long-term carer. Where adoption is in children's best interests this takes place as soon as possible.
- The average length of Care Proceedings decreases and there is evidence of purposeful work with front-loaded evidence.
- More children who become looked after do so in a planned way where carers are able to meet their needs from day 1.
- Foster Carer recruitment activity shows a greater number of mainstream fostering assessments are being undertaken, leading to a greater number of mainstream foster carers being approved.
- A greater percentage of Children in Care have had good quality life work and where appropriate have Life Story Books.
- More children leave care safely to return to their families, where appropriate, and a greater percentage of children who cease care do so through Special Guardianship.
- More care leavers have access to adult mental health services should they need to and more children and young people known to SCT can access therapeutic support and in a more timely way.

Qualitative measures

- Staff are routinely providing feedback, which is constructive and positive and results in tangible actions where appropriate.
- More of our work is rated as Good or better in all categories.
- Learning from a range of feedback, including children and families, is used as the basis of continued improvement, and feeds into learning and development.
- Children's voice is more evident in planning for them, more children attend meetings and have a say in decisions made on their behalf.
- Managers consistently demonstrate their day to day support and direction to ensure the work we do with children is purposeful and appropriate.
- There is an IRO / CP Conference chair footprint evident and Dispute resolution is used proportionately, ensuring that intervention for children is not delayed.
- Private fostering arrangements are better known and are assessed as safe for children.

- Children placed in interim approved placements are safeguarded, and allegations are handled in a timely and robust way.

Section (c) - 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 and are pleased to say that despite the pandemic having an impact on our work, we have maintained good performance in many areas. Over the course of the year, eight of the fifteen Key Performance Indicators have improved or been maintained above our target, three have remained broadly the same but below target, and four have declined or oscillated between failure and tolerance. Particular areas of improvement / maintenance are:

- Timeliness of contacts, referrals and Initial Child Protection Conferences and children in care reviews
- Outcome of random case file audits
- Unallocated children

Those that have declined are:

- Timeliness of visits to children
- Management supervision

On 21st July 2020 SMBC agreed that coronavirus pandemic constituted a relief event, which stipulated that the Trust would be free of any performance consequences or liability in specified areas of the contract. Namely, PI6, PI10, PI11 and PI13, and the relevant parts of the service specification. This relief event was extended to the end of the financial year by letter on 20th October 2020.

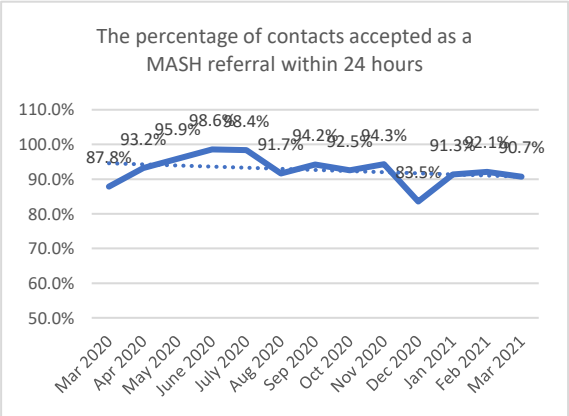
Already discussed earlier within this report, two particular concerns that arose due to the pandemic were staffing (i.e. staff sickness, self-isolation and shielding), and spikes in demand / surges. This will be a theme across many of the performance indicators.

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

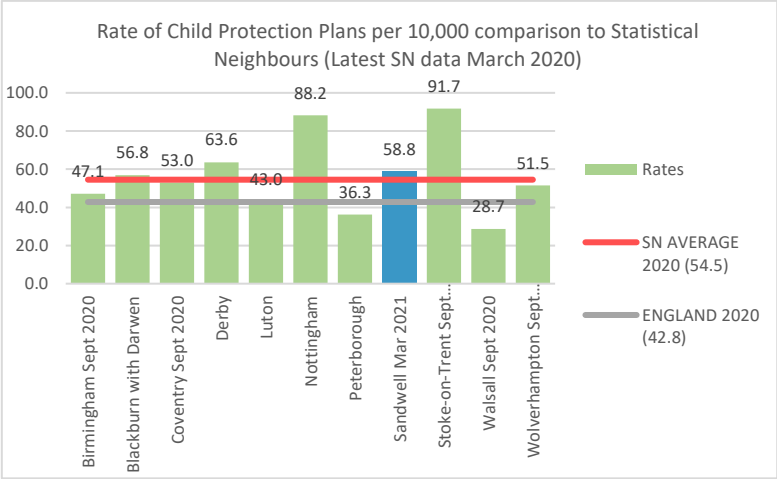
Target: > 75%
Tolerance: > 65%
Failure: < 65%

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. We have been consistently above our target in this area for several years, although there was a dip in performance in December 2020 (caused by a technical problem with our case management system).



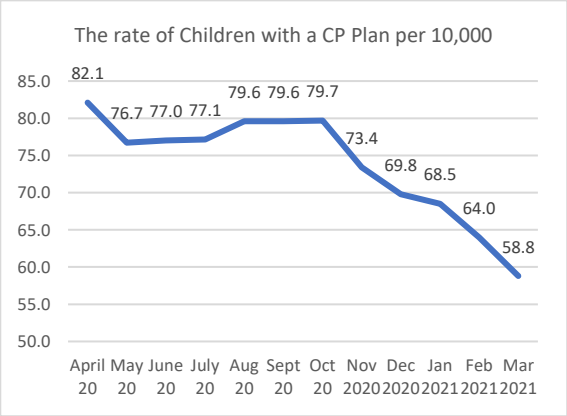
PI2 - The rate of Children who are the subject of a Child Protection Plan (per 10,000) of our child population.

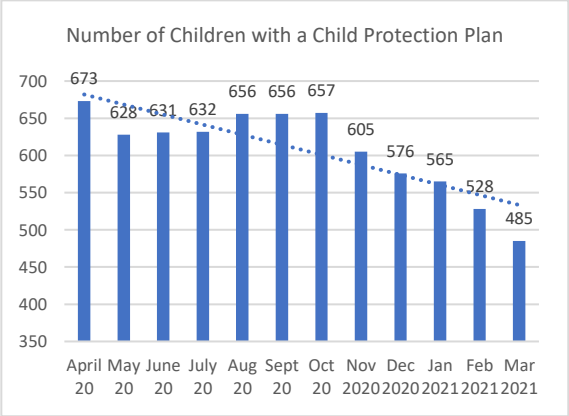
Target: < 65 children per 10,000
Tolerance: < 80 children per 10,000
Failure: > 80 children per 10,000



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 54.5 and the England average is 42.8 (measured at March 2020).

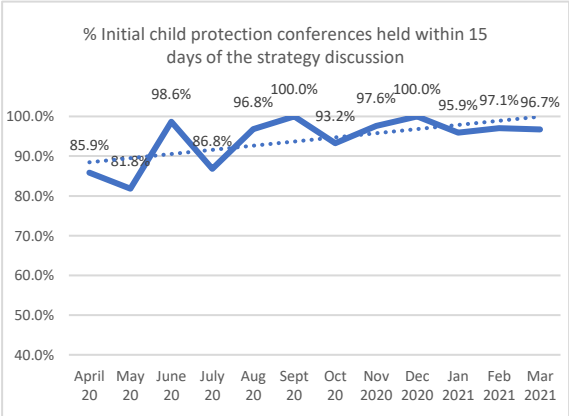
Throughout the year we have worked hard to ensure that the threshold for child protection was consistent, and this is now much more in line with our SN average, and positively at the lowest rate for 2 years.





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%

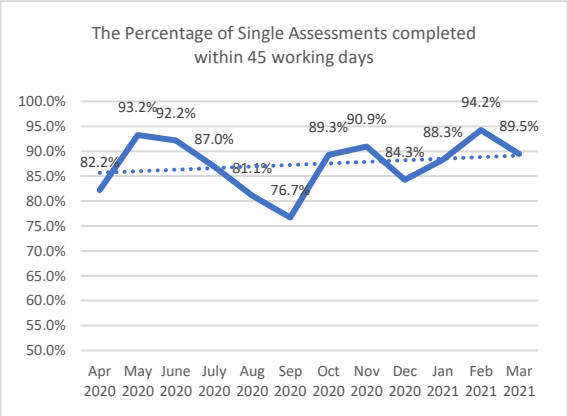


This measure shows how timely we are when we are completing S47 enquiries and organising Initial Child Protection Conferences for children. It gives us a sense of how we are managing demand in this area and how quickly we can bring together a group of professionals to make decisions for children who are potentially at risk of significant harm.

Performance in this indicator has been sustained above target since February 2020 and is consistently above our comparators for 2020 (England 77.7%, West Midlands 77.6% and Statistical Neighbour 78.4%).

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

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

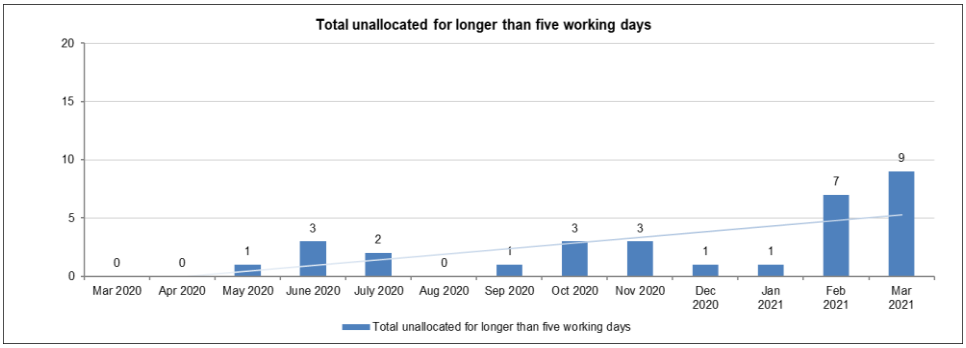


This measure shows how timely our Single Assessments are for children (in line with the statutory maximum expectation of 45 working days). Most Single Assessments are completed by Social Workers within the Safeguarding and Assessment Teams (SAAT), but a significant amount are completed across other service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

We saw a dip in performance mid-year, which coincided with increased demand in this area but also a period of time when staff were self-isolating and shielding.

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

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



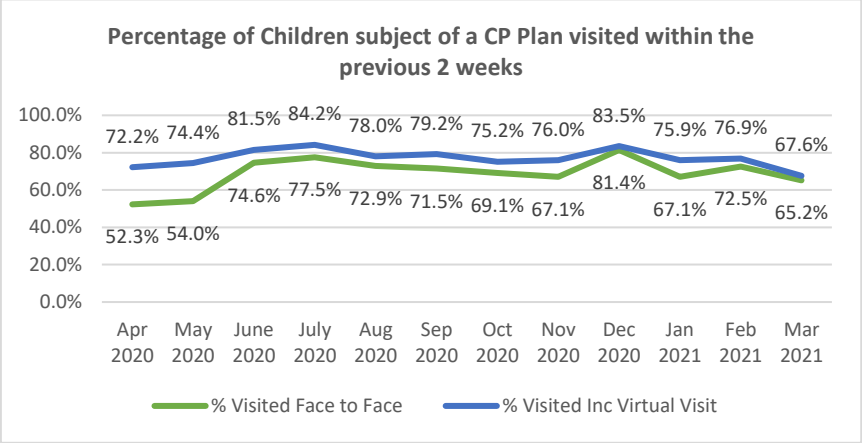
This measure helps to demonstrate how well we have oversight on every child's situation, and how well we are handling throughput at the Front Door and other transfer points. Poor performance in this area would mean children do not have a social worker for lengthy periods of time, which could be a dangerous 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. As at end March 2021, we had nine children unallocated for longer than 5 working days, which is higher than we wanted, and acted as an early warning to us for later problems we experienced from April 2021 onwards (outside the scope of this report).

Nevertheless, the day to day processes we have in place for allocations and transfers work and have been sustained. However, the difficulty in recruiting SWs to our vacant positions has affected our performance in this area, which is discussed elsewhere in this report.

PI6 - The percentage of Children subject to a CP Plan visited within 2 weeks

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



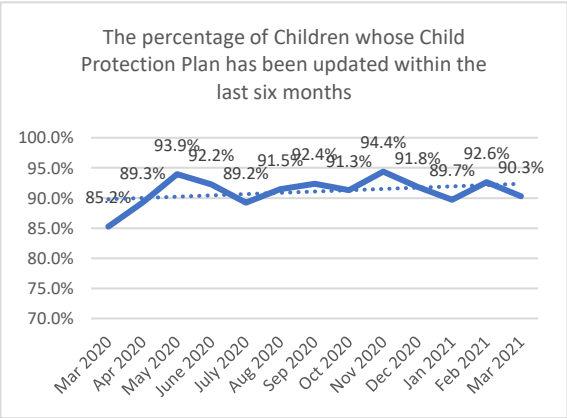
This measure provides part of our understanding of how well we are interacting with children and families under Child Protection. The frequency of visiting children under these circumstances is locally defined, and in Sandwell we expect social workers to visit children subject of a Child Protection Plan at least every 2 weeks. Alongside this measure, it is important to understand the quality of these interventions through auditing and management oversight. Good performance in this area contributes to demonstrating purposeful intervention and safeguarding.

Throughout the pandemic, we have measured both face to face and virtual visits (i.e. through video calls), recognising a need to utilise available tools and technology as imaginatively as possible.

It is clear that at the start of the year (and the pandemic), that the use of virtual visits was higher, although as the year progressed the 'gap' reduced. This was because staff became more confident in visiting children face to face with the development of our pre-visit risk assessments, and also as the national response evolved. The drop in performance at the end of the year is accounted for by increasing staffing fragility within the Care Management service, which has since developed.

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

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



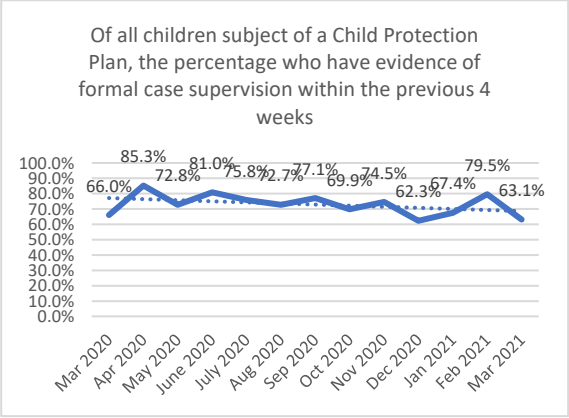
This indicator shows how often we are reviewing and discussing children's plans and our interventions. Good performance in this area would help to show we are ensuring our interventions are having the desired impact, and making changes where warranted. Plans that are not updated are normally an indicator 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, which has been a priority focus over the last 12 months.

Performance has been relatively consistent – between 85 and 95% throughout the year However, this falls below our target of 95%.

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

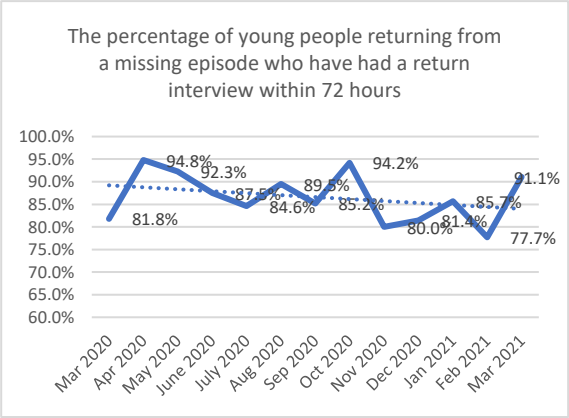
Target: > 65%
Tolerance: >50%
Failure: < 50%



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 case by case basis.We have consistently performance above our target in this measure save for December 2020 and March 2021.

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%

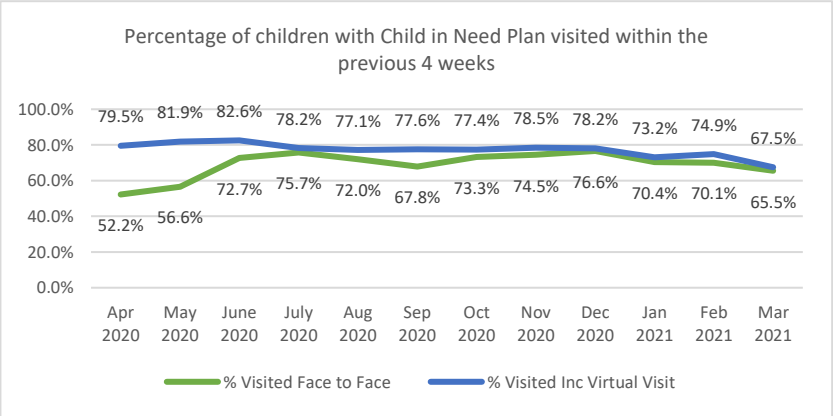


This measure helps to understand how well we are responding to children at risk of exploitation after they return from being missing. Good performance would mean we are gathering information / intelligence from children at the earliest opportunity that would help us safeguard them better in the future and build more accurate intelligence.

Our performance in this area has been good, although the relatively small sample sizes per month mean there can be variance month to month.

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

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

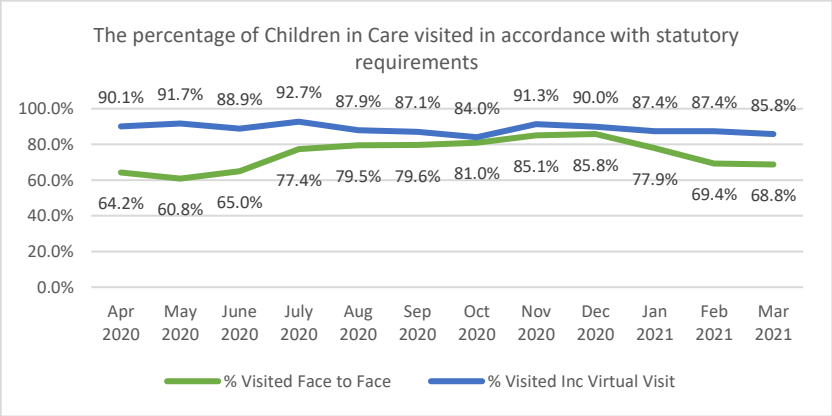


This measure provides part of our understanding of how well we are interacting with children and families under Child in Need. The frequency of visiting children under these circumstances is locally defined, and in Sandwell we expect social workers to visit children subject of a Child in Need Plan at least every 4 weeks. Alongside this measure, it is important to understand the quality of these interventions through auditing and management oversight.

As with other measures relating to visits, we have measured virtual visits alongside face to face and see the same pattern where the use of virtual visits waned after the first few months of the year.

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

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

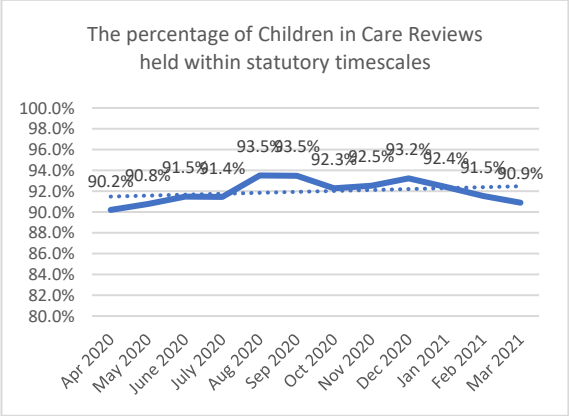


This measure provides part of our understanding of how well we are interacting with Children in Care. The frequency of visiting children under these circumstances is defined through statute. Good performance helps to show we have established relationships with our Children in Care, know their needs and meet their needs.

Many Children in Care are placed in stable situations, and are secure with their carers. Therefore, we have felt more able to make use of virtual visits, a flexibility outlined within the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendments 2020. However, we see the same pattern of virtual visits being used at the start of the year and then again at eth end of the year following the second national lockdown. The slight drop in performance was another early indicator of staffing difficulties within Care Management, referred to elsewhere.

PI12 - The percentage of Looked After Children's Reviews held within statutory timescales

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

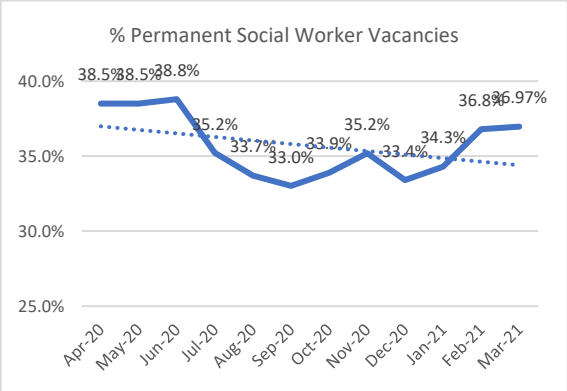


This measure shows the timeliness of Looked After Children reviews, and contributes to our understanding of how well we monitor the progress of Looked After Children's plans, and ensure that we are doing what we say we will. Good performance in this area will show that we independently review children's 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 consistently good, above our target, although our aim is higher.

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.

It is clear that we made progress in this area in the summer of 2020, but towards the end of the financial year we saw the opposite trend. This has been one of our bigger challenges going into the 2021/22 financial year, which will be covered in later sections.

PI14 - Average caseloads 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.

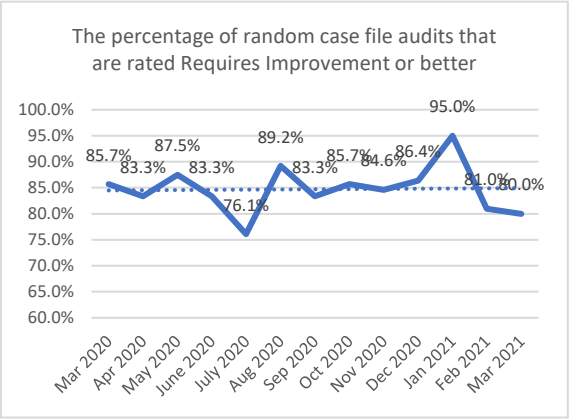
It can be seen that average caseload has gradually increased over the course of the year, which is representative of the evolving staffing shortage we have against our demand. This will be covered in more detail in the next sections.

PI15 - The percentage of case file audits 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 audited case files. 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 audits, despite the challenges we have faced, which should be seen as a positive.



Section (d) - The thematic findings of any Audits and Surveys carried out by the Trust during the previous Contract Year

Quality Assurance and Auditing

Alongside knowing ourselves from a performance perspective, we continue to work to ensure we are interrogating the quality of our own practice. We utilise performance intelligence to develop lines of enquiry, and deploy resource to test these out through dip sampling and direct work with service areas. Learning from auditing and the resultant activity to ensure practice improvement are key to making sure the work we do is as good as it can be now and in the future.

We have a contractual obligation to audit 90 random case files every three months (which is 360 every year).

Our quality assurance and practice learning activity comes from a range of sources, which include: Audits, direct feedback, learning from complaints / compliments, independent scrutiny from outside of our organisation and from within the safeguarding unit.

We also have a practice learning team arm of the Beyond Auditing Service, who deliver one to one and group practice learning on specific topics, hold reflective discussions and help develop best practice guidance for areas of practice improvement. This team also contributes to the design and delivery of services where they need to be improved.

During the first lockdown and until July 2020, some of our Quality Assurance activities (monthly and thematic audits), were scaled down to support the operational services to cope with additional pressures due to restrictions of lockdown. All audits were suspended for managers across the Trust. However, the QA/BA and WFD teams continued to undertake a small amount of Learning and thematic audits to ensure we met our contractual requirements of 90 Audits per quarter. In addition, the QA/BA ad Workforce Development Team also undertook Focussed Brief Audits to ensure the initiatives and work undertaken during lockdown was safe and in line with government guidelines to promote wellbeing and opportunities for children and young people. From the Summer of 2020, a new pattern of auditing was established, whereby managers would undertake six audits per year on alternative months.

Audit Activity and Overall Trajectory

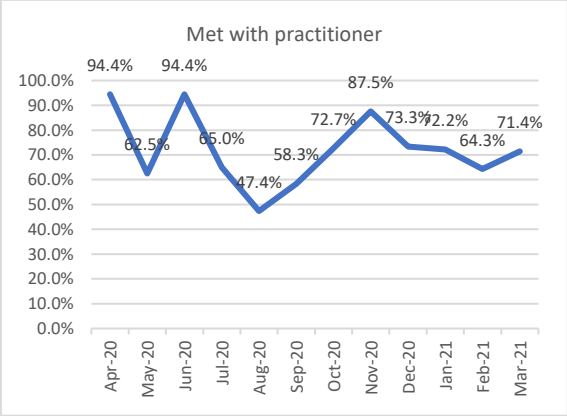
Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, we undertook:

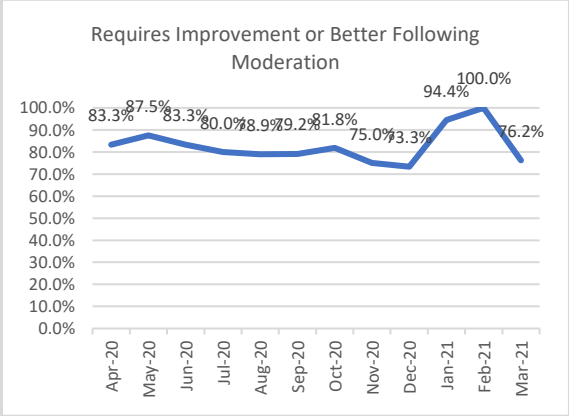
- 218 learning audits (of which 195 were moderated) across the child's journey.
- 134 thematic audits
- 176 Focussed brief audits
- 61 significant incident dip samples (pre-birth and under 1's)
- 17 individual learning audits
- 18 multi-agency audits

A total of 624 audits within the year, which represents a spread of approximately 15% across our children. Through all of our Quality Assurance activity across the year, our work has been consistently Requires Improvement or better, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

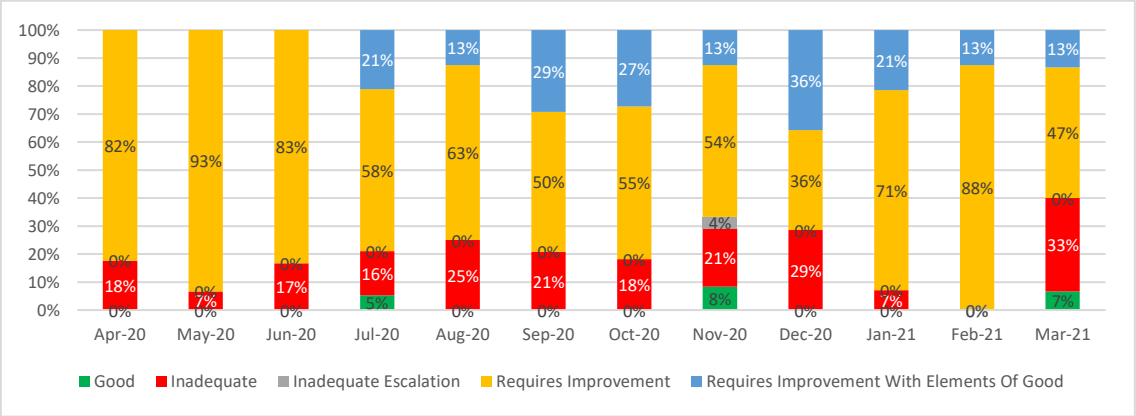
This year, the focus of our audits have moved from on compliance and solely measuring impact on children to a genuine opportunity for learning and improving. As such, we have promoted the importance of discussions with the most relevant practitioner or manager during the audit process and afterwards, our progress has been good.

Our random learning case file audits are important as we expect all social work qualified and front-line managers to undertake six audits per year. This helps them to understand what good looks like and encourage them to have learning discussions, which they will take into their own practice, we call this 'a window back into practice'.

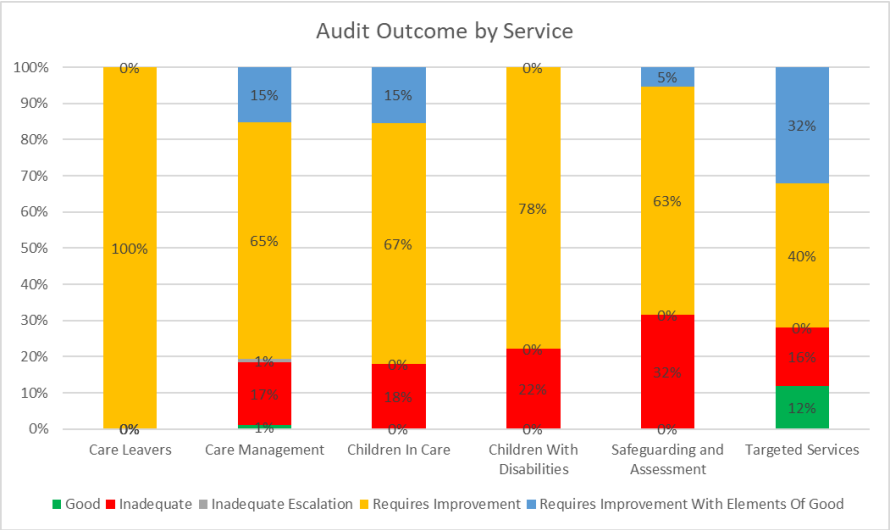




It is worth noting that this year we introduced the category of 'Requires Improvement with Good features' so we can better judge our progress. Below is the month by month distribution of audit outcomes, where it is clear there is an increasing amount of Good practice, but there still remains some inadequate practice:



Looking at this on a service by service perspective, it can be seen that Targeted Services has the biggest proportion of good work, and Safeguarding and Assessment Service has the most inadequate work. It is worth noting that Children with Disabilities and Care Leavers services have had fewer audits, which has meant the audit data is less likely to be completely representative of the work undertaken.



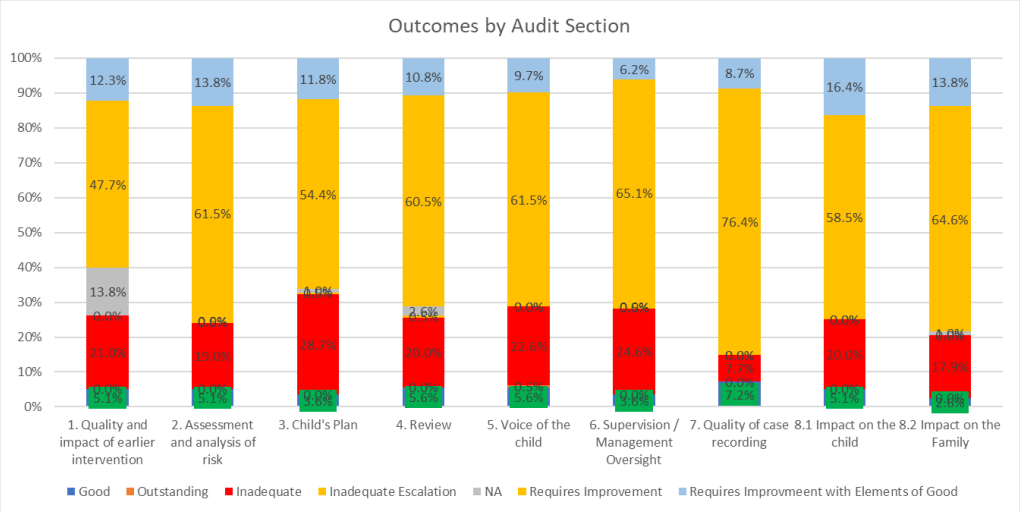
Where audits are submitted on time, all have been moderated, and the below chart shows the difference between auditor judgement and moderator judgement. The vast majority of audit judgements are broadly agreed and where there is disagreement, the moderator tends to moderate 'down' – demonstrating very small pockets of individual optimism. Where this is the case moderators hold reflective conversations with auditors.

Auditor Rating →

Moderator Rating ↓

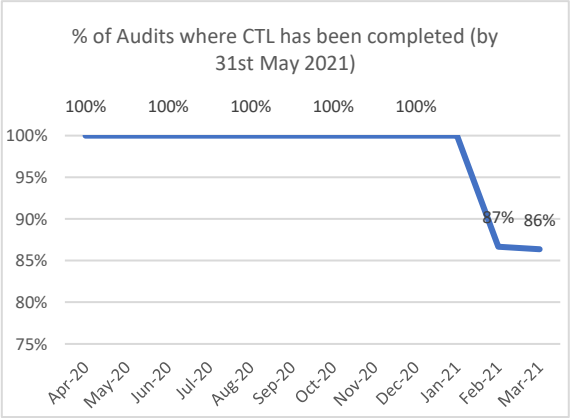
	Inadequate Escalation	Inadequate	Requires Improvement	Requires Improvement With Elements Of Good	Good	Outstanding
Inadequate Escalation	1					
Inadequate	2	27	5	2		
Requires Improvement		8	99	13	4	
Requires Improvement With Elements Of Good			1	25	4	
Good			1		2	1
Outstanding						

Our learning case file audits are completed with judgements in nine categories, which are set out here:



The graph shows a consistent element of good work in each category, particularly around the quality of assessments and perceived impact for the child. However, between 20-25% of our work remains rated as inadequate, with higher prevalence within children's planning and management oversight, this continues to inform our improvement plans and activity.

Team Managers are required to 'close the loop' wherever there are actions identified within an audit. The senior QA Auditor monitors this and ensures that the actions and findings find their way into case file supervisions.



Learning from Compliments and Complaints

Over the course of the year we have had x compliments from a range of sources including Children/Young People, Court, CAMHS, Foster Carers, School, Parents, Health, Local Authority, and family members. It is important that we learn from positive feedback and share where we are getting things right.

The themes of our compliments are:

- Communication, including treating young people with respect
- Delivering objectives
- Quality of Practice, including Relationship Based Practice with our partner agencies, foster carers, families and young people.
- Quality of Service
- Support
- professional development
- teamwork

In addition to this a recurring theme made by our partners has been the recognition to the improvements in the way we are now working, in comparison to the past.

Complaints

During 2020/21 we received 214 complaints, of which 204 have been completed / resolved. The complaints received over the course of the year cover the following themes:

- Access to services (1)
- Accuracy of Assessment/Reports (10)
- Actions / Conduct of Worker (70)
- Change in Social Worker (1)
- Contact Arrangements (14)
- Decision Making (26)
- Delays in receiving services (6)
- Delay in Providing Documentation (5)
- Financial Assistance (15)
- Inappropriate Disclosure of Information (6)
- Issue with carer (1)
- Lack of support (16)
- Not feeling listened to (6)
- Placement Change (7)
- Poor Communication (17)
- Quality of Service (9)
- Social Work Process (3)
- Support with Social Media (1)

This year, representatives from the complaints and QA services have ore regularly attended team and service meetings to share and discuss the themes and learning from complaints. We also held a series of learning events, targeted at managers and practitioners, with the focus on the themes of complaints, learning and service improvement activity. Learning from complains contributed to our core training offer and the targeted practice learning work.

Key learning from complaints include:

1. A need to ensure that children, young people and families understand why we become involved in their lives.

2. Before meetings take place with families and professionals, that important information is shared with parents before the meeting and that information is fully explained to them to ensure they understand what is being discussed.
3. To ensure that applications for citizenships and passports are progressed in a timely way.
4. For expectations to be made clear to parents.

Children and Young People's Participation

The Participation Team has continued to engage with children and young people during the pandemic. Face to face forums have had to be put on hold, but the team have found creative ways to engage. Virtual meetings were established immediately, and despite the limitations of the software available (young people don't like to use Skype) alternative tools were employed to stay connected. The use of Zoom and WhatsApp enabled the Trust to keep in touch using communication platforms that young people were comfortable with. In between the national lockdown and the localised Sandwell restrictions, officers were twice able to meet with some of our care leavers, socially distanced in a local park.

Partner organisations have continued to support the Trust and its young people. Colleagues from Kooth, the HOME Programme, Brook Sexual Health, REES Foundation as well as several internal services have engaged virtually throughout the pandemic. Officers have also hosted regular quizzes which have proved popular. Virtual meetings have been noted and the discussions shared with the wider 'Voice of Sandwell' and 'Care Leaver's Forum' groups, which have well established WhatsApp groups.

Ensuring their voice is heard, children and young people have maintained their involvement in activities that support the Trust, including recruitment (Social Worker, Managers, Targeted Support Workers, Service Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers) and inductions for new social workers, frontline students and ASYE social workers.

From the beginning of lockdown in March until the end of July 2020, the Trust worked closely with Sandwell Council to provide daily food parcels for children, families and care leavers (including their own children). The Trust helped to support over 400 children and young people via the local food hub, ensuring that Sandwell's most vulnerable children and families were supported during the most difficult period of lockdown.

In addition to supporting our most vulnerable with food parcels, the Trust has also been involved in the distribution of DfE laptops. Both engagements afforded the Trust the opportunity to catch up with its children and young people. When it has not been possible for the Participation Team to see young people in person, then the team have made welfare calls and checked in.

Unaccompanied minors have been contacted to seek their views on a national transfer. This is paving the way for a local forum of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) which will complement the Trust's existing groups.

Our young people have helped develop and chair two Corporate Parenting Board meetings, as well as providing feedback to the Trust's Board on the issues that are important to them.

The Participation Team have been working on several initiatives that will enhance engagement. The Voice of the Child group has reconvened with a specific focus on the How Can I Help You Participation Strategy. Mind of My Own training has been regularly delivered, with the engagement leads for Mind of My Own hosting sessions for our IROs and Managers. Officers have contributed to a 'flagship' submission to the National Youth Agencies 'Hear by Right' accreditation scheme. The Trust has engaged with a range of external and national partners. For example, a presentation to the National Care Leaver's Benchmarking Forum and working with the West Midlands Participation Leads Group, supporting the development of a regional participation strategy and young people's forum.

All complaints, whether formal or informal are monitored by the Participation Team, who contact each child or young person to make sure that they have the support they need. Officers work closely with the Customer Experience Team to refine the organisations processes. The Participation Team are co-leading on the Trust's first 'feedback fortnight' which seeks to gather the views of as many children and young people as possible.

By November 2020, work had begun to engage unaccompanied minors (UASC) and Children with Disabilities with the participation team supporting the relevant service areas, ensuring that the 'four I's' of the participation strategy are considered. Work with the care leavers forum and Voice of Sandwell group continued virtually, with many of our young people participating virtually in activities related to the Trust.

National Care Leaver's Week was celebrated with a full programme of activities – interview techniques, wellbeing, a 'raising aspirations' panel and a 'lockdown heroes' celebration event.

The participation team supported the development of a regional participation strategy, again championing the use of the 4 'I's of Inform, Invest, Involve, Influence.

Autumn drew focus on Mind of My Own, with the participation team working with several groups including IROs, Team Managers and COG staff. This engagement, along with the promotion of Mind of My Own, saw an increase in the number of statements received from across the service.

Care Leavers participated in an equality and diversity seminar with the Trust's Board, where they shared powerful stories of their own experiences and those around them.

A newsletter was developed for our Care Leavers, and the team are working with the Leaving Care and Trust Comms teams to ensure that each care leaver receives a present at Christmas.

The Voice of the Child Board was reinvigorated towards the end of the 2020, with a focus on the four I's of the participation strategy. The Participation Manager presented an overview of activities undertaken to the Trust's Executive Management Team and will be attending the Trust Board to do the same.

In January 2021, the Participation Team entered a submission for the National Youth Agency 'Hear by Right' accreditation scheme.

Significant and serious incidents:

During the initial lockdown, there was a national rise in the in number of significant incidents to children, in particular very young children. During the COVID-19 lockdown period we have had 6 such significant incidents, which is a disproportionate number. The Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership determined that 5 of the 6 met the criteria for Childrens Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPR).

We determined early on that 4 out of 6 significant incidents were of particular concern that warranted early quality assurance, self-assessment and learning. This was with the aim of assuring ourselves that there were not systemic issues within our service, and to ensure that we identify and respond to early learning from the incidents. We are confident that there are no serious or widespread systemic issues, but there were areas for learning, which has fed into our overall quality assurance conversations and improvement plans.

Learning that resulted from this work:

- Timely pre-birth assessment as early into pregnancies as possible
- Early identification of connected care and when a placement is unregulated
- Ensuring that Strategy Discussions/Meetings identify and respond to safeguarding need in babies and toddlers
- Ensuring that historic information impacts on the analysis and decision making within assessments
- Robust management oversight in relation to Children in Care who are high risk of offending

- Ensuring robust interventions and decision making where we step down to Targeted Services and parents refuse to engage

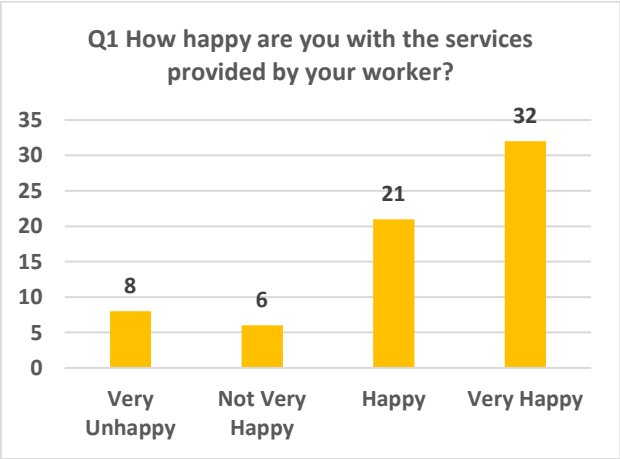
Actions that resulted from this work:

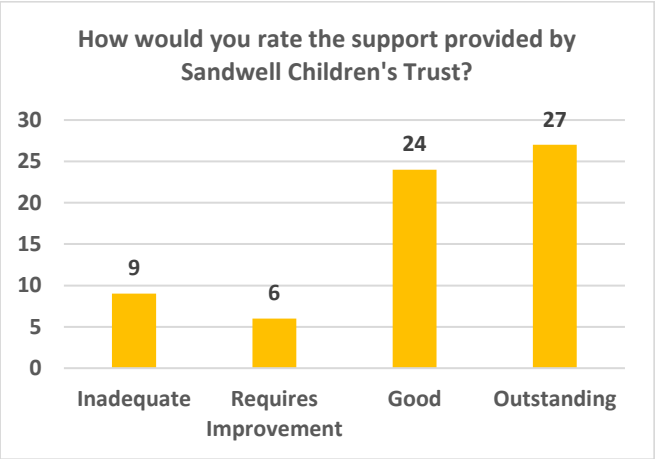
- A programme of training and reflective work provided to specific workers and offered through the BA practice learning team
- Unregulated Placement Event for all Managers/IROs/Conference Chairs
- Learning the Lessons from significant incidents event for all staf
- 7-minute briefing note
- Learning session for IROs/Conference Chairs to ensure that the IRO/CC role for Pre-birth and connected carer assessments is robust and challenging, and actively prevents drift and delay for children.
- A new Birth Plan Form for unborn babies, the pre-birth protocol updated, and regional procedures disseminated
- Improvements have been made to the Children in Care Updating Assessment by making the assessment more child friendly

Audits have consistently identified improvements in quality of overall work in the Trust. Good practice is noted across all areas, with approximately 80% or more audits being rated as RI and above. Our Practice Framework and Model supports us to work in a relationship based, strength based and Trauma informed manner. QA/BA and operational service have worked together to learn from past experiences, understand ongoing challenges, and embrace new ideas and improvements. Under the new arrangements of the CSPRs multi-agency focus is also on early learning and progression of identified actions to impact practice directly.

Feedback from Children and 'Feedback fortnight'

In the Trust, we understand that feedback from our children, young people, family and carers, and partners allows us to measure how well we are doing. We secure regular feedback via our customer relations service, however, in quarter 3 we decided to secure feedback using an event we called 'Feedback Fortnight'. This was held between 5th and 18th October 2020, when we reached out to all children, young people, families, carers and professionals using snap surveys to gather feedback. We used a variety of mechanisms like text messages, social media pages, and our internet page to engage our stakeholders. A total of 169 surveys were completed by stakeholders during the fortnight, which was analysed, and learning has been widely shared across the Trust, and also published on our social media and internet pages. The feedback that was received has been extremely positive, and both children and families, and professionals have confirmed that our services are child centred and are supporting children and families in Sandwell effectively. The following figures show some of the responses that we received:





In total, Children and families completed 67 surveys of which 39 surveys expressed their wishes on how to improve the quality of service delivered by the Trust. Of the 39 comments, 20 children and young people stated that they would change nothing about the services. They were largely satisfied with the quality and timeliness of our service delivery, with special mention for the great services delivered by our COGs. COGs appear to be delivering high quality, person centred services using a relationship-based approach. Some quotes are:

> *"Due to how COVID-19 as affected how all organisations are run I think everyone has done a really good job on making it work so well considering the challenges due to the current pandemic."*
>
> *"I have no concerns so far. My daughter's worker has been professionally excellent and caring towards all of the family."*

We have also analysed the areas of improvements during the qualitative analysis of feedback we received. The main areas of improvements that were suggested are:

- Building stronger partnerships and more face to face meetings
- Reducing staff turnover, and better communication when staff is changed
- More activities for children and young people in community, and better support for homeless young people and families

QPP and Multi agency audits

The QA service continues to represent SCT in our partnership meetings with the Sandwell Childrens Safeguarding Partnership (SCSP), and in particular with the i.e. Quality and Performance (QPP) Sub-Group of the Partnership. We have worked collaboratively together to develop the multi-agency performance scorecard for the QPP, and actively participated in the new form of multi-agency auditing process. Findings from QPP have also been included in the QA reports for dissemination, wider learning and improvements. The multi-agency audits have provided us greater insight into the effectiveness of our partnership working such as core groups, The multi-agency audits have again provided necessary evidence to demonstrate that there are no systemic issues in the way the Trust delivers its services to children and families, and that this is also in line with the quality of service provided to children and families by our partner agencies.

What we know about practice

During the 6 months (April-Sept'20) the QA Service supported the Trusts understanding of the quality of practice during the covid pandemic. The service developed and implemented a Focussed Brief Audit (FBA) specifically to be able to meet this need. the COVID focussed QA work has assured the Trust that there has been a robust approach taken to staff safety and wellbeing, and that children were safe during lockdown. These FBAs have provided us with crucial information around risk assessment being kept up to date, PVRAs being undertaken

before each visit, ensuring children receive the best possible support via face to face (or virtual) visits and direct work, and Education risk assessments being completed in a timely manner. This has helped shape our efforts to keep our staff and children safe, and make improvements were needed.

The Significant Incident QA work has ensured that the service has been assured that there are not systemic issues within the service in relation to practice, but where there was key learning that the Trust has taken an 'early learning approach' to practice and made changes to support improved practice.

The auditing programme continues to offer a robust, good quality 'window back into practice' for auditors and the service alike. Practitioners are reporting that they like the 1:1 reflective session about the audits, and that they feel very proud when their practice is identified as having 'good features'. Seeking feedback from children and families at the end of audits helps to triangulate the quality of both the intervention with the child and their family as well as the quality of the auditing. This helps and supports a strengths-based inclusive approach being taken to quality assurance and learning from good practice.

There is evidence that there is growing confidence in the auditing process in the Trust and that the practice is rated accurately, which gives assurance both internally to the Trust as well as externally – Ofsted also agree with the robustness of the QA process. The lifting up and improving rate of practice means that children are receiving a better service from the Trust.

The multi-agency audits have provided us greater insight into the effectiveness of our partnership working such as core groups, The multi-agency audits have again provided necessary evidence to demonstrate that there are no systemic issues in the way the Trust delivers its services to children and families, and that this is also in line with the quality of service provided to children and families by our partner agencies.

Impact of Quality Assurance on Practice

- Improvement in quality of audits and auditors - via training and moderations, embedding an understanding of what good looks like, which managers take into their own practice
- Relentless focus on including practitioners whilst auditing for increased learning impact
- Embedding Practice Framework and Model using a practical approach as a window back into practice
- Increased focus on 'Impact and intervention' rather than process
- Strong Leadership - audits inform practice and service improvement plans and SEFs
- Feedback from children and families evidence real impact on outcomes

Section (e) - The outcome of any Ofsted monitoring visits and/or Ofsted inspections

The table below outlines the outcome of Ofsted's Visits and Inspections in 2020/21:

xxx – Outcome of Ofsted Inspection and Monitoring Visits

Inspection / Visit	Date	Judgement
Overall Assurance Visit	3rd March 2021	No judgement for assurance visits https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50162853
Fostering Assurance Visit	20th October 2020	No judgement for assurance visits https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50158180

Children's Social Care

Ofsted inspectors visited us on 3rd and 4th March 2021 for their assurance visit. Due to the two-week lead time for this visit, this visit felt like a full inspection for most. Feedback from inspectors was as expected, we have areas of strength and areas for continued improvement (all of which we already knew):

Positive feedback

- Children are safe
- Good response to the pandemic – children and staff well supported
- Good partnership links
- Evidence of good work and practice in each service
- Good quality audits and moderation with a positive audit framework
- Good work from education services and schools
- Leadership – we know ourselves well

Improvements to be made

- Child Protection Planning and Intervention
- Pre-proceedings and court work
- Permanence and Matching for children
- Some managers and IROs could identify issues sooner and could be more successful in resolving them
- Our children's emotional wellbeing and CAMHS offer (including for care leavers)

Fostering service (IFA)

We received inspectors on a 'no-notice' basis on 20th October 2020 to seek assurance about our fostering services throughout the pandemic. We expected this and had factored the preparation for this into our weekly Ofsted Preparation meetings with the fostering service. The visit was not without its difficulties, particularly with staff getting used to demonstrating our good work virtually to inspectors. Feedback was that inspectors did not identify any widespread or serious concerns in relation to the care and protection of children and was largely positive. However, there were two regulatory requirements set out in the letter, which were:

- *The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))*

- *Within 16 weeks of the date on which the old agency ceases carrying out the functions of a fostering agency, the fostering service provider in relation to a new fostering service ("the new fostering service provider") must, unless it is not reasonably practicable to do so, carry out an assessment of any foster parent for whom it has assumed responsibility by virtue of regulation 33(2) or (3) (a "transferred foster parent") and decide whether to approve them as a foster parent, in accordance with the provisions of regulations 26 and 27, with the modification that regulation 27(1) does not apply. (Regulation 34(1))*

  In particular, this relates to completing the process for all foster carers who transferred from the local authority when the agency was set up.

The latter of these requirements had a deadline for 31st March 2021. We successfully reviewed each of the remaining foster carers who this regulation applied to by the end of the financial year, and informed Ofsted.

A full training package for foster carers has been available since the summer of 2019, but our promotion and drive for foster carers to attend was felt to have room for improvement. Since the assurance visit, we have slightly improved in this area, with an increase of 6% of all foster carers completing their Training, Support and Development portfolio within the previous three years. Core training also increased by an average of 10%.

Section (f) - 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 £65,328,000 and the 'third party' income was £7,149,794, which consisted of

- CCG health contribution
- Education funding for placements
- DfE improvement grant
- Troubled Families claims

In addition to this we drew upon a high cost placement reserve from SMBC of £500,000, and COVID-19 funding of £1,920,398. This makes a total income of £75,398,192.

We also had an opening deficit of £5,814,000. The deficit for 2020/21 is subject to audit but provisionally stands at £1,861,144, making the cumulative deficit £7,675,144.

Medium Term Financial Plan

The Medium Term Financial Plan is a rolling three-year strategy to manage our finances whilst addressing our deficit. We can 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 of our work as efficiently as possible
- Ensuring we get best value for money for the services in which we commission
- Ensuring we take advantage of invest-to-save initiatives
- Delivery of savings aligned to our improvement journey

The cost-saving work outlined within this plan can be broken down to specific areas, such as the cost of children's placements, reducing the number of placements we need to utilise, ensuring that our service by service demand aligns with our establishment, and making sure the work we do is necessary – reducing drift and delay. The MTFP aims in the next three years to address our cumulative deficit and is largely due to staffing costs (agency premium), and high demand for services to be provided for Children in Care.

For the year 2020/21 we aimed to achieve a draft deficit position of £1,613,469. This would be achieved through the delivery of cost savings totalling £2,600,000 compared with the previous year.

Year-end position

Income totalling £75,398,192 was received for 2020/21, and expenditure was £77,259,336, meaning the Trust has incurred a £1,861,144 provisional deficit, which was £247,675 above the aims outlined within the Medium Term Financial Plan. This was due to continued demand pressures on high cost placements and continued reliance of agency staffing in some areas.

This deficit is expected to be mitigated throughout the course of the next three years due to the development of a well governed cost savings plan tackling demand, supplier management and staffing permanence.

The below table highlights the provisional full-year outturn for - 2020/21.

Provisional full-year outturn	2021
	£
Income	75,398,192
Expenditure	(77,259,336)
Operating deficit	(1,861,144)
Deficit before taxation	(1,861,144)
Tax on deficit	Nil
Deficit (Loss) for the Financial year	**(1,861,144)**

This year, some of the key points are:

- We received £2.1m of DFE Improvement Grant funding to fund some of our improvement initiatives.
- We drew upon the high cost placement reserve of £500k paid by SMBC.
- We received emergency COVID funding from SMBC of £1.92m to offset increased costs caused by COVID-19. Examples of this (non-exhaustive) are: Cost incurred not being able to step children down from their placements; increased Independent Living Allowance for Care Leavers (in line with increases to Universal Credit) and additional resources to cover staff who are sick, shielding or self-isolating as a result of covid-19.
- Other third-party income received was £1.0m less than budgeted in the MTFP.
- Key cost pressures remain within staffing (requirement for agency staff to fill front-line roles) and placements (particularly external residential provision).

Section (g) - Demand analysis in respect of the Services against assumptions and models in respect of the preceding Contract Year

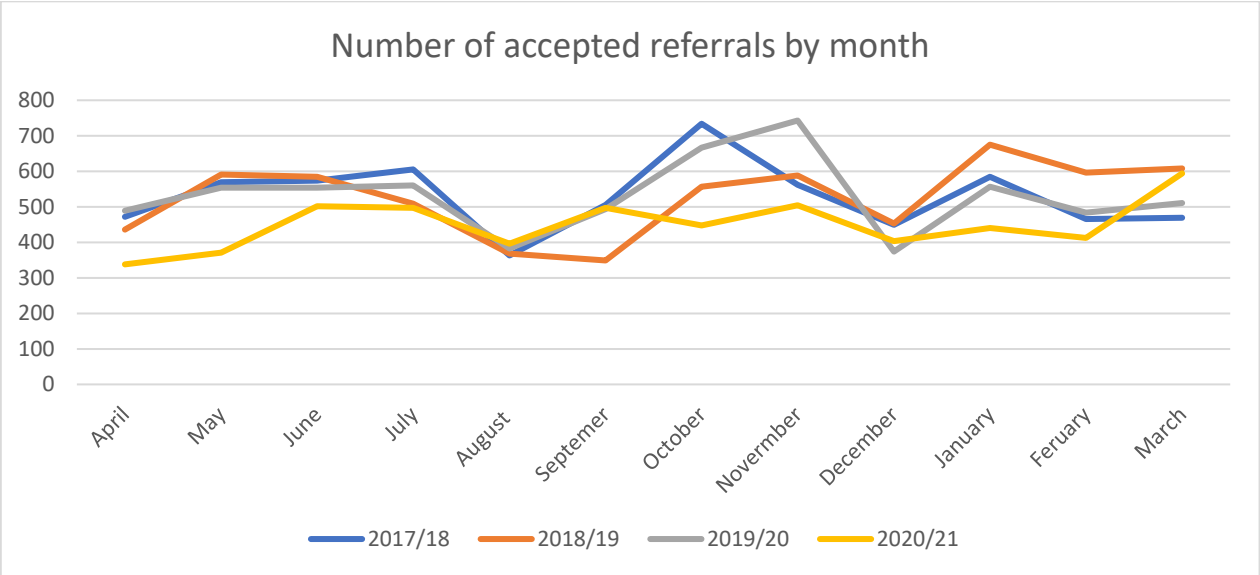
Our contacts / referrals

The more contacts we receive from our partners, the public or directly from families, the more resource we need to screen to determine whether they meet our threshold for intervention. Whilst we do not want to dissuade anyone from contacting us, particularly members of the public and families, we do need to strike the right balance with partners as to what constitutes appropriate referrals. As such, we maintain close strategic and operational relationships with partners to ensure a shared understanding of the threshold for access to our services. We received 27,938 contacts during the year, of which 36% were from Police, 16% from Health and 10.7% from Education. We saw a drop in referrals from education services during the pandemic, which we believe is largely due to schools being closed. However, we received more contacts overall than last year.

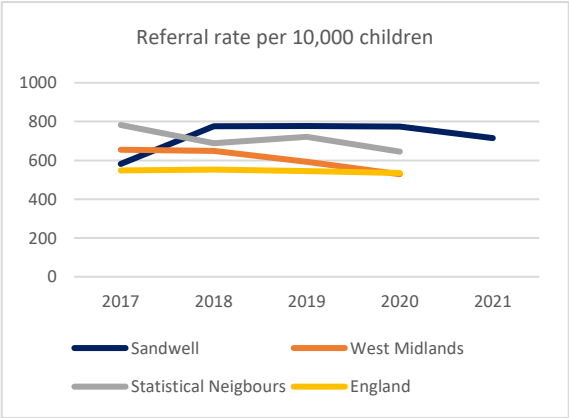
Total Contacts for 2020/21 by source

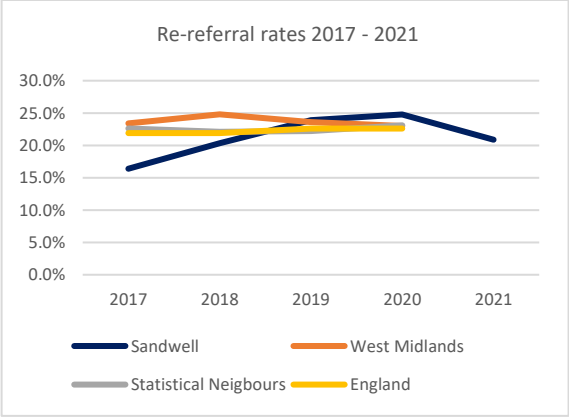
Contact Source Categories	Total	%
Health	4468	16.0%
LA	2416	8.6%
Police	10045	36.0%
Education	2988	10.7%
Other	3034	10.9%
Prison and Probation	857	3.1%
Self / Relative / Friend	1944	7.0%
Voluntary Organisation	1105	4.0%
CAFCASS, Central Government and Legal	838	3.0%
Anonymous	243	0.9%
Total	**27938**	

The number of referrals we accept serves as an indicator for how many children and families we are likely to work with over the longer term. We accepted a total of 5,402 referrals across the year, which was lower than the previous three years (6,364), but this still represents more referrals per 10,000 children than our comparators. This year 19.3% of contacts led to a referral, which is a reduction of five percentage points.

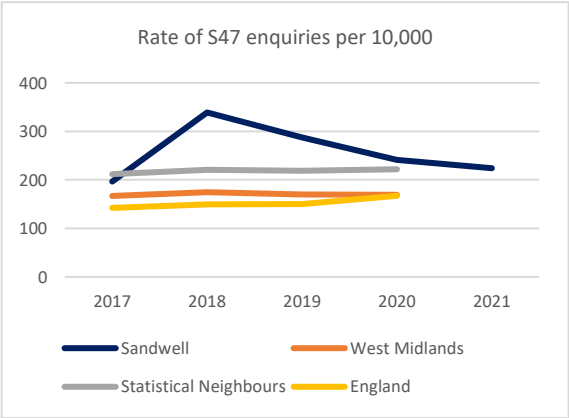


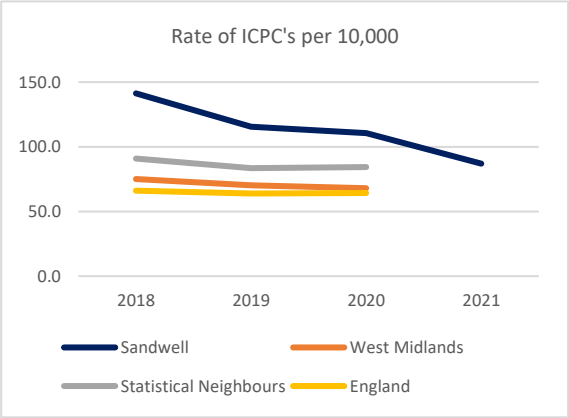
We have seen a decrease in re-referrals (where we were involved with the family less than 12 months prior), in 2018/19 the re-referral rate was 23.9% , last financial year the rate was 25%, but this year our rate is 20.9%. This is now 2.8% higher than our statistical neighbour comparators for 2018/19.



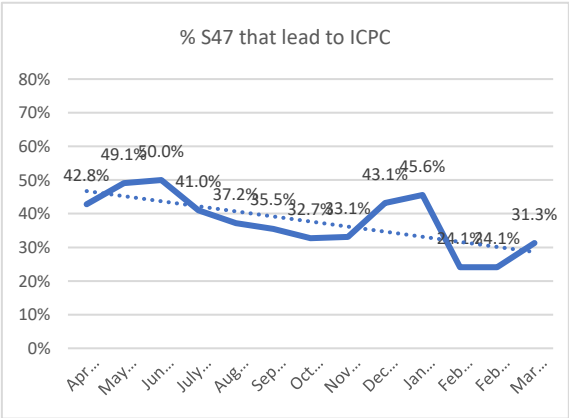


The rate of S47 enquiries per 10,000 has further reduced this year to 224, which brings us more in line with our Statistical Neighbour average rate of 222. In addition, the rate of Initial Child Protection Conferences per 10,000 has reduced to 87 this year (from 110.70 in the previous year), bringing us closer to our Statistical Neighbour average rate of 84.4. his shows we are more confident and purposeful when we are faced with deciding whether to proceed with S47 enquiries and holding Child Protection Conferences





The conversion rate of S47 enquiries leading to Child Protection Conferences is lower this year, and a reducing trajectory can be seen. However, where we choose to hold an Initial Child Protection Conference, this tends to lead to a Child Protection Plan.



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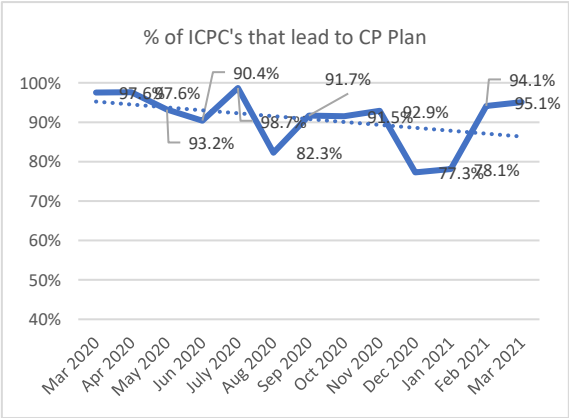


It is clear there is still work to do to reduce demand at our front door, thus our

Our children in Sandwell Children's Trust

As of 31st March 2021, we had 856 children with a Child in Need Plan, 485 children with a Child Protection Plan and 888 Children in Care. We have more children in care on average than our statistical neighbours:

Table X – Comparison with Statistical Neighbours (CP / CIC)

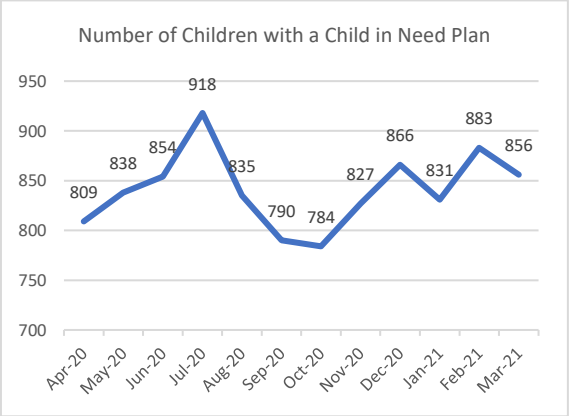
	Sandwell (31st March 2021)	Statistical Neighbour Average 2019/20	England Average 2019/20
Assessments undertaken	755 per 10,000	672.6 per 10,000	553 per 10,000
Children with a Child Protection Plan	58.8 per 10,000	54.5x per 10,000	42.8 per 10,000
Children in Care	107.6 per 10,000	94.3 per 10,000	67 per 10,000
Children with a Child in Need Plan	103.8 per 10,000	No comparators	

This continues to highlight our challenge in ensuring improvement whilst working with significantly more children and families than our neighbours, within a fragile marketplace for social workers within the region and nationally.

Children in Need

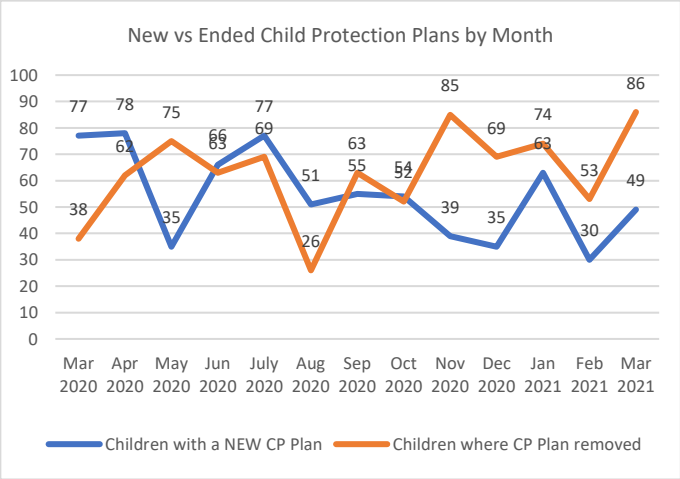
The graph below shows that we began the year with 1066 children in need, with a downward trend across the year, ending with 807. Interventions with families through a Child in Need Plan are intensive, purposeful and kept under constant review as it is very easy for plans to drift.

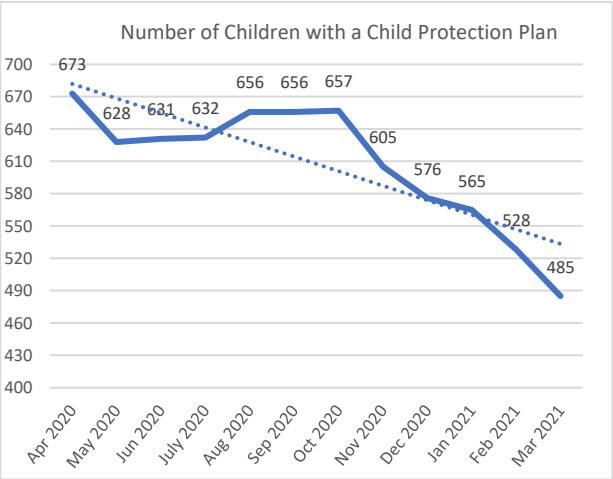
The majority of these children are held within the Care Management service, although some older children are provided services through the Children in Care service under a Child in Need Plan.



Children with a Child Protection Plan

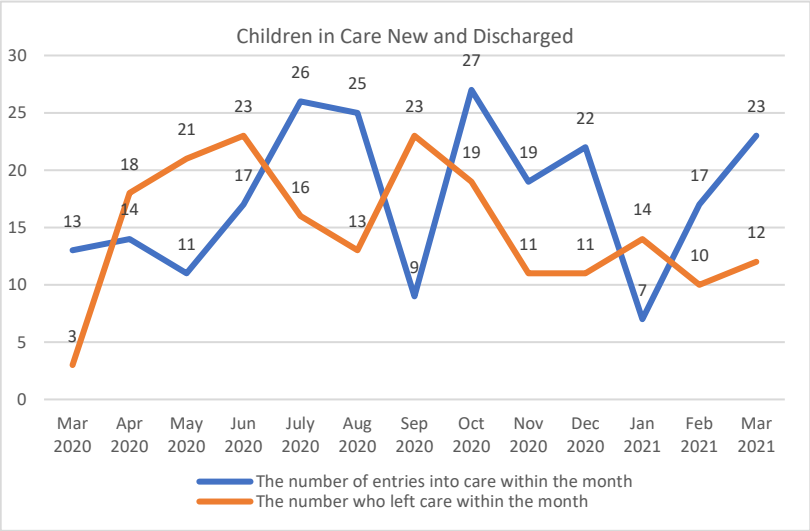
We began the year with 673 children who were subject of a Child Protection Plan, and across the course of the year this decreased to 485, with the most significant decrease in Quarters 3 and 4.

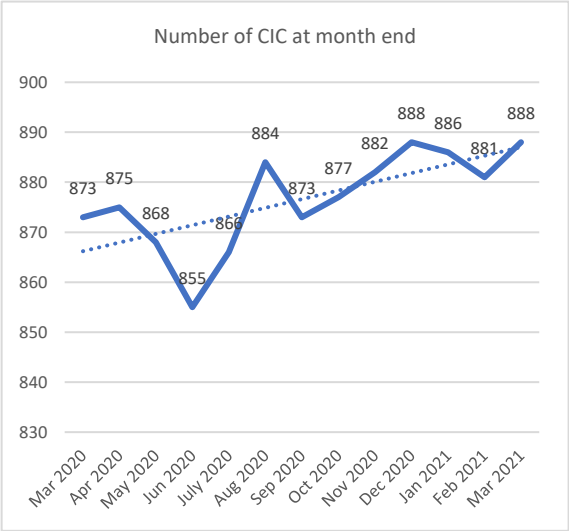




Children in Care

We began the year with 873 children in care and saw a gradual increase to 888, with a variable level of children coming into care but a more consistently low number of children leaving care across the year.



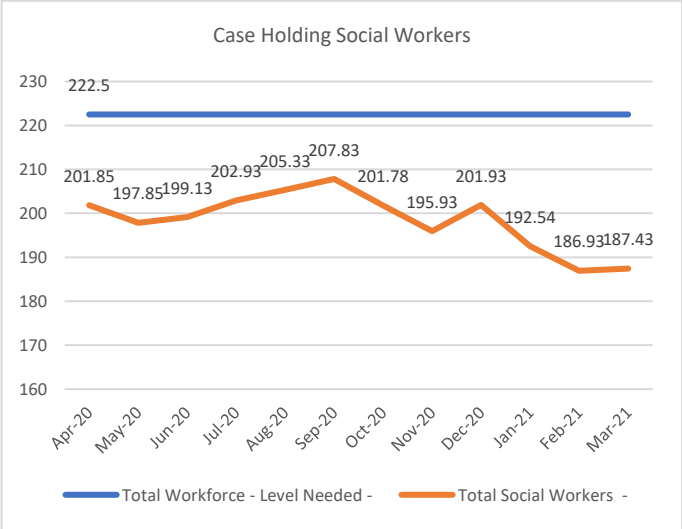


Demand for -Staff

It is important to acknowledge that Sandwell Children's Trust employs nearly 600 staff, of which around half 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.

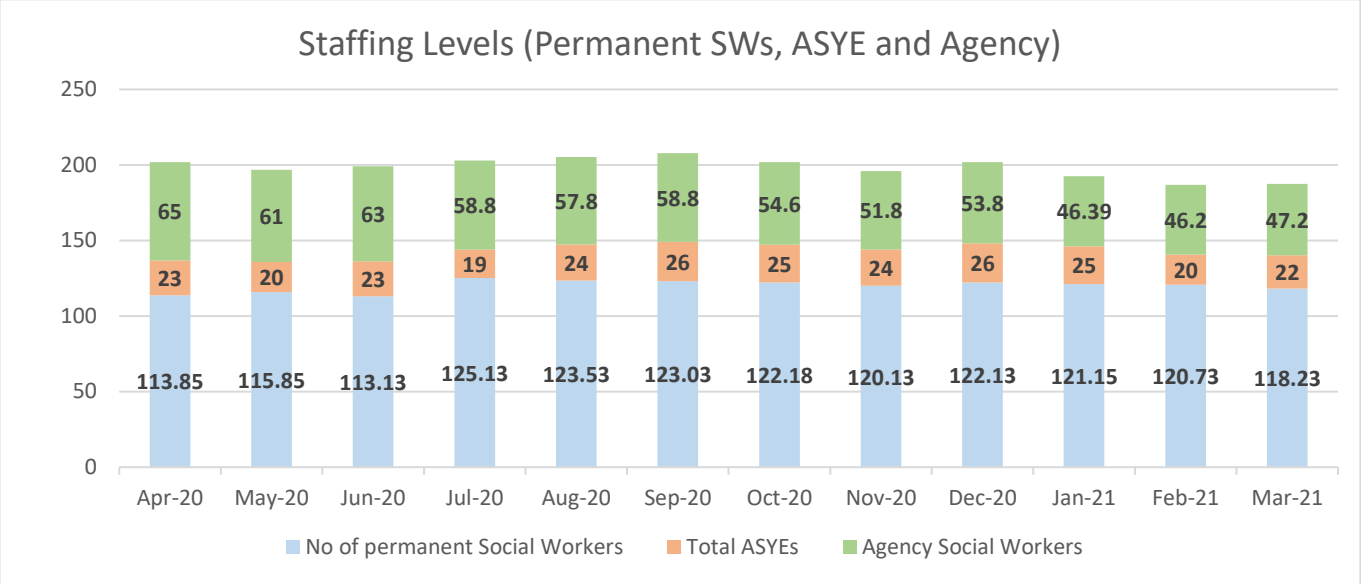
There are a range of models we can use to determine how many social workers we need to work with our families, some more complex than others. However, we continue to have a very simple calculation for this, which is:

1. For social workers working with Children in Need and those with a Child Protection Plan (within the care management service), an average of 18 children.
2. For social workers working with long term Children in Care (within the Children in Care 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).



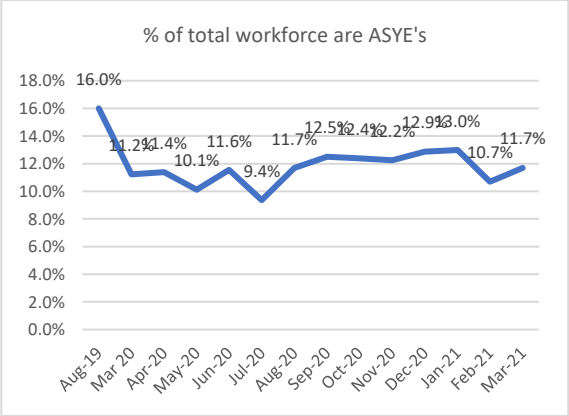
Case-holding Social Workers

We have an agreed establishment of 222.5 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).



Social Workers in their Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE)

The Trust, along with all children's services nationally, has a reliance on newly qualified social workers in their first year of employment (ASYE). During this year, social workers are required to complete a range of training, practice based learning, observations and a portfolio under the supervision of an experienced social worker. The benefits of maintaining a significant cohort of newly qualified social workers are clear, as it enables us to keep a steady flow of social workers into our organisation, contributing to a stable workforce. However, there have been challenges associated with managing this group of staff, in our first year, which has included the ability to provide appropriate support and supervision and protecting caseloads.

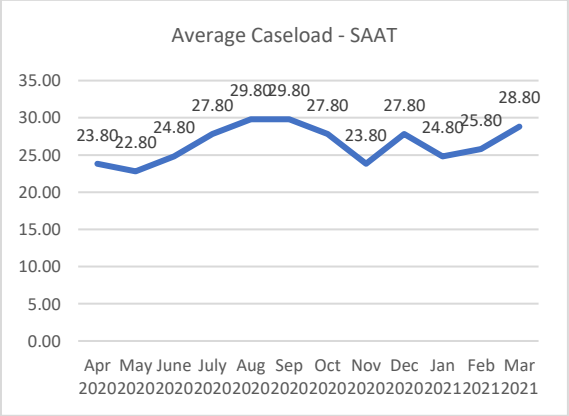


Clearly, the more newly qualified social workers we have, the more pressure there is on our experienced workforce, not only in relation the support they need to provide, but also the proportion of cases allocated to them.

The number of ASYE cases has remained consistent at around 23 over the course of the year but has coincided with number of total social workers in the organisation reducing from 201.85 to 187.43.

Safeguarding and Assessment Service (Assessments of Children and Families)

The Safeguarding and Assessment Team are responsible for undertaking assessments that arise from new referrals. This work is short-term and should not exceed 45 working days, aiming to meet the intervention needs of the family within the 45-day timescale where possible. In the event that further work is required, SAAT may identify longer term needs and transfer the families to Care Management, or where necessary, to Children in Care; or alternatively may step down families to Targeted Early Help in instances where further support work is required.



Average Caseload SAAT

	Apr 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021
Number Cases SAAT	524	563	716	744	780	730	761	767	762	745	721	875
Total Caseholders SAAT FTE	23.80	22.80	24.80	27.80	29.80	29.80	27.80	23.80	27.80	24.80	25.80	28.80
Average Caseload SAAT	22.02	24.69	28.87	26.76	26.17	24.50	27.37	32.23	27.41	30.04	27.95	30.38

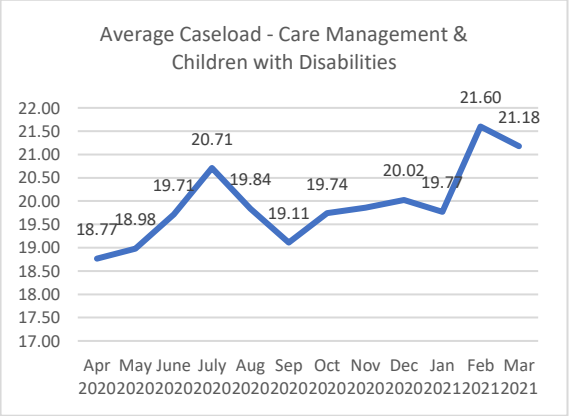
-

The average number of cases within the SAAT service has increased across the year from 23.8 to 28.8 with a particular spike in the summer of 2020.

Medium and Longer-Term Intervention (Care Management and Looked After Children)

Most of our casework take place within these two services, whether children are subject of Child in Need Plans, Child Protection Plans or Children in Care.

We have a target of 18 children per social worker in the Care Management Service. We began the year with an average caseload of 18.77 children, saw peaks in July 2020 and February 2021, and finished the year with a higher average caseload of 21.18.

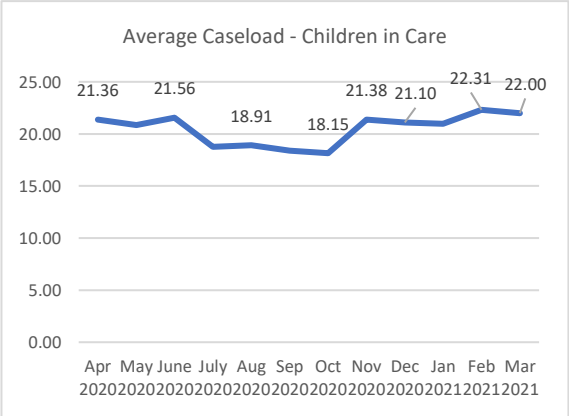


Average Caseload Care Management and Children with Disabilities Service

	Apr 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021
Number Cases CM/CWD	1763	1745	1765	1850	1800	1772	1757	1770	1785	1735	1731	1655
Total Case holders CM/CWD FTE	93.95	91.95	89.54	89.34	90.74	92.74	88.99	89.14	89.14	87.75	80.14	78.14
Average Caseload CM/CWD	18.77	18.98	19.71	20.71	19.84	19.11	19.74	19.86	20.02	19.77	21.60	21.18

The work undertaken by the Children in Care service is to ensure that children who are to remain in the care of Sandwell Children's Trust are protected from significant harm, live as fulfilled a life as possible, achieve their potential and become independent members of society. These children need stability in their arrangements and benefit from good relationships with their social workers, carers and key professionals.

To provide enough time for these relationships to develop, we have a target of 15 cases per worker in the Children in Care service.



We began the year with approximately 21.36 children per social worker, which decreased to 18.15 in the autumn of 2020, and the increased across the remainder of the year to 22 children per social worker, which is significantly above our aspirational target of 15.

Average Caseload Children in Care Service

-	Apr 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021
Number Cases (Children in Care)	630	636	636	628	624	625	617	620	633	629	647	649
Total Case holders (Children in Care) FTE	29.50	30.50	29.50	33.50	33.00	34.00	34.00	29.00	30.00	30.00	29.00	29.50
Average Caseload (Children in Care)	21.36	20.85	21.56	18.75	18.91	18.38	18.15	21.38	21.10	20.97	22.31	22.00

Care Leavers

Our care leavers service provides a service to young people 18 or over who are still in care. Throughout the year there was gradual increase of young people per worker, which reduced towards January 2021.

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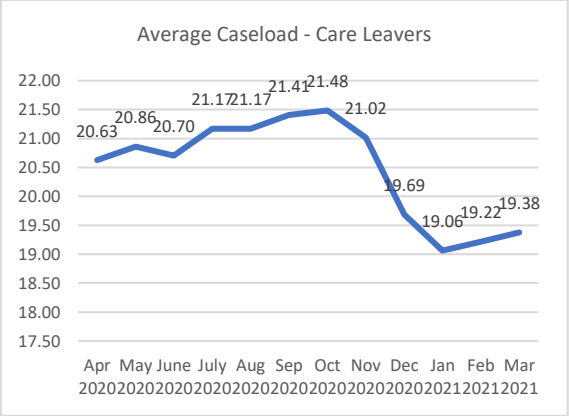

Average Caseload Care Leavers Teams

	Apr 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021
Number of Young People - Care Leavers	264	267	265	271	271	274	275	269	252	244	246	248
Total case holders Care Leavers FTE (inc. PAs)	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80	12.80
Average Caseload Care Leavers	20.63	20.86	20.70	21.17	21.17	21.41	21.48	21.02	19.69	19.06	19.22	19.38

The Fostering Service

The new staffing establishment for the Fostering Service was put into place at the start of this year, and is based on modelling of 16.5 fostering households per Supervising Social Worker, and circa 6 assessments at any one time for an assessing social worker. This is based on recent benchmarking with local and national comparators.

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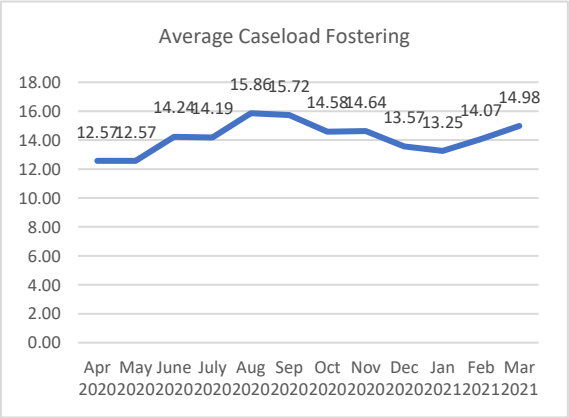


Average Caseload Fostering Teams

	Apr 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021
Number Cases Fostering Service	255	255	249	254	268	264	255	256	251	245	246	247
Total Caseholders Fostering FTE	20.29	20.29	17.49	17.90	16.90	16.79	17.49	17.49	18.49	18.49	17.49	16.49
Average - Caseload Fostering	12.57	12.57	14.24	14.19	15.86	15.72	14.58	14.64	13.57	13.25	14.07	14.98

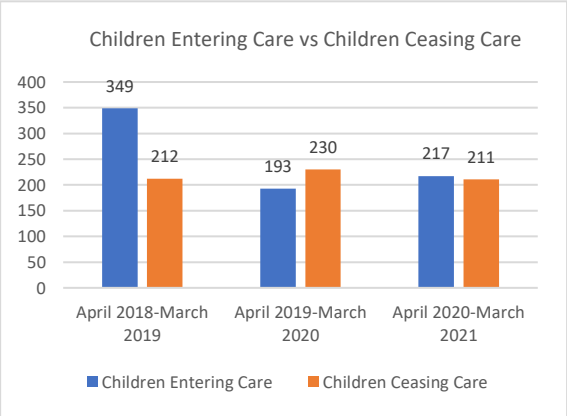
Demand for Foster Placements for Children in Care (Internal and External)

A priority for SCT within the last two years has been to understand and model, where we can, the number of foster care placements we need as there are clear links between children's placement and financial modelling (outlined in Section (a)).

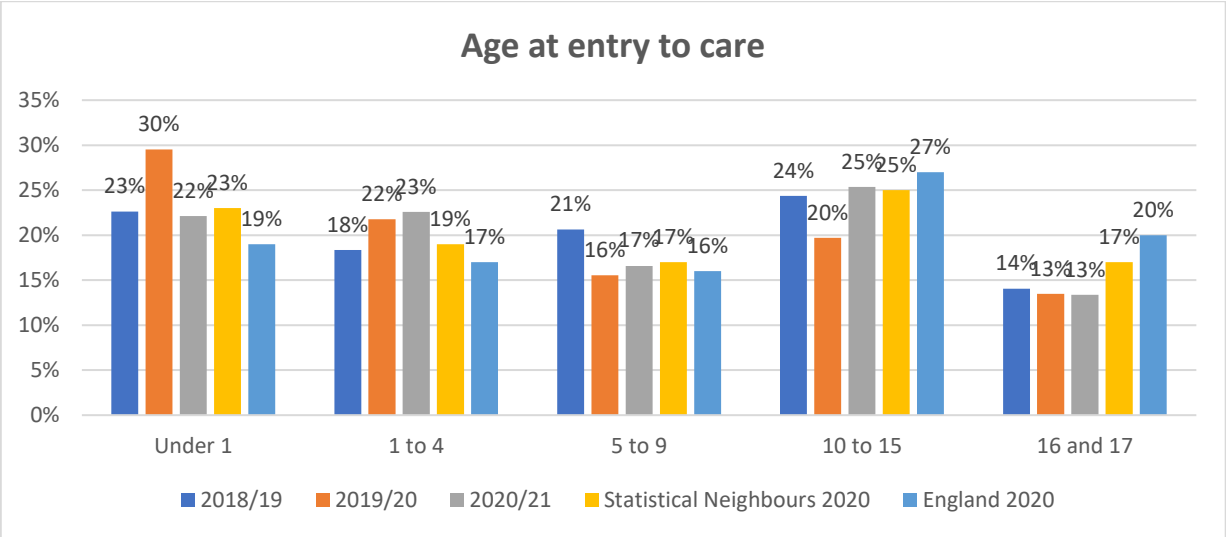
The number of Children in Care who need a placement is the biggest contributor to our resource deficit outlined in Section (a). First and foremost, we need to ensure that all our children in care are in the right placement for them, and wherever possible we must be getting best value for money from these placements. 35% of our total placement spend is represented by 7% of children's placements.

Entry into care

In previous sections we have articulated that the number of children in our care have remained static. Over the past two years we have averaged around 200 entries and exits per year, which is lower than our Statistical Neighbour comparators entering care (247), and in line with England Average of 206 over the two-year period (April 2018-March 2020). This is similarly the case for Children Ceasing Care we are lower than the Statistical Neighbour Average of 232 and in line with England Average 194



Over the previous three years we have tended to have a greater proportion of children aged between 0 and 9 than our comparators. Where we need to act to protect a child, the sooner we do this the better, and younger children are more likely to be found good quality permanent placements through adoption. Outcomes for younger children in our care are also better on average.



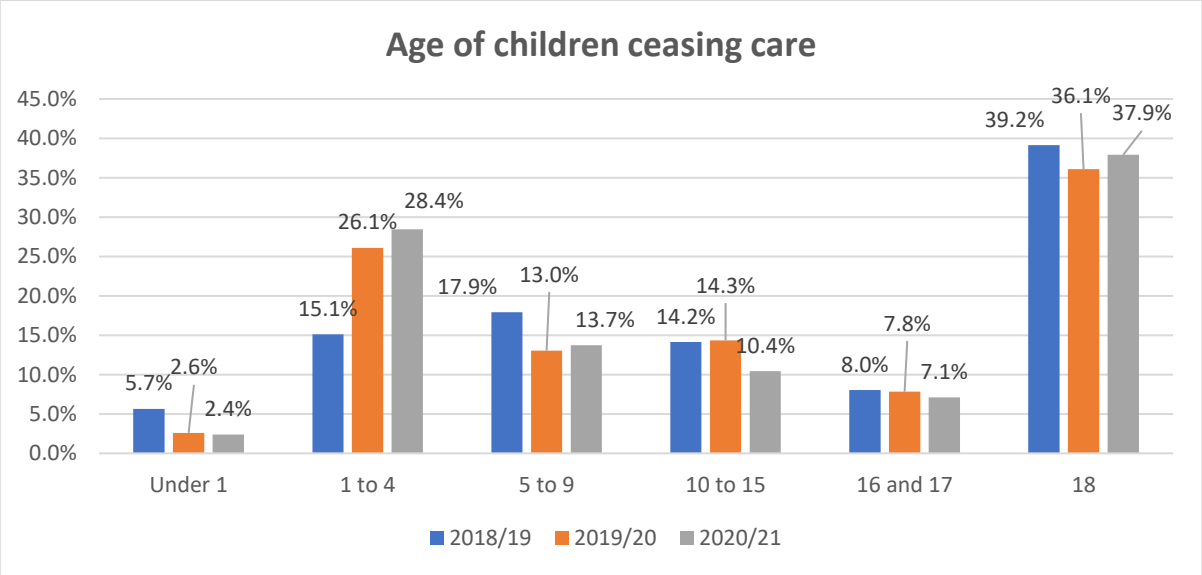
Last year we had a drop in the use of Police Protection and Emergency Protection Orders, although we have found this year to have seen an increase in both areas. We have also seen a reduction in the use of Section 20 accommodation on entry into care.

Initial Leal Status (at point of entry)	2018/19	2019/2020	2020/21
Accommodated with breaks (no care episodes recorded)	0	1	0
C1 Missing Legal Status	1	0	0
Care Order	13	0	0
Emergency Protection Order	3	0	2
Interim Care Order	165	100	116
On remand, or Committed for Trial or Sentence and Accommodated by LA	10	9	9
Police Protection and in LA accommodation	41	18	35
Single Period of Accommodation under Section 20	116	65	55
Grand Total	**349**	**193**	**217**

The table below shows where our Children in Care have been placed since 1st April 2019, focused on those settings that have the highest resource implications.

Children ceasing care

The majority of children ceasing care across the previous three years have been those turning 18, and those children between 1 and 4 years old.

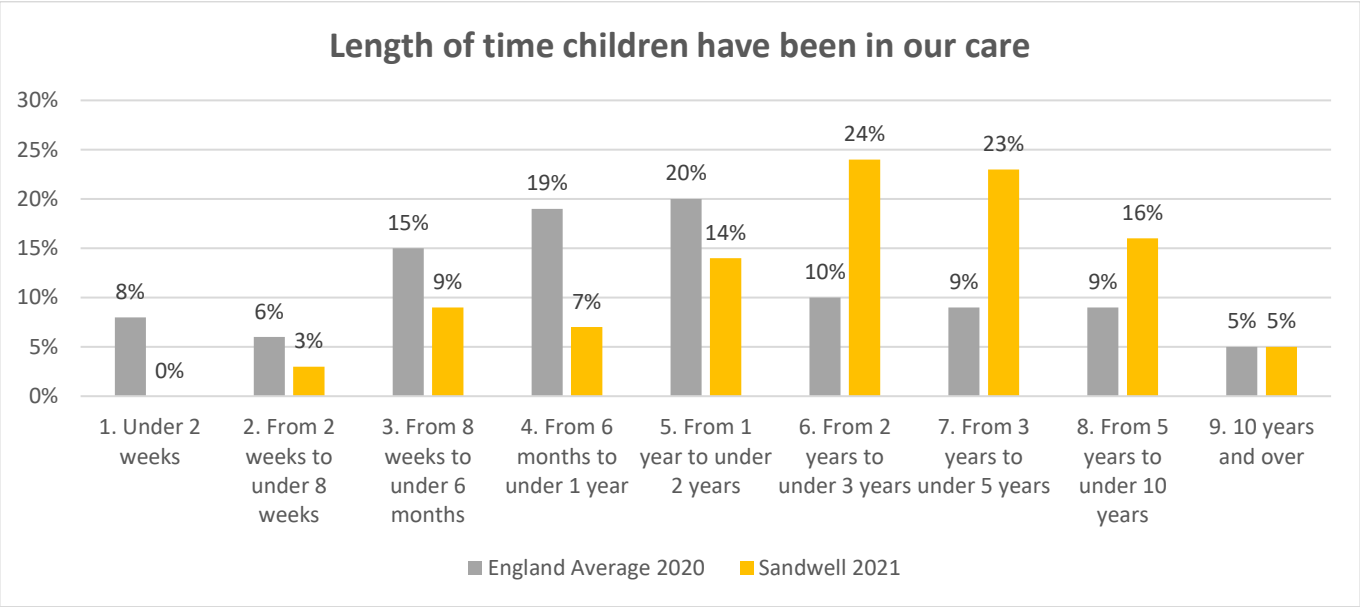


Over the course of the last three year we have seen an increase in the use of special guardianship and a consistent flow of children being reunified to their family.

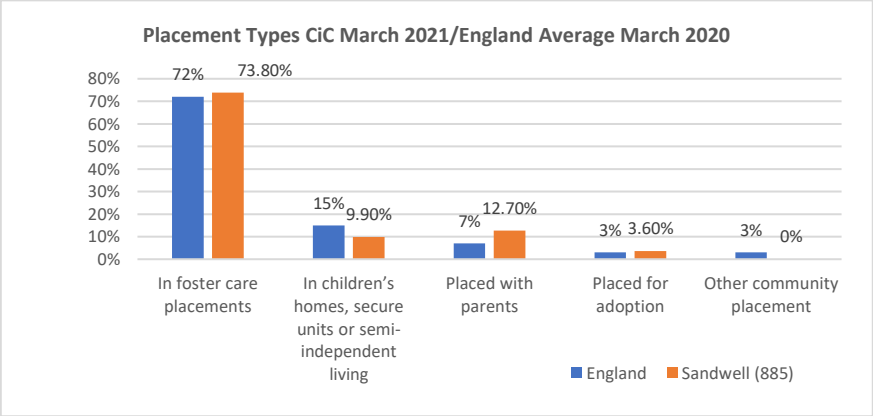
Ceased Care Reasons	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Adopted	34	30	36
Care Order Discharged	0	10	5
SGO	10	20	25
Reunification	57	47	41
Independent Living	81	79	74
Child Arrangement Order	6	7	4
Supervision Order	5	13	17
Other	19	24	9
Total	**212**	**230**	**211**

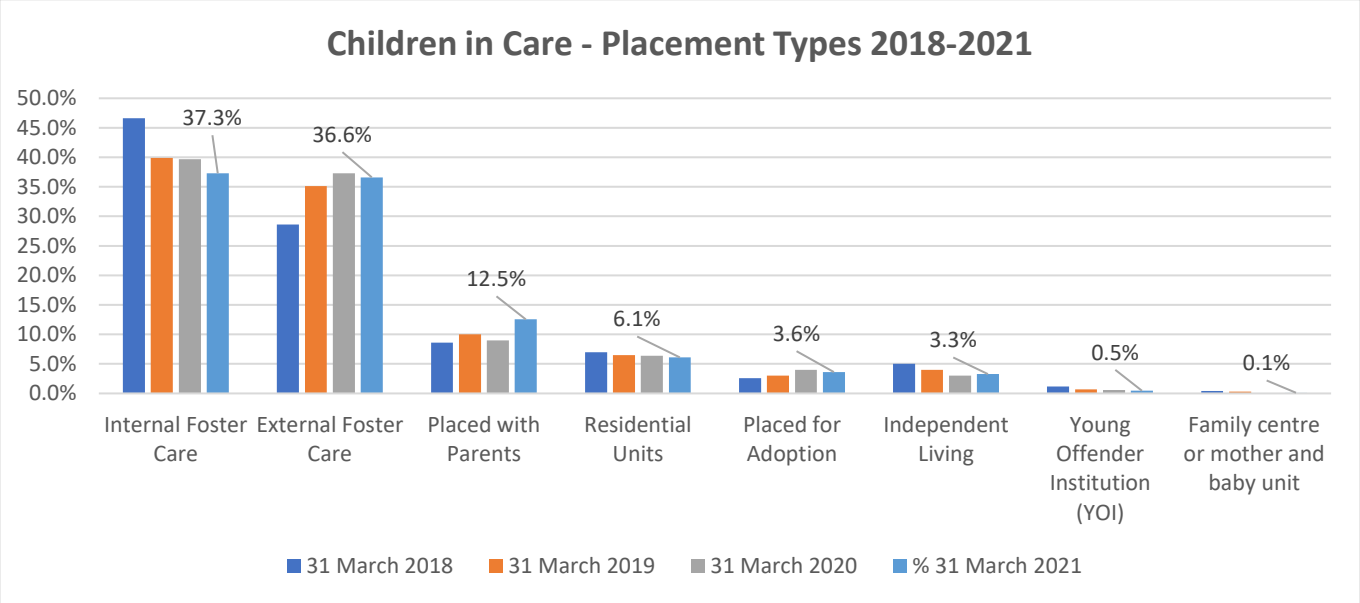
Our current cohort

In Sandwell, more children have been in our care between 2 and 10 years than the England average. This goes some way to demonstrate that we are still managing the legacy of children who required protection from the tie we were deemed inadequate.



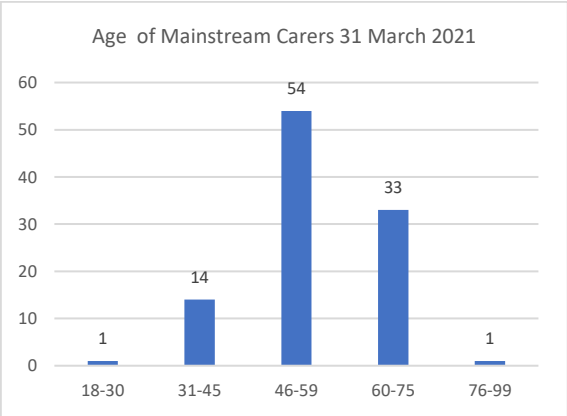
Over the last three years, a smaller proportion of children have been placed within our own foster care placement, and we have seen increased use of external foster carers and children who are placed with parents. However, our use of residential homes is lower that the England average in 2020.

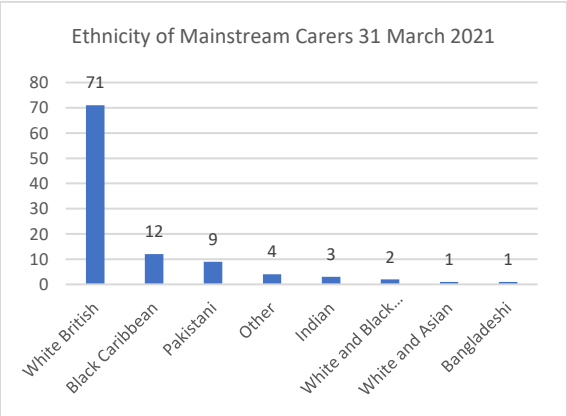




Approved Foster Carers

As a Trust, we are registered as an Independent Fostering Agency. However, we are no different from a Local Authority fostering service in that we provide support for both mainstream and connected carers, alongside commissioning agency foster care placements.





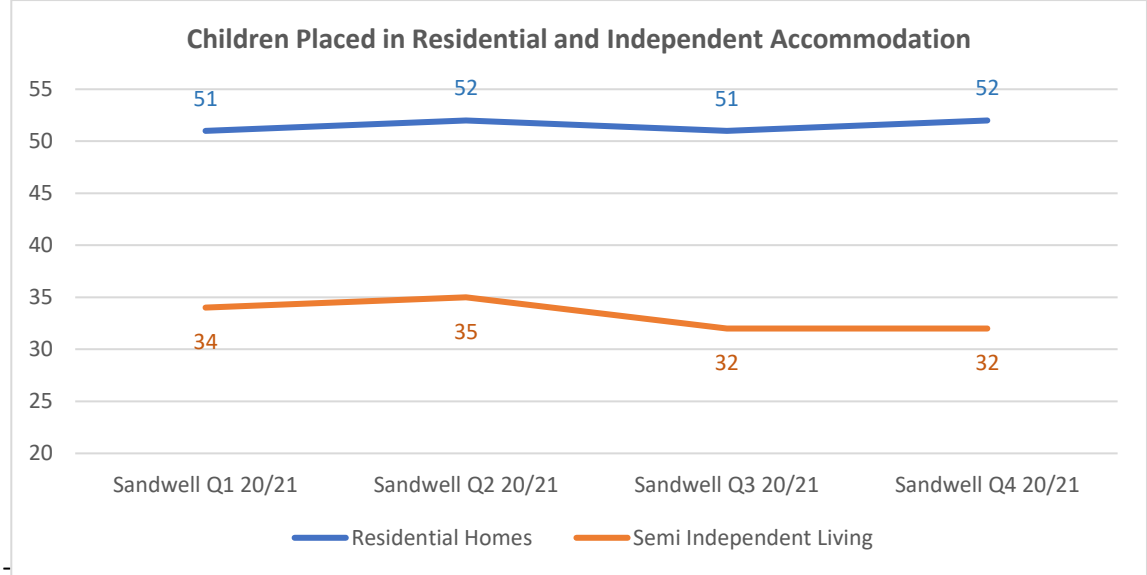
As at 31 March 2021, we had 331 children placed with 225 internal foster carers (106 mainstream and 119 Family and Friends), which is 37.4%. 325 children were placed with external agency foster carers, which is 36.7%. Finally, our use of connected carers has increased by 10.

Most of our carers are of White British ethnicity, and 34 out of 103 (33%) mainstream foster carers are aged over 60, and are therefore more likely to retire within the next five years. This, alongside a reduction of children's placements with internal foster carers represents a sufficiency challenge for us.

Residential Placements

We do not operate any residential children's homes and are therefore whenever we need to place a child outside of a family setting we do this through a commissioned agency. External residential placements represent our highest cost placements, and are a clear area for ensuring we are making the best use of resources. Whilst there will always be a need to accommodate children with complex needs, often there are more appropriate 'family settings' for these children, which we have explored.

A further pressure for us is independent accommodation for older Children in Care and Care Leavers, which often is supported and comes at a significant cost.



Section (h) - 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 2019/20, owing to the agreements pertaining to the Relief Event agreed on 21st July 2020, which remains in place.

Section (i) - 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

There were no changes to the Service Delivery Contract during this financial year.

Changes to Support Services Agreements

There were no changes to the support services agreements during the year.

Other significant changes

On 23rd November 2020, Pauline Turner was removed as a company director, on 31st March 2021 Frances Craven was removed as a company director and on 30th March 2021 Emma Taylor was added as a company director (effective from 12th April 2021).

Section (j) - 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, Financial Mechanism or the Performance Indicators in the next contract year. However, we enter into constructive conversations about these matters to coincide with the Contract Review of next year.

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

There are no comments to be made about the contractual governance, (change controls).

Section (I) - 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.