



Improvement Plan 2021-2024





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

"As we enter our fourth year here in Sandwell Children's Trust, we do so in the knowledge that we have done our very best for our children and families under the enormously challenging circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff have shown great dedication and resilience in keeping children safe during a very difficult period. Now is the right time for us to reflect on our progress, consolidate all we have done and plan for the future.

I am therefore very pleased to present our latest improvement plan, which underpins our aim to invest in our people, practice and partnerships to provide excellent services for children and families in Sandwell."



**Emma Taylor – Chief Executive of
Sandwell Children's Trust**

"I am really excited to join Sandwell Children's Trust - the Sandwell Family - at this crucial juncture. I can see the good work undertaken by staff at all levels and the difference this has made to how we work with our children and families. I have sensed the passion and willingness from our staff to strive for excellence and it's important that we do this based on our Sandwell Family values. We know what we need to work on to improve even more - our Improvement Plan sets out how we are going to do this, and how we will know we've succeeded."



Ieasha Hamrahi

"We are very happy to have contributed to Sandwell Children's Trust new improvement plan and we look forward to seeing changes being made that makes a difference to children and families in Sandwell."



India Purewal

"We think it is important that there is a dedicated place for the Chief Executive to review progress and make sure the improvements in this plan are the biggest priority, and are glad that we are able to be involved in this."

**Co-Chairs of Sandwell Care Leavers'
Forum**

Our Approach to Improvement in 2021 and beyond

We have come a long way in the last three years since we began as a Trust, and have made some great 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 it is the right time for us to refresh our improvement plan with the aim of becoming a 'Good' or better organisation.

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:

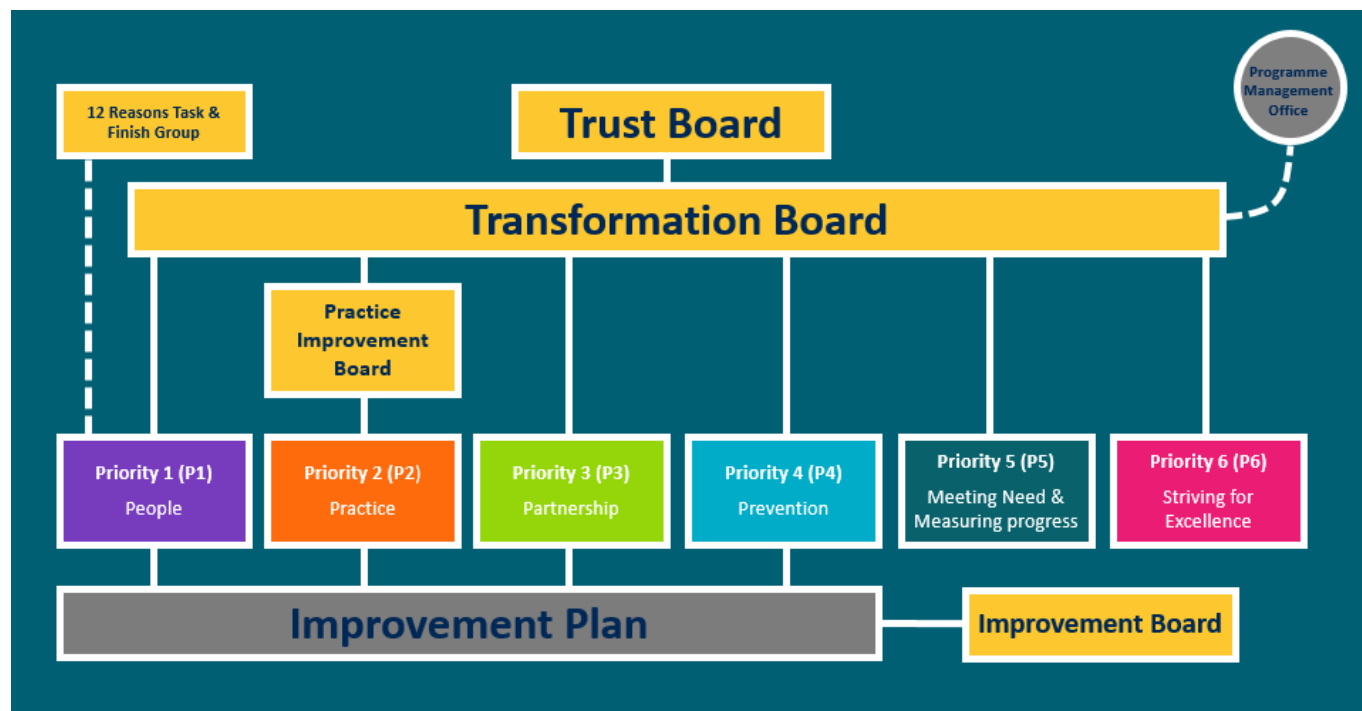
- We work with partners so that Early Help promotes prevention at every level
- Ensuring the most relevant partners are integral in every child's assessment and plan, actively support families and where decisions are made on behalf of children
- Capitalising on the six towns in Sandwell to ensure that 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

Delivery and Governance

Leaders in Sandwell Children's Trust are accountable to the Trust Board for all of the work they do, which includes the improvement programme. As children's services in Sandwell was rated by Ofsted as Inadequate in 2017, we remain under the statutory intervention of the Department for Education, which means we have an independent improvement board chair and adviser Mark Gurrey. Furthermore, our contractual relationship with Sandwell MBC adds a layer of scrutiny and

governance from the Director of Children's Services. A further key forum for improvement across the partnership is the Sandwell Safeguarding Children's Partnership, also chaired by the DCS.

The improvement programme fits within SCT's strategic transformation programme, which sets out our priority areas for transformation over the next three years. Priorities one to four are addressed through this improvement plan, of which 'Practice' is the single biggest area.



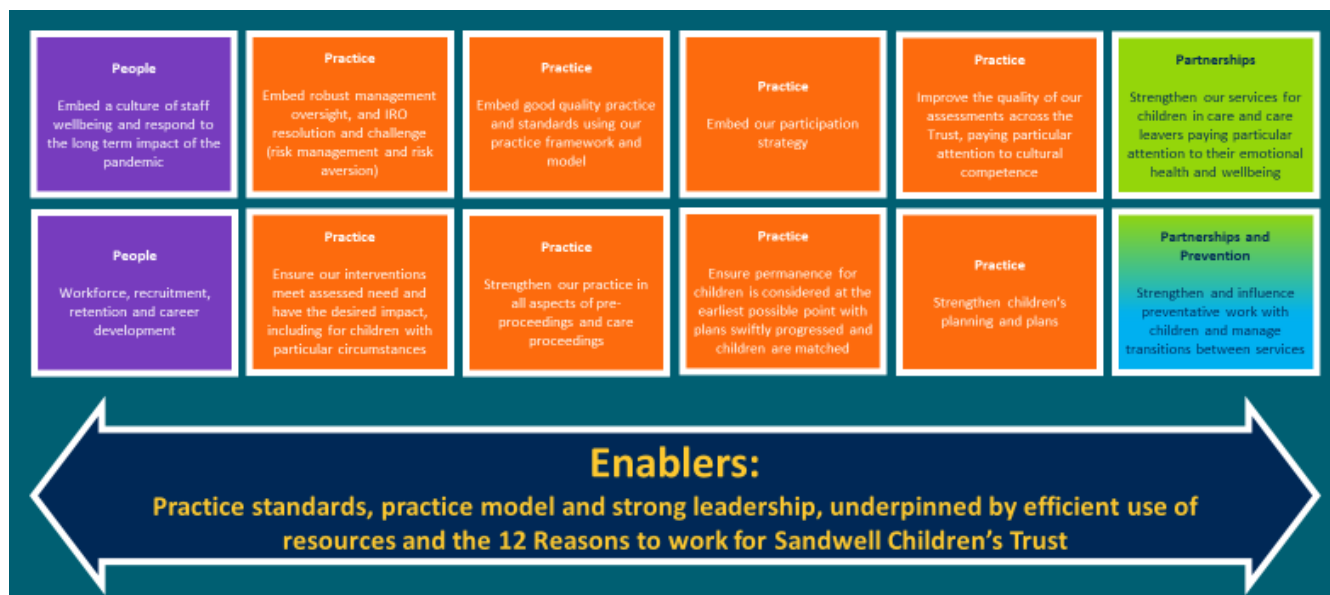
All services within Sandwell Children's Trust are expected to follow a cycle of planning, doing and reviewing; with constant practice analysis throughout our improvement journey. This allows each Head of Service (and in turn their management team) to demonstrate impact against our improvement priorities on a 12-weekly basis.

The Director of Quality and Performance is the key senior leader responsible for the improvement programme, holding, alongside the Chief Executive, a fortnightly Practice Improvement Board with key staff across the Trust to demonstrate progress against 'practice' (Priority 2).

The programme is led and monitored by the Business Improvement and Change Manager, and progress is validated against our Performance and Quality measures and findings in consultation with the Principal Social Worker. This aims to create a balance between strategic planning and practice improvement to achieve positive outcomes for children, which is measurable and can be evidenced.

Our plan to get to good

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: what are our qualitative and quantitative measures?

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.