

Inspection of Sandwell local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 13 to 24 October 2025

Lead inspector: Monique Lindsay, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection in 2022, when Sandwell children's services were judged as requires improvement to be good in all areas, most services have significantly improved. Sustained leadership, stronger partnerships, and effective governance and strategic alignment between the Trust and the council have enabled senior leaders to make tangible improvements that are making a positive difference to children's lives.

Services for children in need of help and protection have improved in many areas, including early help, transition planning for disabled children and support to children at risk of coming into care. The help, care and assistance provided to children in care has been strengthened and most children are now living in settled homes and making good progress in their lives. A stable workforce, stronger oversight and improvements to independent reviewing officer (IRO) services are making a positive impact for these children. While some practice areas for care leavers have improved, pathway planning and contact with care leavers who are no longer in touch remain inconsistent. Leaders are aware that the improvements made to care leavers services have not fully delivered the intended impact for care leavers.

What needs to improve?¹

- How well children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, understand their rights and entitlements about coming into care and accommodation options. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The pace of leaders' actions to achieve timely permanence for some children in care. (outcome 4, national framework)
- The relationships and contact that personal advisers (PAs) have with children both before and after leaving care to support their preparation for adulthood. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The quality, accessibility and timeliness of pathway plans for some children in care and care leavers. (outcome 4, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and families in Sandwell benefit from timely and effective involvement from a wide range of early help services. A well-embedded early help offer and work with partners strengthens the quality of early help assessments and support. The broadening of professional engagement is resulting in more children's needs being assessed and addressed at an earlier stage.
2. Children referred to children's services receive appropriate help and support. Managers promptly screen new referrals and apply thresholds consistently to prioritise children most in need of help. Social workers use a broad range of information to assist them in making informed recommendations, with historical risks and the impact of cumulative harm well considered. Families are helped to understand consent and how their information will be used.
3. The response to children affected by domestic abuse is appropriate. Consideration of information gathered, decision-making and conversations with children, parents and carers at risk of domestic abuse are undertaken in a way that minimises risk to them. Multi-agency information-sharing within the multi-agency safeguarding hub is timely and proportionate and used effectively to inform risk assessments, next steps and safeguarding considerations. The co-location of the Horizon service that aids children at risk of exploitation and who go missing supports efficient communication and coordination between social workers and specialist practitioners for these children.
4. When children are harmed, or are at risk of harm, strategy meetings are prompt, well attended by multi-agency professionals and result in clear safeguarding

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

decisions and actions being taken that help to protect children. Child protection investigations are mostly effective, with children's voices routinely informing social workers' analysis and planning, and include a detailed threshold discussion for initial child protection conference. Safety and contingency planning are strong, detailed and tailored to each child and their family situation.

5. The emergency duty service provides a swift and proportionate response to children in need of help and support out of office hours. Children receive responsive help that reflects their presenting need and risk, ensuring they are safeguarded.
6. Most assessments of children's needs are routinely timely, detailed and shaped by information gathered from children, families and partner agencies. Children and families are visited regularly during assessments, with purposeful discussions, reflection and interventions helping to bring about positive change. Decision-making about support and services is based on a clear understanding of children and families' circumstances.
7. Most children benefit from effective safety planning through well-led child protection conferences. Plans have direct, timebound actions that are reviewed regularly through multi-agency core groups and review child protection conferences. Child protection plans are accessible and child focused, and for most children are reducing risk.
8. The quality of child in need plans is variable, with some plans lacking clear timescales and measures of progress. When specialist tools are used to understand the extent and impact of neglect, these are helpful to social workers and families in understanding what changes are needed to protect children. While these are mostly used effectively, for a small number of children there has been some delay in addressing ongoing neglect.
9. When the risks to children escalate, appropriate decisions are taken by managers to move into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). Leaders maintain strong oversight of children in pre-proceedings to minimise drift and delay. This increased oversight is having a positive impact, and most children's plans are being progressed in a timely way and agreed actions and interventions are completed promptly. Letters written to parents to explain the PLO process are sensitive in explaining concerns and what they need to do and are easy for parents to understand.
10. Disabled children are well supported by skilled practitioners using appropriate communication tools to ensure that they gain a clear understanding of children's needs, worries, wishes and feelings. Assessments of need and plans for disabled children are comprehensive and include multi-agency responses that help to meet their specific needs. Disabled children have a smooth transition to adult services with referrals for Care Act assessments made by social workers in the children

with disabilities team. These are timely and helpful for disabled children as they grow into adulthood.

11. Children at risk of harm outside the home receive tenacious and relationship-based support from workers. Focused risk management plans completed by specialist practitioners are strong and show robust understanding and analysis of risk factors for children, alongside measured actions to be taken. Risk management plans are written to and with children, which means the child's voice and wishes are clearly presented.
12. When children aged 16 and 17 present as homeless or at risk of homelessness, their immediate need for accommodation is responded to, but their rights and entitlements are not always explicitly explained to them. Assessments by children's services and housing services are not sufficiently joined up to help inform decision-making and children's plans. During the inspection, leaders agreed that practice is not meeting their expectations for these children.
13. Children at risk of entering care because of family breakdown benefit from impactful, intensive support through the valued Intervention hub. Through intensive engagement with families, multisystemic therapy (MST) therapists and intervention workers help to rebuild trust, strengthen parenting, and create safer, more stable home environments. Children benefit directly from improved emotional security, more consistent routines, and secure relationships with their caregivers. For most children, this helps them to stay at home. Social workers can articulate the importance of wider networks to help children, and they reflect family networks in some children's plans; however, it was too early to see the impact of these actions for children.
14. Children live in private fostering arrangements that are suitably assessed. Since the last inspection, a revised focus on awareness-raising and stronger management oversight and governance are helping to improve the response provided to these children.
15. Children who are assessed as being young carers have access to a well-established service offering a wide range of support and activities.
16. The local authority designated officer response to managing allegations against professionals is prompt and appropriate, with productive multi-agency decision-making and monitoring of risk that prioritises children's safety.
17. Systems for identifying and monitoring children missing education are robust. Clear processes and a proactive approach help many children to re-engage in education. When children are electively home educated, multi-agency collaboration ensures that children receive effective monitoring and support. When elective education is deemed unsuitable, strong systems are in place to maintain oversight of children.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

18. Children in care are making good progress. They live in homes and with carers that meet their needs. There is good exploration of children's family networks and children live with family and friends, as kinship carers, when safe and appropriate. This helps children to sustain relationships that are important to them. When this is not possible, social workers identify suitable alternative care arrangements.
19. Risks to children in care are well understood and responded to by skilled, compassionate social workers. Children in care at risk of exploitation, or who go missing, benefit from tenacious multi-agency work that reduces risk.
20. Children in care contribute meaningfully to their assessments, which are regularly updated, and used to inform their plans. Children's plans are reviewed at meetings that are well attended by children, professionals and family members. Children's views are actively represented, and this helps children to understand their plans and feel heard. IRO letters to children are thoughtful and provide a valuable record of their progress and experiences.
21. Social workers know their children in care well. They build trusting, nurturing relationships and speak with pride about their children. Many visits to children in care are regular and purposeful and in line with their needs. Social workers use life-story and direct work well to help children in care to understand about their childhood experiences and journeys through care. Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives, which helps with their identity. Family time arrangements are well managed, reviewed regularly and informed by children's views.
22. Children in care are central to practice, and their individual needs and aspirations influence the support provided. Comprehensive engagement work ensures that children's views are heard, their achievements celebrated, and they help to shape service development. Children in care have their views championed by the Voice Team. They are supported to understand their rights, talk about things that are important to them and make new friends. A wide range of activities and groups are facilitated to engage them, including the Voice of Sandwell (VoS) participation group.
23. Supported by the virtual school, most children in care are helped to make progress in school, and their attendance and attainment are improving. Their personal education plans are timely and of good quality. For a small number of children, actions identified, including attendance issues and a lack of special educational needs and disabilities support, are not always timely or effective. This is impacting on some children's progress.

24. Children are helped to live healthy, fulfilling lives. Their health needs are prioritised, and they are fully supported to engage in activities they enjoy and to pursue hobbies and interests.
25. Decisions for children in care to be placed at home with parents are mostly appropriate and in children's best interests. These arrangements are usually informed by comprehensive assessments though placement plans are not always completed, which can reduce the clarity and consistency of care for children. Risk and protective factors are considered, and swift action is taken when there are significant changes in circumstance. For a very small number of children in care, safeguarding checks are not completed swiftly after they returned home in an unplanned way, to ensure the arrangement is safe and suitable for them.
26. Permanence is considered for children early, and the majority of children have stable long-term placements that are meeting their needs. Some live in long-term foster care and are formally matched with their carers. Some achieve timely permanence through adoption and special guardianship. For these children there is a sense of being loved and cared for and stability provided, with carers who can meet their needs for the rest of their childhood. However, for a number of children, formally recognising and ratifying their long-term care or discharging their care order after they have returned to live with parents is taking too long. Although there is no significant detriment to these children as they are living in their permanent homes, delays in securing permanence impact on their ability to feel settled.
27. While most children in care live in stable and caring homes, a very small number of children live in unregistered children's homes or supported accommodation. Leaders ensure these options are only used as a last resort and for the shortest period until children can be moved into suitable registered accommodation or the accommodation provider registers with Ofsted.
28. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care are sensitively supported by knowledgeable social workers in the dedicated separated children's hub. Workers are cognisant to each child's unique experiences and use specialist resources to help meet children's needs. When children are awaiting decisions on their asylum status, there is a careful triple planning approach taken and children are aware of the possibilities for their future. While interpreters are used regularly, key documents are not always provided in a language that children can understand.
29. Fostering assessments, approvals and training are robust, with timely decision-making. Foster carers are well supported, which helps to increase the stability of care for children. Children's plans for adoption are timely. Agency decision-makers write sensitive letters to children following decisions being made about their future care, and adoption services benefit from secure collaboration between the regional adoption agency and the Trust. This ensures that there is early matching and placement which considers children's individual needs,

cultural heritage and sibling relationships, and children are placed with families who can understand and meet their needs.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

30. Many care leavers benefit from and are helped by tenacious PAs who are proud of their achievements. For some care leavers, PAs are not allocated early enough before they leave care to enable PAs to build trusting relationships with them and to assist their transition to adulthood. While progress has been made in this area, not all care leavers are benefiting from this early support. Equally, when care leavers are no longer in touch with PAs, there is limited proactive contact made with them to ensure they receive the services they are entitled to and are not disadvantaged. Leaders are actively progressing plans to address this, but the pace of change has not been sufficient since the last inspection to ensure consistently good experiences.
31. Most pathways plans are co-produced with care leavers and include their voices, hopes and goals that are clearly recorded in their own words. For some care leavers, their plans are regularly reviewed and provide them with meaningful and purposeful support. However, not all care leavers benefit from having their plans shared with them, and some plans are not accessible to care leavers as they are not shared in their first language. For some care leavers, their plans are not updated when things change, and this reduces their effectiveness and impact. Leaders know of this inconsistency from the last inspection and continue with plans to strengthen this area.
32. PAs help care leavers to be healthy. They routinely and sensitively explore care leavers' health needs, helping young people take control of their own health appointments, and encouraging and facilitating attendance with those young people who appreciate this level of confidence-building. Emotional well-being and mental health are a priority focus and PAs understand how past adversity and trauma can impact on care leavers' well-being.
33. Matching of care leavers to PAs takes account of individual views, cultural needs and the experience of the PA. This same approach applies when care leavers return to the service after the age of 21, with the continuation of established relationships appropriately prioritised.
34. The local offer for care leavers is comprehensive, with a cohesive range of financial, practical and emotional support. However, one entitlement, council tax exemption for care leavers living outside the local area, is not automatically applied, leaving a number of care leavers at a disadvantage. Additionally, some social workers and PAs are not fully familiar with all aspects of the local offer, which limits consistent access to available support.

35. The development of the 16+ service with dedicated PAs has strengthened support for former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, with staff demonstrating a strong understanding of their cultural needs and trauma. Care leavers are encouraged to engage in community and cultural activities, and legal advocacy is actively pursued. Pathway plans are culturally sensitive and regularly updated but not always shared in accessible languages, and for a small number of care leavers accommodation arrangements were unclear, causing some anxiety for these young people.
36. Care leavers over 21 who receive an ongoing service have strong support from PAs. They benefit from long-standing, meaningful relationships that on occasion continue beyond the age of 25 if desired. Discussions are held before young people turn 21 to determine whether continued PA involvement is needed. While some progress has been made since the last inspection, for those care leavers over 21 who are no longer in touch, there is no annual contact made by the service to them, and contact relies too much on care leavers to ask for further assistance. This means some may not receive the support and help they are entitled to.
37. Most care leavers benefit from living in a wide range of suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Housing applications are supported once care leavers are ready to manage a tenancy. Care leavers are helped to develop independence skills and have access to several housing projects which provide effective preparation for independence. A small number of care leavers were not provided with their move-on accommodation plan early enough, leading to uncertainty.
38. Most vulnerable care leavers receive helpful and appropriate support. PAs keep in regular communication with care leavers who are in custody and work closely with relevant partners in advance, to aid rehabilitation arrangements. Care leavers who are parents are mostly well supported by PAs. They are helped to prepare for parenthood and are encouraged to access general parenting services.
39. Care leavers are helped to feel safer. The Horizons team provides good support to care leavers up to the age of 25, helping them to make choices that will keep them safer. When risks are high, vulnerable adult risk management meetings are used effectively to coordinate multi-agency support to help reduce need and risk.
40. The service for 'qualifying' care leavers is inconsistent. Some do not receive the help they need at the time they need it. Leaders recognise this and are working to strengthen the support for all care leavers, regardless of status.
41. Care leavers are supported to learn and make progress in their education, training and employment. PAs demonstrate tenacity in securing opportunities that align with young people's skills, interests and ambitions.
42. Care leavers have a strong collective voice in Sandwell. A dedicated Voice Team and the Forum for Independent Young Adults act as dynamic advocates for

change, championing care leavers' rights and helping them to influence service design. Care leavers have successfully shaped improvements to the local offer, such as securing free prescriptions and promoting more respectful language and recording through the 'Working Together' strategy.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

43. Senior leaders in Sandwell share a strong and visible commitment to improving the quality of services for children and families. They provide coherent and purposeful direction, ensuring that the strategic vision for children's services is well communicated and shared across the organisation and with partners. They are well sighted on the children's services reforms and over the past three years, their transformation programme is helping to develop services in line with national reforms.
44. Governance arrangements are robust. The director of children's services, the Trust chief executive, the executive management team and elected members maintain a clear line of sight to frontline practice, supported by sound scrutiny from the Trust board. Relationships between the council and the Trust are constructive and mature, with a shared responsibility for growth. Despite wider financial pressures, there is sustained investment and corporate commitment to children's services.
45. Strategic partnerships are well established and contribute meaningfully to both strategic and operational improvements. Collaborative work with partners, for example, has strengthened the service offer, and improved transition arrangements for disabled children through closer joint working with adult services.
46. The corporate parenting board presents a picture of strong governance and robust partnerships, with a clear focus on improving experiences for children in care and care leavers. Although strategic intention to improve the experience and progress of care leavers is strong, the board has not driven sufficient progress in improving some aspects of services and support for all care leavers.
47. Leaders have consistent and highly effective engagement with a number of care leavers in Sandwell. They support the visibility and influence of care leavers, with representatives co-chairing the corporate parenting board and creating tangible practice change across the service. This has helped to identify and shape some of the improvements made to care leavers services.
48. Leaders demonstrate dedication to change, with an honest and reflective self-evaluation. During this inspection, they were open about where their oversight of practice needed a sharper focus, for example the response to children aged 16 and 17 presenting as homeless, and that they would take immediate action to remedy this. Leaders accept that some of the service changes and developments,

specifically around permanency for children in care, and some services for care leavers, have not consistently led to meaningful impact.

49. Leaders have access to accurate, timely performance information that is mostly used effectively to monitor quality and identify trends. Some tracking mechanisms, while useful in highlighting areas for development, are not being used consistently or efficiently to make tangible impact for children.
50. Leaders understand their community and are committed to advancing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The EDI strategy sets a positive and ambitious tone, reflecting the diversity of the community and workforce, and helping to promote a culture of respect and belonging. This has not been fully and consistently embedded to secure the intended impact for all children and practitioners.
51. Leaders have firmly embedded a strong learning culture across children's services. The learning hub, trust academy and principal social worker play pivotal roles in promoting good practice and professional growth. Regular auditing and quality assurance activity are used to evaluate practice quality and inform organisational learning. Feedback from staff, children and partners is valued and used constructively to shape service development. Leaders demonstrate openness to challenge and use learning from audit, review and feedback to strengthen systems and improve consistency.
52. The practice model developed by the Trust is reflected across children's services and underpins practice that is strengths-based, restorative and reflective, fostering empathy and meaningful relationships between practitioners and children and families. Practitioners and managers understand and apply the model well, and this is helping to embed a relationship-focused approach across services. Practice standards and expectations are clearly defined and embedded. They provide practitioners with a framework for quality and professional accountability and are helping to improve consistency and confidence across teams.
53. A comprehensive workforce strategy reflects a confident understanding of the importance of organisational commitment to practitioners. A sustained and targeted focus on workforce development and retention has resulted in greater stability across the service. This supports continuity of relationships for children, enabling practitioners who know them well to plan more effectively for their needs.
54. Leaders prioritise manageable caseloads, good-quality supervision and professional development. Most managers at all levels have routine and regular oversight of social work practice. Strengthened management oversight and reflective discussion allow for practitioners to be well supported in their decision-making and analysis of risk.

55. Staff consistently describe leaders as visible, approachable and supportive and value structured engagement activities, such as the 'Compliments Café'. The time leaders invest in direct engagement with teams is valued by the workforce and contributes to a strong sense of shared professional pride and trust across the service. Staff enjoy working in Sandwell, with some saying it 'feels like a family'.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This report is available at <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2025