



Department
for Education

Improvement Advisers' Report: Sandwell Children's Trust

July 2026

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Background and Introduction

This report summarises the progress made in supporting good outcomes for children and young people in Sandwell by the Sandwell Children's Trust and the local authority. The purpose of the report is to inform decision-making about the ending of DfE Intervention and the revoking of the associated statutory direction that is currently in place.

Summary and Headline Messages

- Ofsted inspected children's services in Sandwell under the ILACS framework in October 2025, with the outcome that services were Good overall, with Good for all sub-judgements with the exception of that for the experience and progress of care leavers, where the outcome was 'Requires Improvement to be Good';
- Ofsted undertook a regulatory inspection of adoption services provided by the Children's Trust in February 2026. At the time of writing, the inspection outcome is not published, but the feedback was in line with or exceeded the ILACS finding, with the sub-judgement for leadership in adoption being awarded 'Outstanding';
- The Children's Trust has continued to make progress in relation to implementing the Families First reforms, built on a much-improved relationship with partners;
- The current contract under which the Children's Trust delivers children's services comes to an end on March 31st 2028. The Chief Executive and Lead Member of the Council have stated that there are no plans for an early end of the current contract, assuming that Children's Trust operates in a fiscally responsible manner;
- Decisions will clearly need to be made in respect of whether to renew the current contract or to bring the services operated by the Children's Trust back in house from 2028 onwards. Any decision about the future delivery model must be taken on a clear, risk assessed basis. The Council will want to carefully consider the risk of disruption to a service whose current performance has been hard-won after many years when services and outcomes were assessed by inspectors as inadequate;
- The Trust, staff and partners also need to operate in a context of certainty and with that in mind, the local authority should be prepared to provide a minimum of 12 months' notice of its intention in this respect. Children's services are complex, and this is also likely to be the minimum period needed to plan and implement the process while minimising risks of disrupting service delivery should the decision be to return services in-house;
- While there is clearly the potential for changes in delivery model in the future, it is my view that the current circumstances support a decision to end statutory intervention by the Department. Outcomes for children are good; there are clear plans in place to address the areas for further work in the Ofsted inspection. I have also worked with both the Council and the Children's Trust to ensure that the programme of improvement will continue and there is a stated intention to continue with the current model of service delivery until at least the end of the contract in March 2028. In this context, there is no obvious benefit to delaying the ending of the intervention.

Summary of Progress Achieved

The full Ofsted inspection of October 2025 identified that:

‘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.’

This headline finding is in line with the positive findings of the two earlier focussed visits which took place in October 2024 and April 2025.

The findings by the inspectorate offer assurance about the overall quality of services currently provided, and of the abilities of leaders to continue to improve services and outcomes for children, young people and families in Sandwell.

Leaders within the Children's Trust have developed an action plan in response to the findings of the Ofsted inspection. This has been discussed at the Improvement Board; the plan is comprehensive and outcomes focused. Appropriate action has already commenced to address the recommendations and other findings by Ofsted in the inspection.

Although inspectors identified many strengths in relation to support and outcomes for care experienced young people and young adults, the sub-judgement indicates that there remains more to do in this area before outcomes are consistently good. This finding is accepted by the leadership team and there is a clear determination to address the areas for development at pace.

I am confident that the service will be able to demonstrate significant improvement to outcomes in this area, certainly by the time of the next Ofsted Focussed Visit, which will almost certainly consider outcomes for care experienced young people and young adults. My subsequent work with team managers in this part of the service has evidenced that progress is already being made in addressing the issues identified by inspectors.

Other areas where inspectors made recommendations in order to improve the consistency of outcomes are also being addressed. Inspectors recommended, for example, that steps should be taken to ensure that young people aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are fully aware of their rights and entitlements.

The Children's Trust has updated practice guidance and made changes to the children’s case recording system to ensure that practitioners provide information about rights and entitlements. The effectiveness of the joint response by the local authority and trust is monitored through joint meetings involving senior officers from both, while the Council has identified four housing officers who are dedicated to responding to the needs of 16-

and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless, all of whom have accessed additional training in relation to the legislative framework. This is a good example of the authority and the trust working together to improve outcome and address areas for development.

In overall terms, the quality of practice has improved significantly since the inspection in 2022. Strong and visible leadership 'contributes to a strong sense of shared professional pride and trust across the service.'¹

Leaders within the trust have overseen the development of an effective and comprehensive practice model that enables clear and consistent work with children, young people and their families. This has been adopted as a shared practice model across the partnership, helping to ensure that children and their families experience a consistent, strengths-based and relationship-based response when they are in need of help, support or protection.

Leaders also continue to prioritise the strategic development of services in Sandwell. Most notably, this includes preparation for implementing the Government's reform agenda. This includes operating a pilot in Oldbury, trialling the implementation of the Families First programme.

The pilot builds on the extensive work led by the Sandwell Children's Trust Chief Executive and the Director of Children's Services to improve the effectiveness of partnership working, including through the adoption of the practice model across the partnership, as noted above.

Within the pilot, partners attend Family Allocation Meetings, where decisions are made jointly about which agency and practitioner should lead the assessment and support process for vulnerable children. This approach is attracting interest from other local authorities regionally and nationally.

The pilot is currently being evaluated and will inform the roll out of the new model across Sandwell, which will take place from early in the 2026/27 financial year.

Activity by adviser

Since the last review report in October 2025, I have continued to offer support and challenge to the leadership team. This has included individual meetings with key stakeholders within the trust and the local authority as well as chairing the Improvement Board.

I have also co-facilitated reflective sessions for team and service managers alongside the trust's principal social worker. These have been consistently well attended and have been impactful. The sessions have focused on equipping managers with additional skills

¹ Ofsted inspection report: October 2025, paragraph 55

in relation to management oversight and reflective supervision in order to support improved practice.

The approach has resulted in tangible positive changes including, for example, increased use of thinking and decision-making tools and the development of practice guidance around participative recording, safe-uncertainty and defensible decision-making. The programme will continue beyond my involvement, and provides an important way of supporting front line managers in what are some of the most challenging jobs in children's services.

I have also offered individual coaching sessions to a number of team managers who, for various reasons, have been identified as benefiting from a more bespoke approach.

Most recently, I have been providing some focussed support to Independent Reviewing Officers and team managers within the care experienced service. This has been in response to the Ofsted findings and recommendations, and is aimed at helping them to prioritise actions needed to improve outcomes.

My involvement in this work has either now completed or will be completed by the end of March 2026. I am confident that the progress made will continue to be embedded across the service as the practice framework, core expectations and aspirations for the future are understood by the majority of managers and leaders across the service.

Ofsted inspection activity since the last full inspection of children's services

There has been considerable Ofsted inspection activity since the last full inspection in May 2022, as follows:

- Area SEND full inspection: July 2023
- Focussed Visit: Contacts and Referrals within the MASH: October 2024
- Focussed Visit: Children in need or subject to a child protection plan: April 2025
- Children's Services Inspection: October 2025.

As a Children's Trust, Sandwell is inspected separately as an Independent Fostering Agency and also as an Adoption Agency. A full fostering regulatory inspection took place in October 2024 with the outcome of good overall and, as noted above, an Adoption Agency inspection took place in February 2026, with the outcome also being good overall, with outstanding leadership.

Taken together, these inspections evidence both a pattern of improvement and increasingly, a picture of sustained good outcomes being achieved for children, young people and their families.

Where inspection reports have identified the need for improvements, for example in relation to children and young people who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, these have been accepted and acted upon by both the local authority and the

Children's Trust. Both organisations have worked closely together in taking targeted action to address areas for development as identified by inspectors and through their own self-assessments.

Leadership and governance

Leadership arrangements across the Children's Trust and the authority are strong, with all key leaders in permanent roles. Although there are always some tensions in a commissioner/provider relationship, strategic work between the trust and authority is much improved since I began my role as adviser in 2023. As the October 2025 Ofsted inspection report states:

‘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.’

Leadership within the Children's Trust is characterised by an experienced permanent leadership team who have all been in role for a considerable period. Leaders know themselves well and have access to good performance dashboards that enable them to identify areas where performance may be slipping, and take action as needed. The focus of the executive management team as a whole has been critical in delivering the improvements in services and outcomes for children, young people and families.

The Children's Trust board consists of a diverse group of members who bring support and challenge to the executive team. The board is chaired by an extremely experienced former senior civil servant, who has played a very helpful role in maintaining constructive relationships between the local authority and the Children's Trust through some challenging periods, as briefly described later in this report.

The Chief Executive of the Children's Trust and the Director of Children’s Services have established a positive working relationship. As noted above, this has had real impact in the area of developing more effective partnership working across the system as a whole. This is in marked contrast to the position that existed when I became Improvement Adviser in 2023. At that time, there was much less evidence of strong joint leadership by the Council and the Children's Trust. While relationships across the broader partnership were generally good, there was limited collective impact on front-line practice.

That situation has changed significantly as a result of the effective leadership provided by the current Director of Children’s Services and the Chief Executive of the Children's Trust. The impact of this leadership is evidenced by the shared practice model that has

been adopted across the partnership, and through the engagement by partners in the Families First changes taking place in Sandwell.

Governance arrangements are also strong, with Ofsted inspectors noting that:

‘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.’

The trust and local authority are taking the opportunity to review governance arrangements following the Ofsted inspection outcome. This is to ensure that the focus on improvement and outcomes for children and families continues across the various governance forums in a context where the need for an independently chaired Improvement Board has come to an end.

Risks and challenges

There are a number of risks and challenges for any Children's Trust or local authority in delivering consistently good quality services for children, young people and their families. Services and budgets are complex, and all children’s services authorities and trusts have faced increasing challenges resulting from the rapidly increasing costs of placements for children in care.

In general terms, relationships between the trust and the local authority have improved significantly over the time that I have been involved as adviser. It is important, however, to acknowledge issues relating to budgets that have caused significant difficulties and that are, to some extent, still being worked through.

Budgets and the cost of delivering services are almost always a point of tension whether services are delivered in-house or through a trust arrangement. Further tensions resulted from errors in budget monitoring that emerged at the end of the 2024/25 financial year, and which have continued to have impact in the current year. These errors resulted in an additional overspend being identified by the Children's Trust late in the 2024/25 financial year, adding to the projected overspend already identified at the time.

The emergence of this issue and its timing caused significant strain in relationships between the local authority and the trust. Internal audit was subsequently tasked with assessing the robustness of financial systems within the trust. Meetings between members of the trust board and executive and with Members and senior local authority officers took place in the summer of 2025 in order to support relationships.

During the current financial year, the trust chief executive, with the support of the Trust board, asked for further exploration of all activities in order to identify any further errors. This resulted in additional pressures being identified, linked to the same errors that had

caused the previous issue. The trust has agreed to seek to identify additional savings to mitigate the impact of this further overspend.

This is clearly very unfortunate, although for context, it should perhaps be noted that whatever the delivery model, errors do sometimes occur, and that this is the first instance of such issues arising in budgets that are the responsibility of the trust since it began operations.

It was in this context that negotiations were also taking place to agree a contract sum for delivery of services by the Children's Trust to cover the remainder of the operation of the contract. It is therefore particularly positive that these negotiations successfully concluded in agreement. It is also positive that the Council has worked to ensure visibility of the cumulative deficit resulting from overspends that have accumulated over the period of the contract, and included measures to address the issue as part of the contract sum arrangement.

It should also be acknowledged that elected Members, through Scrutiny, Cabinet and full Council, voted to pass the contract settlement to the end of the contract period, demonstrating the commitment to funding children's services and to securing the stability of the Trust in the medium term.

This evidences that, difficulties notwithstanding, senior officers within the trust and the local authority have worked collaboratively and productively together to reach agreement on funding to the end of the contract.

The Council has referred to this settlement as 'full and final'. While it is entirely understandable that the authority should seek to plan with this level of certainty, the reality of managing children's services means that some flexibility is likely to continue to be needed.

Budgets in children's services are frequently volatile and accurate forecasting can be challenging. This particularly relates to the costs of placements for children and young people in care. Continuing national challenges around fostering sufficiency and rapidly rising costs for children's home placements have resulted in the costs for providing homes for children in care escalating rapidly over recent years.

Alongside the constant need to focus on the quality of practice being delivered by the service within a complex system and partnership environment, delivering the best possible outcomes for children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable, requires constant review and change. This need for change is driven by a number of factors, including:

- Developments in understanding of the impact on children and young people of societal and other changes including, for example, growing recognition of the exploitation of young people by organised crime groups;

- Recognition that despite best efforts, we can do more to ensure that our services protect children and young people more effectively. The National Panel's recently published report 'Protecting all vulnerable babies better', for example, includes wide-ranging recommendations on how all services that work with vulnerable families can do more to secure engagement, a number of which would require additional resources.

Budget volatility, increasing costs and the need for investment in order to address changing needs and vulnerabilities result in challenging discussions about funding for children's services across all local authorities, regardless of the delivery model. This can result in over-spends in demand led services being perceived as predominantly a service issue as opposed to one that is corporately owned. These risks can be greater where responsibility for delivery is commissioned through a Children's Trust arrangement or similar.

The latest Medium Term Financial Strategy, approved by the Council, includes provision in the reserves to address volatility in demand-led services. This is prudent and evidences forward-planning by the Council to manage pressures from changes in demand and is a positive indication of continued commitment to ensure resources are available to meet the needs of vulnerable citizens in Sandwell – children, families and adults.

Progress in relation to the financial settlement in place to the end of the contract and the use of external consultants [Newton Europe] to provide an independent view of placement costs and support future forecasting, alongside the more general points made above about more positive relationships between the Council and the Trust provide evidence of a shared approach to problem-solving in what are always difficult circumstances.

Moving forward, the contract between the Council and the Children's Trust provides a mechanism for the regular review of changes in demand and the associated impact on budgets. It will be important to exercise this mechanism appropriately and robustly in future years, in order to ensure that there is sufficient time to identify emerging pressures and take actions to address these, while simultaneously ensuring that services are provided as efficiently as possible.

The key here will be for the Children's Trust and the local authority to continue their open relationship and to address any budget challenges through shared solutions. There are examples of this approach being adopted in Sandwell, which is encouraging. Joint work, for example, is taking place to support increased local placement sufficiency through the potential development of children's home capacity and in developing local offers for foster carers.

In agreeing the contract sum, the Children's Trust also identified a number of savings opportunities. The Trust and the local authority have also agreed that Newton Europe undertake some further 'test and learn' activities in order to identify any opportunities to

deliver further savings in the commissioning of placements for children in particular. These are all positive evidence of a commitment to deliver good outcomes while achieving value for money.

Contractual arrangements

The current contract between the Council and the Children's Trust ends on 31st March 2028. The Council has indicated that it has no intention of bringing children's services back in-house, at least for the duration of the existing contract, subject to continued fiscal responsibility by the Children's Trust in operating the service. This brings welcome assurance and stability to the delivery of what are high-risk and complex services in the near term.

In general terms, it is not unreasonable for Councils to want to have full control of children's services, and in time this may well become the view in Sandwell. Bringing services back in house would, however, be a very complex task. It will be important that the decision about whether to not to renew the contract is based on a full and balanced risk assessment.

Risks associated with changing the delivery model include:

- The potential impact on staffing stability at all levels within the Children's Trust;
- Potential disruption to the current leadership team of the Trust, who have been instrumental in delivering the improvements to services and outcomes;
- The need to ensure that high risk services continue to operate smoothly throughout the period of transition;
- Ensuring sufficient capacity within the authority's corporate and support functions to enable continued smooth operation of complex functions;
- Ensuring availability of resources to cover the costs that are likely to be associated with the transition;
- Ensuring that the service as a whole can remain future-focused, continuing to deliver change including those arising from changes in the legislative and statutory guidance framework.

During any transition period, the change management process will be required to take place alongside the continued delivery of complex and high-risk services. Careful and transparent planning will be key in ensuring that, should it be decided not to extend the contract, that the transfer takes place with the least likely disruption.

An area requiring particular care will be to avoid or minimise any impact on staffing stability. This is an area where significant progress has been made over recent years; more staff at all levels are in permanent roles and vacancy and turnover rates have improved significantly. Periods of uncertainty about future directions of travel and/or disruption to leadership can easily result in instability in staffing. Instability in staffing makes delivery of consistently good outcomes for children much more difficult.

In considering its decision, the Council is likely to view the potential of having direct oversight and control of children's services as attractive. There may also be a view that delivering these services in-house will result in savings. It is the case that there are some additional costs associated with the Children's Trust model.

It is obviously important to factor in the potential costs of disruption when undertaking a financial assessment of the impact of changes such as these. Any savings derived from a reduction in duplication of some roles, for example, are easily dwarfed by very small increases in the number of children living in childrens' homes. Disruptions in service delivery or caused by increased instability in staffing can often result in less effective planning for children. This in turn can result in higher numbers in care and/or open to other parts of the service, resulting in increased overall cost.

Children's services are high risk and complex to deliver. While children's services are constantly changing and evolving, they need to operate within a stable and predictable framework if they are to operate safely and deliver consistently good outcomes.

Whatever the decision by the Council in relation to extending the contract, it is therefore essential that there is adequate notice of its intention to either extend the contract, or to seek to bring services back in-house. Realistically, in this context, a 12-month notice period is the minimum necessary to avoid unintended consequences.

Should the decision be to bring services back in house, this period is also likely to be the minimum necessary in order to provide sufficient time for the repatriation of complex systems and services, and to ensure that staff can be fully engaged in the process. An open and transparent approach between the authority and the trust will be essential in ensuring that services transfer as smoothly as possible.

Even where the decision is to continue with the Children's Trust arrangement, as the contract enters its' final year, staff, leaders and partners will experience increasing uncertainty about plans for the future in the absence of any clear statements about the continuation of the trust. It is primarily for this reason that the decision about the contract should be announced at least 12 months before the expiry date.

Council governance arrangements would require that any decision to extend or not to extend the contract would need to be made before the end of the current calendar year.

It is acknowledged that the Council has all-out local elections in May. While the current administration and senior officers within the authority have made clear statements about having no intention to change the model of service delivery at least for the remainder of the current contract, any new administration may hold a different view.

In the event that this is the case, it will be important that senior officers support the administration to adopt a balanced approach to decision-making, and the additional risks of seeking to change delivery arrangements too quickly.

Ongoing sustainability

There are a number of grounds for optimism about the likelihood of continued improvement in services and outcomes for children, young people and families in Sandwell.

Morale is good, with a highly committed and skilled workforce at all levels. Staffing within the trust has become much more stable over recent years. There are a number of factors behind this positive change, including:

- The Sandwell Deal, developed in partnership with and funded by the authority;
- Focus on cultural change, investment in learning and development for staff;
- Growing positive reputation of the Children's Trust, making it an attractive place to work;
- Investment in 'grow your own' approaches to recruiting, developing and retaining staff, particularly qualified social workers;
- Impact of regulations relating to locum staff.

Leaders know themselves well, are forward looking and remain ambitious in continuing to deliver improvements to services and outcomes. Strong partnership relations provide a firm basis for implementing the Families First reforms as an integral part of the programme of continuous improvement.

Certainty about the continuation of the current delivery model until at least the end of the current contract provides reassurance that there will be continuity in the short to medium term.

As noted above, while children's services are constantly developing and changing, they need to operate within a framework of certainty and predictability to do so safely and deliver good outcomes for children and young people. It is therefore essential that there is clarity about the delivery model beyond 2028 as soon as possible, and certainly at least by March 2027.

Concluding remarks

Prior to the formation of the Sandwell Children's Trust, there was a long history of children's services being described as inadequate by Ofsted since the safeguarding and looked after children inspection of January 2010.

The challenge of turning round services of the risk and complexity of children's services from a lengthy history of poor performance should not be underestimated. The Children's Trust, as the primary driver of improving services and outcomes for the vulnerable children and families in Sandwell, should be congratulated for the work involved in achieving the overall 'Good' result in the inspection in October 2025.

The Council has also been through a significant improvement journey. Difficulties within the Council resulted in Commissioners being appointed in 2022. This intervention ended

exactly two years' later in recognition of the progress led by the current political leadership and the Chief Executive.

Children's services rarely fail on their own; inadequate services are often operating in a context where corporate leadership is weak. The transformation within the Council is also therefore an important factor in securing continued sustainability of good outcomes by the Children's Trust and children's services more generally.

Similarly, where children's services are found to be inadequate, there are also usually failings in the broader partnership of services that support children and their families. This is why it is so positive to see the transformation in relationships and achievements by the partnership more generally, through the shared practice model and now, as the trust and partners move towards delivery of the Families First programme across Sandwell.

In overall terms, the conditions for continued improvement of services and outcomes for vulnerable children in Sandwell are clearly in place.

Taking all of the above into consideration, I believe the conditions are appropriate to step down the Department for Education's intervention in Sandwell's children's services.



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