

# Strengthening Family Resilience

**Looked After Children  
Strategy  
2016-2019**

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## Foreword

This strategy outlines our aims to prevent family breakdown but where this happens, we want to be able to support children and young people who are in our care. Our aim will always be to get a permanency for the child either by planned return home or a long-term alternative home.

We want the same outcomes for the children and young people we look after as any parent should want for their child.

We want to make sure all children and young people who are looked after get the best possible care and support. We will work in partnership with children and young people, their parents and families and partner agencies.

Our pledge to children and young people in our care sets out what we will do to make sure they enjoy their childhood, have help to do their best and make a success of their lives.

The Sandwell pledge is based on what children and young people have told us what is most important to them, which has produced the following commitments from us:

- We will provide you with information about being in care
- When you live in care we will keep you safe from harm
- We will support you in education
- We will support you in your health
- We will get you ready for being an adult
- We will ensure you have your voice heard
- We will ensure you have a social worker and an independent reviewing officer
- Whilst in care we will ensure you have a plan in place
- We will keep you in contact with family where possible
- We will give you the opportunities to get involved

We will work hard to develop partnership working, so that children and young people are supported. The Corporate Parenting Board, alongside the Looked After Young People's Board and Care Leavers' Forum will work to ensure this strategy is delivered.



Councillor Hackett  
Cabinet Member for Children Services

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## Background and purpose of the Placements Strategy for Looked After Children

This strategy sets out how we will help families to build their resilience so that more children are able to stay safely at home. We want to support families, where possible, to stay together in the interests of children and young people. The strategy has a clear focus on further reducing the number of children becoming looked after in Sandwell over the next three years; on minimising safely the time children spend in care and therefore reducing the expenditure on care arrangements for children and young people.

Vulnerable children will still need to be accommodated in order to ensure their safety and wellbeing. There are no proposals to change the thresholds for children being accommodated and decisions will always put the interests of the child first. The strategy is written in this context and focuses on how children's and families' needs can be met in different ways for example, earlier intervention.

The strategy acknowledges that decreasing funding means we must reduce both numbers of children in care and the expenditure on the support we provide. This will require new thinking, different approaches and a dedicated focus from services across the Metropolitan Borough and its partners.

The strategy is part of the long term strategic business planning work being undertaken across all areas of the Metropolitan Borough to ensure our services and finances are sustainable.

The overarching vision for services in 2016 is that "Our vision is for Sandwell's children and young people to have the best start in life and for them to be nurtured and supported by those who care for them so that they will develop into healthy, socially responsible and achieving adults who will, in turn, show the same level of care when raising their own families".

For children at risk of harm, achieving this vision means working to help families address their problems and to find alternatives to care wherever possible. The network of support for children and families will include schools, emergency services, health partners, community groups and families working together to make plans that keep children safe and independent.

We are embedding a number of guiding principles that will underpin all that we do:

<b>Principle 1:</b>	The voice of the child is of paramount importance and must be visible and listened to through the child centred practice.
<b>Principle 2:</b>	Our Services will reflect and respond to the diverse needs of our communities.
<b>Principle 3:</b>	The quality of our delivery is central to our success and improved outcomes for children.
<b>Principle 4:</b>	We will take a whole family approach to our work and engage with those who will help us to meet their needs by offering early help rather than waiting until problems escalate.
<b>Principle 5:</b>	We will communicate effectively and meaningfully with our families, our staff and partner agencies.

This Strategy sets out in detail how we will support families to stay together in the interests of children through adopting a "whole system" approach and how we will provide cost effective care when children cannot live safely with their families.

## Children in care 2015-2018

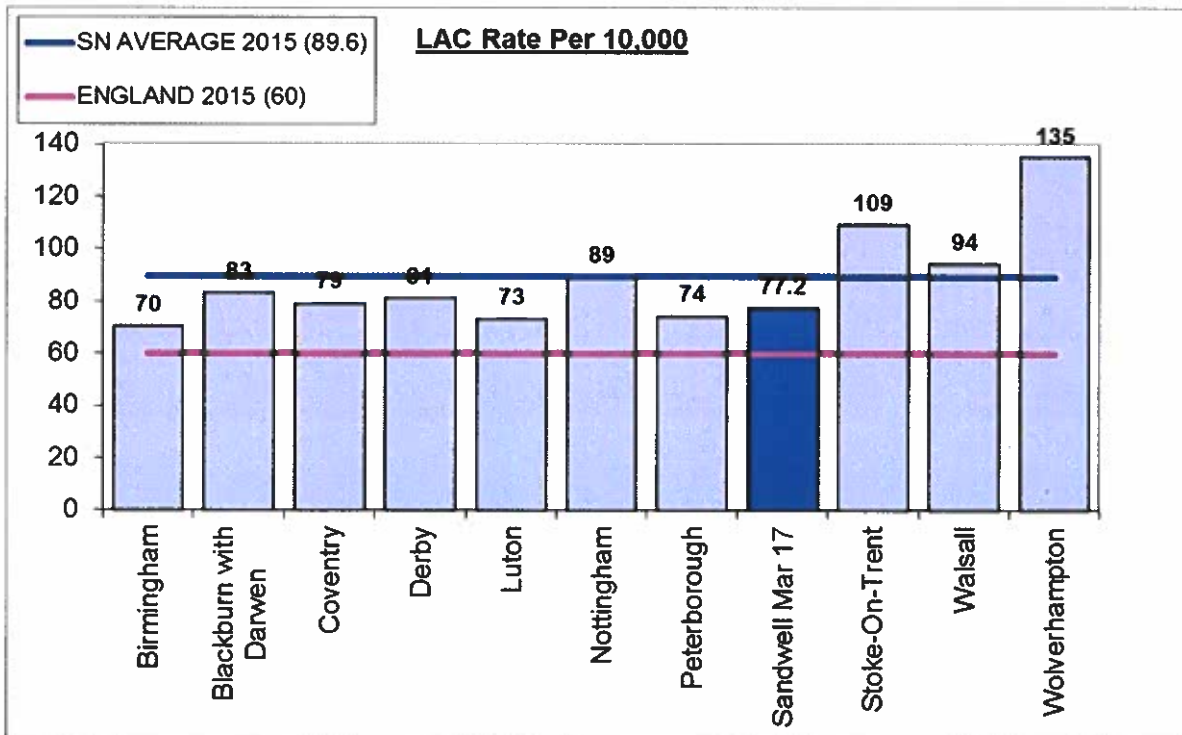
The starting point is the upward trend which has seen the number of children in care increasing since the end of 2015 and spend on care arrangements rising alongside. This is shown below.

Figure 1: the total number of children in care 2015-2017



The ambition of the Strategy is to ensure that the rate of children per 10,000 reflects the true nature of the needs required in this local authority. We will therefore expect the per 10,000 rate to be closely aligned to our statistical neighbor rate.

Figure 2



The reasons why children become looked after and why numbers are increasing have been considered. Analysis of the risk factors in the cases of children becoming looked after shows the most prevalent issues are:

- Mental Health Needs amongst parents/carers
- Neglect
- Domestic Abuse in household
- Emotional Abuse
- Drug Misuse by Parents
- Alcohol Misuse by Parents
- Homeless 16+ young people

In particular, the combination of substance misuse, mental health concerns and domestic violence are recognised as the key issues for focus in work across the safeguarding system to ensure children do not become looked after and remain in their families. These are by far the most common factors contributing to the abuse and neglect of children and amongst the most difficult to resolve. If not tackled successfully, children in families where there is substance misuse, mental health concerns and/or domestic violence will be at a greater risk of becoming looked after.

As well as reducing numbers, the Strategy sets an expectation that the cost of the care provided for looked after children decreases over time. This will be achieved by changing the mix of placements we make, exploring new models and continuing to drive lower costs through effective commissioning and contracting practice. Sandwell has previously had a higher number of out of Borough and external placements compared to other authorities as a result of a higher proportionate usage of residential and independent fostering care. The actions in this strategy will move us to a position in line with or below the average for local authorities with more in-house provision.

Recent trends in the numbers of children coming into care in Sandwell have meant that the service is more reliant in placing children and young people in foster placement provided by the independent sector. In order to control expenditure, the service will therefore have to recruit more in-house foster carers as set out in our Placement Strategy.

In order to achieve this, we will need to continue to support and develop a workforce that is able to manage risk confidently, broker solutions within families and the wider community; strengthen bonds with schools to ensure we are working together to identify issues and risk at the earliest opportunity and promote resilience and creativity to deliver flexible solutions and alternatives to children becoming looked after.

The table and charts below show how the LAC budget is being modelled for the duration of the business plan (2015-21) based on the delivery of this strategy. This represents an extremely ambitious plan for services and partners in Sandwell. The rest of the Strategy sets out in more detail the work streams and proposals being taken forward to deliver it.

By 2019 there will be less reliance on external and out of borough placements including residential. In-house fostering placements will account for 57% of placements (currently 45%) and independent fostering will reduce from 31% to 18%.

## Reducing the risk and building resilience

We want children to live with their families within strong and inclusive networks of support. We will support children and their families who need our help with a Think Family approach.

By 2019, all our work will start from an understanding of a child and family's needs and the support available from their friends, family and community. This builds on current work. We will coordinate support when not available from families and the wider community, to improve outcomes and to reduce cost whilst keeping children safe.

We will do all we can to prevent people needing our services. We will build strength and capacity within people's relationships and the networks available to them so that they can meet their own needs and therefore are better able to look after their children. We will proactively identify those who need specific additional support to address problems to reduce their impact and/or to prevent them from getting worse. Where people do need our services, we will identify what we might need to do, or commission earlier to reduce longer term, high cost intervention that could otherwise be needed over the course of a life time.

We will ensure that we reduce the number of children requiring statutory child protection services by providing early intervention targeted support. Where intervention is necessary we will work closely with the family, their family group and community to support them to make changes to their lives and improve the outcomes for their children.

Where this is not possible and children need to come in to our care we will ensure that the placement available meets the specific needs of each child focusing on family settings and maintaining their education placement to ensure stability in a time of change. We will also make our budget available more flexibly to resource different care plans, not only providing traditional placements.



## Our Vision

“Our vision is for Sandwell’s children and young people to have the best start in life and for them to be nurtured and supported by those who care for them so that they will develop into healthy, socially responsible and achieving adults who will, in turn, show the same level of care when raising their own families”

Our support builds on the strengths of families and clearly addresses the risks to children so that plans succeed and children do not need to come into care.

Where children and young people do come into care they have good educational and care placements primarily in a family setting and that their care pathway ensures that they are looked after for the shortest period of time.

## Strategic objectives

This Strategy covers seven key outcomes, these are:

1. Support families to stay together
2. Manage risk confidently and support families at the edge of care
3. Provide and commission a flexible and affordable range of high quality placements
4. Secure timely permanence for children and young people
5. Help children and young people to thrive and achieve
6. Enable children and young people to participate fully in decision making and service design
7. Support Care Leavers

### *Strategic objective 1: Support families to stay together*

We know that children's needs are best served in a family. Very occasionally it is not possible for this to be within their own family. Helping families stay together and able to look after their children must therefore be a key focus for us and it begins with early identification of need and effective early intervention. Preventative and early support services can reduce the number of children and young people reaching the need for statutory and specialist services and the threshold for care and needing to become looked after.

Children's needs are best served in their own families, if this can be safely supported. Helping families stay together is therefore a key focus for all of Children's Services and begins with early intervention.

Preventative and Early Help services can reduce the number of children and young people reaching the threshold for care proceedings and needing to become looked after.

Early Help services will focus on timely and proportionate interventions to prevent breakdown in families, delivering rapid support to rehabilitation plans to enable children to return home quickly when they do become looked after.

We will:

- Promote the use of Early Help services with partner agencies.
- Ensure that the application of thresholds is robustly applied.
- Engage children and young people at risk of disaffection from school.
- Share information and work together as a team around the child and family.
- Develop robust support package to enable those Looked After Children who can return home to do so in a timely way.

## *Strategic Objective 2: Manage risk confidently and support families at the edge of care*

For children at the edge of care, i.e. child where there is a high at risk of being looked after, we need to have services which can act quickly and decisively in response to family crises and to prevent children coming into the care system.

This means being able to manage risk confidently, offering effective support and interventions and identifying alternatives to care wherever they exist.

We need to ensure our services meet the needs of families and children who are at risk of coming into care to enable us to reduce the LAC population in the coming years. We are developing new services and investing in existing services such as 'Alternatives to Care' to meet the needs of these families to ensure a balanced approach is taken to risk whilst giving families the opportunity to develop their strengths within a supported framework.

### **We will:**

- Use focused interventions, such as Multi Systemic Therapy and the Family Solutions Team, to support families at the edge of care.
- Embed a community model which uses volunteers to support struggling families.
- Maximise the use of family group conferencing to prevent children becoming looked after.
- Promote the use of Special Guardianship and Kinship care to enable children and young people to remain in the community.
- Apply the Signs of Safety model throughout Children's Services.

## *Strategic Objective 3: Provide and commission a flexible and affordable range of high quality placements*

For children and young people in care we need to make sure we have a sufficient and diverse range of placements, available locally, which promote positive experiences for all children in care, whatever their needs. We will explore new and creative solutions, especially for children and young people where the traditional options of fostering or residential care will not lead to good outcomes.

### **We will:**

- Reduce our dependence on Independent Fostering Agencies.
- Continue to increase the number and capacity of in-house fostering and adopting families that is ethnically diverse and relevant to Sandwell's needs.
- Recruit and train foster carers who specialise in teenage children with behavioural problems, disabilities and provide appropriate training and support.
- Make residential placements for fewer children and make them closer to home – aiming to place, wherever possible and appropriate, LAC within a 20-mile radius of Sandwell if not placed in the borough.
- Jointly commission accommodation for children between the ages of 16 and 21 that provides a pathway between care and independence.
- Improve collaboration between Single Placements team and the fostering service, ensuring all placements are the most appropriate for children and young people and represent value for money.

- Promote the use of SGOs to secure permanency.
- Only use secure welfare as a last resort.

#### *Strategic Objective 4: Secure timely permanence for children and young people*

These placements and support arrangements will include an appropriate education setting which ensures that becoming Looked After does not lead to a break in their learning. This may mean maintaining the child's current school placement even if that requires travel. We need to recognise the relationship between placements and school for children in care where a breakdown of a school/education provision is often a trigger for the breakdown of their placement. Similarly, problems at home often manifest themselves at school through behaviours.

#### **We will:**

- Reduce the delay that children experience in achieving permanence.
- Work to ensure the Adoption and Fostering Panel timescale dovetails with court timetables.
- Monitor and continue joint training for social workers and both panels to continue the improvement in report, assessments and presentations to the panel.
- Where an adoption order is not possible or in the child or young person's interest, to promote the appropriate use of Special Guardianship Orders or Residence Orders as an alternative to long term fostering.

## *Strategic Objective 5: Help children and young people to thrive and achieve*

For children and young people in care, having a clear plan is essential. A good plan ensures that children come into and exit care at the right times and that throughout they have the security and confidence of knowing what the future holds. We need to ensure that children do not 'drift' through care, but have clearly-planned journeys which allow them to be reunited with family and friends where possible, have stable placements with alternative carers and exit the care system positively at whatever age this happens.

### **We will:**

- Narrow the education and employment gap between care leavers and their peers.
- Keep children and young people in school, college or university and promote consistent attendance.
- Improve health outcomes looked after children and young people.
- Promote attachment, resilience and self-esteem for looked after children by promoting access to services linked to health outcomes.

## *Strategic Objective 6: Enable children and young people to participate fully in decision-making and service design*

The child's voice is at the heart of what we do.

We are committed to listening and taking account of the views of all Sandwell's Looked After Children we work with to make sure that their views influence how services are planned. Children have the right to participate in decisions made about them. Looked After Children should have the opportunity to make their views known at every stage and to ensure that those views influence both their individual plans, and also the shape and design of current and future services.

Sandwell's Looked After Children, young people and care leavers are currently encouraged to get involved and share their views and experiences in a number of ways.

The Looked After Young People's Board and Care Leavers' Forum directly supports the Corporate Parenting Board to measure and monitor the effectiveness and quality of corporate parenting to children and young people; according to the views and experiences of the children who are in care. The board is fully committed to listening to the voice of service users and the active involvement of children and young people within the decision-making processes.

The Sandwell Pledge sets out our commitment to children and young people to be more involved in decisions and for their views to be listened to. The LAYP Board will use the Pledge to gauge the Council's performance.

**We will:**

- Ensure that every young person has an opportunity to sit on or have their views represented at the LAYP Board.
- Ensure that there are a broad range of appropriate mechanisms in place to capture views of children and families and put the child's voice at the heart of our service.
- Ensure that every child and young person is fully involved in their life planning.
- Ensure that all Looked After Children and young people contribute to the LAC service as a whole.
- Continue to offer all children and young people access to independent advocacy services.

### *Strategic Objective 7: Support care leavers*

An essential part of our role as a good corporate parent is to prepare our children and young people for their independent adult lives. We need to ensure they are prepared with the necessary life skills and confidence to continue to thrive when they leave care. Sandwell is signed up to the national care leavers' charter and this is contained within appendix 2.

**We will**

- Improve collaboration with Adult Services in planning the placements and transitions for looked after young people with disabilities age 17 plus.
- Seek to ensure the provision of a flexible range of different types of accommodation which support different levels of independence and transitions to adulthood.
- Encourage young people to stay in existing placements through Staying Put.
- Continue to provide apprenticeships in the Council to all care leavers.
- Endeavour to engage with those care leavers who are reluctant to use our services.
- Improve collaboration with mental health services to improve outcomes for care leavers.
- Continue to ensure that all care leavers have a consistent personal advisor.

## Sufficiency statement

The Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy describes the placements we want to provide and commission for our Looked After Children and focuses on how we will develop our current arrangements to improve the lives of the children in our care. Its scope is not restricted to just making good quality placements, the intention is to bring together the range of activity across Children's Services at all stages of the care journey, including a clear focus on supporting families to stay together, wherever it is safe to do so, and minimising the need for children to become looked after.

The statement provides further detail regarding the Looked After Child population, the views of children and information regarding current placement provision and mix. The statement is updated annually and is available to the public via the council's website.

## Ensuring the strategy is implemented

The Corporate Parenting Board will have oversight and responsibility for ensuring that the LAC Strategy is embedded within the service and that the seven strategic outcomes are achieved. There is reference to the outcomes within the Sandwell Council Business Plan 2017/18–2019/20 Children's Services.

**PLEDGE 1**  
We will provide you with information about being in care  
We will give you a booklet called Show Me That I Matter when you come into our care, which gives you information that you need to know about being in care. It will give you important phone numbers of people you may need to contact.

**PLEDGE 2**  
When you live in care we will keep you safe from harm  
We will make sure you have a caring place to live and we will make sure you feel happy, safe and settled and receive the right information about where you live.

**PLEDGE 3**  
WE WILL SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR EDUCATION  
We will do everything we can to enable you to do well at school as you possibly can. Your education and individual learning is important to us. We will encourage and guide you to reach your full potential and achieve your goals and aspirations and celebrate your achievements with you.

**PLEDGE 4**  
WE WILL SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR HEALTH  
We will support you in all your health needs including physical, emotional and mental health. We will ensure you are able to participate in decisions about your health and have access to the health history that we hold for you.

**PLEDGE 5**  
We will get you ready for being an adult  
We will make sure you are aware of the Care Leaver Charter which outlines support offered to Sandwell Care Leavers. We will involve you in making decisions about getting ready to leave care and moving into adulthood and becoming independent.

**PLEDGE 6**  
WE WILL ENSURE YOU HAVE YOUR VOICE HEARD  
We will listen to you and take your wishes and feelings into account in all of our work we do with you. We will make sure you have the right support at the right time from the right person. If you need to talk to some one independent, we will make an advocate available to you. You can also raise your views and report a problem around the pledge on the Mind of My Own (MOMO) app for children and young people.  
Log onto [www.mindofmyown.org.uk](http://www.mindofmyown.org.uk)

**PLEDGE 7**  
WE WILL ENSURE YOU HAVE A SOCIAL WORKER AND AN INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER  
We will make sure that the social worker and independent reviewing officer working with you listen to you, be supportive and honest. They will work on your behalf and make sure you have access to all your rights and entitlements. They will ensure that you know how to contact them, to speak to them.

**PLEDGE 8**  
Whilst in care we will ensure you have a plan in place  
We will make sure you understand your own life story, the decisions that have been made and the plans that are in place for you. Where possible, we will involve you in the decision making.

**PLEDGE 9**  
WE WILL KEEP YOU IN CONTACT WITH FAMILY WHERE POSSIBLE  
We will help you stay in touch with people who are important to you. We will find an appropriate place for your contact. If contact can't happen we will be upfront with you and explain the reasons why.

**PLEDGE 10**  
We will give you the opportunities to get involved  
You can get involved with the Looked after Young People's Board (LAYPB) which is made up of children and young people like you. You get a chance to tell us what you think about services and how they could be improved and organised.

**SANDWELL'S PLEDGE TO YOU**  
The promises by Sandwell Council to all children in care

**Sandwell**  
Metropolitan Borough Council

For further information about the pledge please contact The Participation Team on 0121 569 5922 or email [laypb\\_board@sandwell.gov.uk](mailto:laypb_board@sandwell.gov.uk)





Department  
for Education

## Care leavers' charter

A Charter is a set of principles and promises. This Charter sets out promises care leavers want the central and local government to make. Promises and principles help in decision making and do not replace laws; they give guidance to show how laws are designed to be interpreted.

The key principles in this Charter will remain constant through any changes in Legislation, Regulation and Guidance. Care leavers urge local authorities to use these principles when they make decisions about young people’s lives. The Charter for Care Leavers is designed to raise expectation, aspiration and understanding of what care leavers need and what the government and local authorities should do to be good Corporate Parents.

**We Promise:**

**To respect and honour your identity**

- **We will support you to discover and to be who you are and honour your unique identity. We will help you develop your own personal beliefs and values and accept your culture and heritage. We will celebrate your identity as an individual, as a member of identity groups and as a valued member of your community. We will value and support important relationships, and help you manage changing relationships or come to terms with loss, trauma or other significant life events. We will support you to express your identity positively to others.**

**To believe in you**

- **We will value your strengths, gifts and talents and encourage your aspirations. We will hold a belief in your potential and a vision for your future even if you have lost sight of these yourself. We will help you push aside limiting barriers and encourage and support you to pursue your goals in whatever ways we can. We will believe in you, celebrate you and affirm you.**

**To listen to you**

- **We will take time to listen to you, respect, and strive to understand your point of view. We will place your needs, thoughts and feelings at the heart of all decisions about you, negotiate with you, and show how we have taken these into account. If we don’t agree with you we will fully explain why. We will provide easy access to complaint and appeals processes and promote and encourage access to independent advocacy whenever you need it.**



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