



OFSTED REGULATION 35 REPORT
SANDWELL CHILDRENS TRUST FOSTERING
URN NUMBER: 1267324

1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025

Sean Segal
Registered Manager

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Responsible Individual



fostersandwell.co.uk

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Name of Fostering Service: Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering

Period Covered: 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

Sean Segal
Registered Manager
30 May 2025

Introduction

The Regulation 35 report, as outlined in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations (2011), is a statutory requirement designed to ensure that fostering services are operating effectively, safely, and in the best interests of children in care. Its primary purpose is to provide the registered provider with a comprehensive review of the service's quality of care, compliance with legal obligations, and effectiveness in promoting positive outcomes for children and young people. This report draws together findings from monitoring activities, feedback from foster carers, children, and professionals, and performance data, enabling leaders to identify strengths, address areas for improvement, and plan strategically for service development. Ultimately, the Reg 35 report is a key tool in maintaining transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement within fostering provision.

Statutory Context

Regulation 35 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations (2011) places a duty on the registered provider to monitor the fostering service and prepare a written report on its conduct and management at least once every 12 months. This requirement forms part of the wider legislative framework governing fostering services, ensuring that providers have robust systems for oversight, quality assurance, and accountability.

The contents of the Regulation 35 report must reflect the principles set out in statutory guidance and should demonstrate how the service is meeting the requirements of the Children Act (1989), the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations (2010), and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services.

Ofsted inspectors use the Reg 35 report as a key source of evidence during inspections. It enables them to assess how effectively the provider evaluates its own performance; addresses identified shortfalls and maintains a culture of continuous improvement. By linking self-assessment directly to regulatory standards and inspection outcomes, the Reg 35 report ensures that fostering services remain focused on safeguarding, promoting welfare, and achieving positive, lasting outcomes for children in care.

Local and National Context of Fostering Provision in Sandwell

At the national level, fostering services in England face sustained pressure from rising demand and limited supply. The number of children in foster care has grown significantly in recent years while growth in fostering households and carers has been comparatively modest. This mismatch contributes to greater reliance on independent fostering agencies (IFAs), higher placement costs, and in some cases, children being placed further from their birth communities. Recruitment and retention of foster carers remains a national priority, with the Department for Education (DfE) introducing new campaigns and funding initiatives to encourage more households to foster.

Locally in Sandwell, these national challenges are mirrored and, in some areas, amplified. This deficit in available foster carers and fostering placement capacity locally not only limits placement stability but also increases dependency on external provision. Furthermore, more than 90% of Sandwell's children in residential care are placed outside the borough, driving significant financial pressures and potentially impacting children's ability to maintain local networks and continuity in education and support services.

To address this widening crisis, the DfE has initiated a pilot program that brings together clusters of local authorities to create regional fostering recruitment and retention "hubs." These hubs aim to streamline and strengthen the process of both bringing in and keeping foster carers across England. The expectation is that centralising recruitment through regional hubs helps reduce duplicated effort, speeds up response times, and enhances the consistency of the applicant experience. Sandwell's Fostering Service has formed part of the Black Country Hub pilot, with collaboration to drive this forward from Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Dudley and Walsall's Fostering Services. The outcome of the joint bid to the DfE to deliver this pilot is expected in late summer of 2025.

Current judgement

Date of Last Ofsted Inspection: 14th - 18th October 2024

Overall Judgement: Good

Statutory Requirements for Improvements:

Sandwell Children's Trust following have acted on the statutory recommendations and the recommendations to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

| Requirements | Due Date | Progress |
|---|---------------|--|
| <p>The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, andthe need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill.(Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b)) | 31 March 2025 | Sean Segal has been in post since 7 th November and was Ofsted registered on 12 th February 2025. The Senior Leadership have acknowledged the need to recruit the right person with skills, experience and wisdom to lead the fostering service to outstanding and provide the consistency to both the foster carers and children. The Trust have successfully appointed an experienced Registered Manager who has held several RM positions in both IFA and Trust establishments. |

| | | |
|---|---------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In particular, the registered person must take all necessary steps to ensure that there is a consistent and stable manager in post and that they are registered with Ofsted. | | |
| <p>The registered person must maintain a system for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. • The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). • (Regulation 35 (1)(b) (3)) | 30 April | Completed – refer to Consultation section of this report. |
| <p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable them to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (1) (3))</p> <p>In particular, this relates to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • operating an out of hours service that meets the needs of the foster carers; • ensuring children receive their passports in a timely manner; • ensuring access to financial allowances for children and foster carers are transparent and equitable; | 30 March 2025 | <p>Training, Matching, and Out-of-Hours Support</p> <p>All foster carers receive a comprehensive training and development package. This includes both mandatory courses and specialist training designed to support their professional growth and improve outcomes for the children we care for.</p> <p>We have worked collaboratively with colleagues in the Emergency Duty Service (EDS) to enhance their understanding of foster care notifications.</p> <p>A dedicated Foster Care EDS group inbox has been established to ensure that any incidents or concerns are promptly shared with the fostering team. While this new process is still in its initial stages, it is already proving effective in improving the responsiveness to foster carers and children.</p> <p>All children are matched with foster carers using our matching tool, ensuring that carers receive all relevant information, including delegated authority and care plans. Matches are coordinated during</p> |

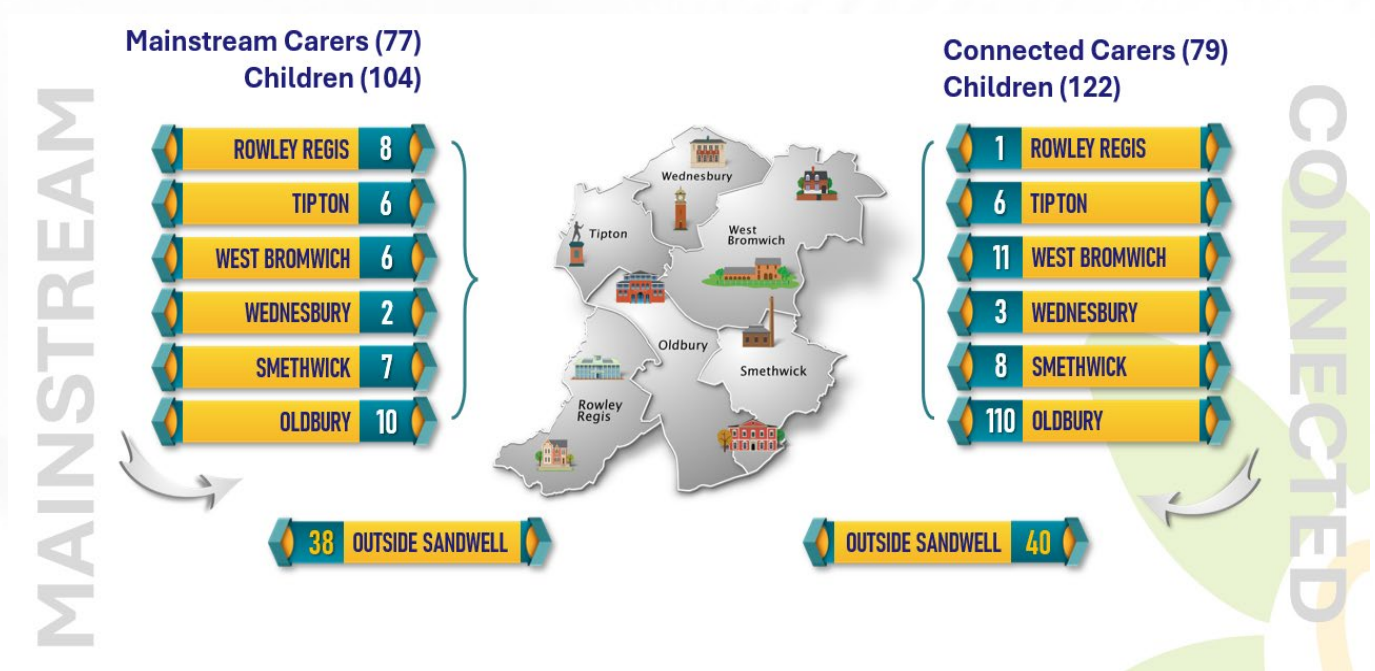
| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring that any recommendations made through the use of monitoring tools are addressed in a timely manner. | | <p>daytime hours and approved by the Fostering Team Manager. A Supervising Social Worker is responsible for identifying and exploring the suitability of each match.</p> <p>To further strengthen EDS support, the fostering service have worked with EDS and shared a one-minute guide to fostering notifications which has also been shared with foster carers, so that they are aware of how we have supported EDS in understanding their roles and responsibilities.</p> |
|--|--|--|

An additional Ofsted recommendation was that the registered person should ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' page 29, paragraph 13.8).

The reviewing process has undergone revisions since the last Ofsted inspection. The FIRO will now review all annual reviews where no changes to the carers' terms of approval are required. The reviews are now sent through to the Fostering Registered Manager to act as Decision maker for these reviews. When changes are necessary, the Panel continues to consider Mainstream and Connected Person(s) assessments, foster carer first and third annual reviews, reviews with recommended changes in terms of approval, reviews following allegations or concerns regarding standards of care, resignations, terminations, and Regulation 25 matters. As part of the FIRO annual review process, an internal quality assurance document is now completed to ensure oversight of the quality of the reports, the triangulation of the evidence submitted to support the recommendation for continued approval being made and to support the wider learning and development across the Fostering Service in respect of any key themes emerging.

Carer demographics

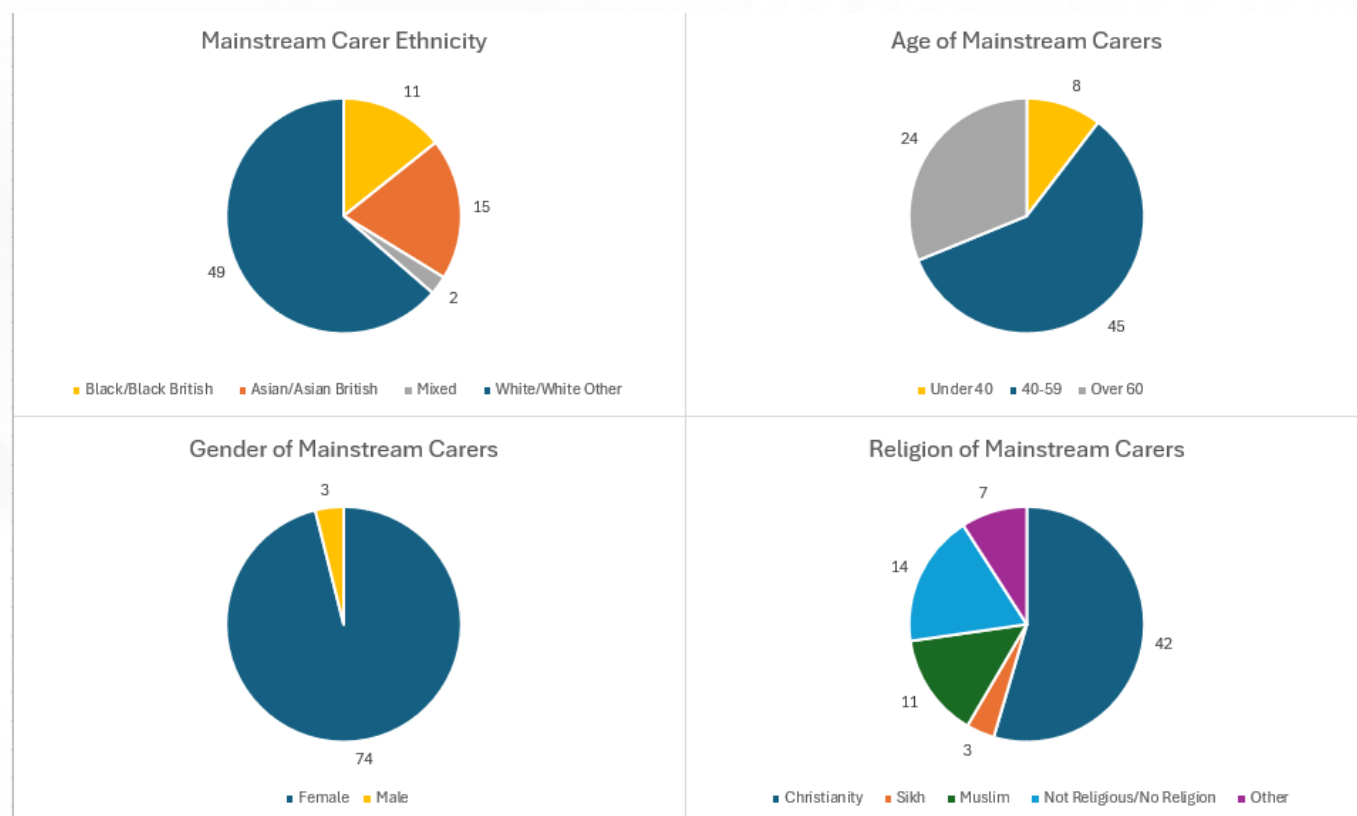
Number of Mainstream & Connected Carers in Sandwell (Main Carer)



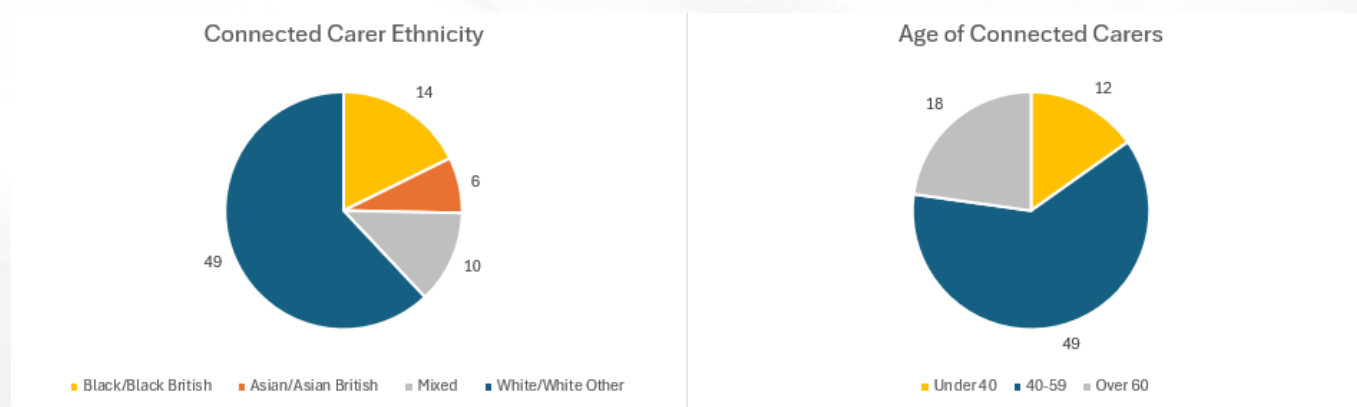
As of 31 March 2025, Sandwell Children Trust Fostering have 156 Foster Carers (main carers) and 251 (main and linked carers). Our 156 foster carers (main carers) are made up of 77 Mainstream and 79 Connected. Sandwell have almost an equal number of carers living inside and outside of Sandwell (50.64% inside). Similar distribution for connected foster cares applies with 39 connected carers living inside Sandwell and 40 living outside.

Based on the household addresses of carers who reside in Sandwell, the largest numbers of mainstream carers reside in Oldbury (25.64%) followed by Rowley Regis (20.51%), Smethwick (17.94%), Tipton and West Bromwich (15.38%) and Wednesbury (5.12%). The largest numbers of Connected Carers live in West Bromwich is 28.2% followed by Oldbury 25.64%, Smethwick (20.51%), Tipton (15.38%), Wednesbury (7.69%) and Rowley Regis (2.56%)

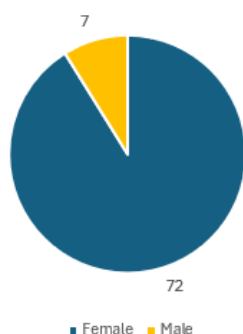
Sandwell Carer Demographics (Mainstream)



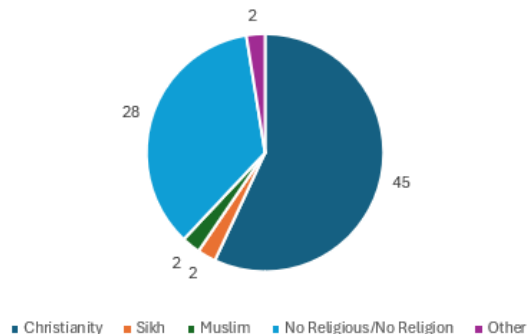
Sandwell Carer Demographics (Connected Carers)



Gender of Connected Carers



Religion of Connected Carers



- Most carers in Sandwell are from a White background (63.67% Mainstream Carers, 62% Connected Carers). Across the combined cohort of our foster carers, White British carers make up the largest proportion at 59.43% (104 carers). The next largest groups are Caribbean – 12% (21 carers), Pakistani or British Pakistani – 6.29% (11 carers), Indian or British Indian – 5.14% (9 carers), White and Black Caribbean – 4% (7 carers). Any other ethnic group – 4% (7 carers) which include any other mixed background – 1.14% (2 carers), Black British – 0.57% (1 carer) with White Polish, and African are a very small percentage (less than 2%).
- The largest number of carers in Sandwell are aged 40-60 (58.4% Mainstream Carers, 62% Connected Carers).
- The highest number of primary carers are Female, 96% of Mainstream Carers and 91% of Connected Carers.
- Most carers are from Christian background; 54.54% of mainstream and 56.96% of Connected Carers.
- Within the reporting period two of our 126 internally placed children were placed with carers of the same Ethnicity (Culturally matched in house foster carers)

The tables below present data on the 251 approved foster carers (both main and linked) as of 31 March 2025, detailing their protected and personal characteristics, including ethnicity, religious affiliation, sex, marital or civil partnership status, and disability.

Disability

| Ref | Disability | Number of Carers |
|-----|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| G1 | Disabled under the Equality act | 4 |
| G2 | Not disabled under the Equality Act | 247 |
| G3 | Refused / preferred not to say | 0 |
| G4 | Unknown / Not collected | 0 |

Ethnicity

| Ref | Ethnicity | Number of Carers |
|-----|--|------------------|
| H1 | Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi | 1 |
| H2 | Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Chinese | 1 |
| H3 | Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Indian | 11 |
| H4 | Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Pakistani | 17 |
| H5 | Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Other Asian | 2 |
| H6 | Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: African | 1 |
| H7 | Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: Caribbean | 31 |
| H8 | Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: Other Black | 4 |
| H9 | Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian | 1 |
| H10 | Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: White and Black African | 0 |
| H11 | Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean | 8 |
| H12 | Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: Other mixed or multiple ethnic groups | 3 |
| H13 | White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British | 163 |
| H14 | White: Irish | 0 |
| H15 | White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 0 |
| H16 | White: Roma | 0 |
| H17 | White: Other White | 6 |
| H18 | Other Ethnic Group: Arab | 0 |
| H19 | Other Ethnic Group: Any other ethnic group | 2 |
| H20 | Refused / preferred not to say | 0 |
| H21 | Unknown / Not collected | 0 |

Marital and Civil Partnership

| Ref | Marital and Civil Partnership Status | Number of Carers |
|-----|---|------------------|
| J1 | Never married and never registered a civil partnership | 101 |
| J2 | Married or in a civil partnership | 150 |
| J3 | Separated but still legally married or still legally in a civil partnership | 0 |
| J4 | Divorced or civil partnership dissolved | 0 |
| J5 | Widowed or surviving civil partnership partner | 0 |

Religious affiliation

| Ref | Affiliation | Number of Carers |
|-----|--------------------------------|------------------|
| K1 | No religion | 30 |
| K2 | Christian | 102 |
| K3 | Buddhist | 0 |
| K4 | Hindu | 2 |
| K5 | Jewish | 0 |
| K6 | Muslim | 17 |
| K7 | Sikh | 6 |
| K8 | Other religion | 8 |
| K9 | Refused / preferred not to say | 0 |
| K10 | Unknown / Not collected | 86 |

Sex

| Ref | Sex | Number of Carers |
|-----|--------|------------------|
| L1 | Male | 96 |
| L2 | Female | 155 |

Comparison to Local and National context

UTILISATION - MAINSTREAM

| | Sandwell | | | Statutory Averages | | |
|----------------------------------|----------|------|------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | | | Neighbour | West Midlands | Black Country |
| Number of: | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2024 | 2024 | 2024 |
| Approved foster places | 175 | 145 | 128 | 297 | 285 | 193 |
| Filled places | 135 | 120 | 104 | 201 | 187 | 135 |
| Vacant places | 5 | 10 | 3 | 47 | 52 | 70 |
| Places not available | 45 | 10 | 16 | 40 | 40 | 37 |
| Places used for short break care | 0 | 5 | 5 | 10 | 6 | 2 |

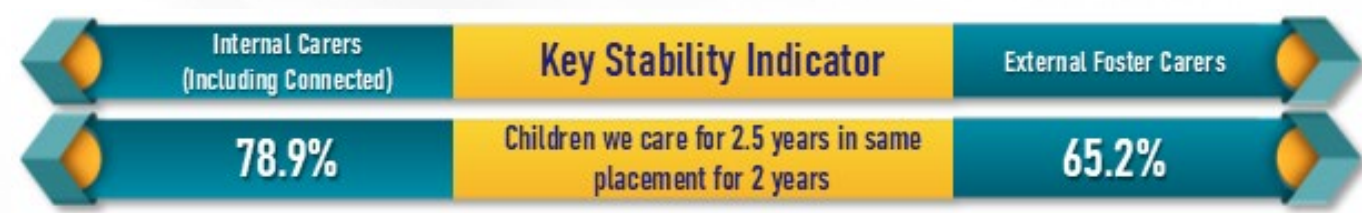
DE-REGISTRATIONS - MAINSTREAM

| | Sandwell | | | Statutory Averages | | |
|------------------|----------|------|------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | | | Neighbour | West Midlands | Black Country |
| Number of: | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2024 | 2024 | 2024 |
| De-registrations | 9 | 19 | 22 | 18 | 18 | 12 |

APPROVALS - MAINSTREAM

| | Sandwell | | | Statutory Averages | | |
|------------|----------|------|------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | | | Neighbour | West Midlands | Black Country |
| Number of: | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2024 | 2024 | 2024 |
| Approvals | 8 | 5 | 14 | 12 | 13 | 15 |

Key Performance Indicators



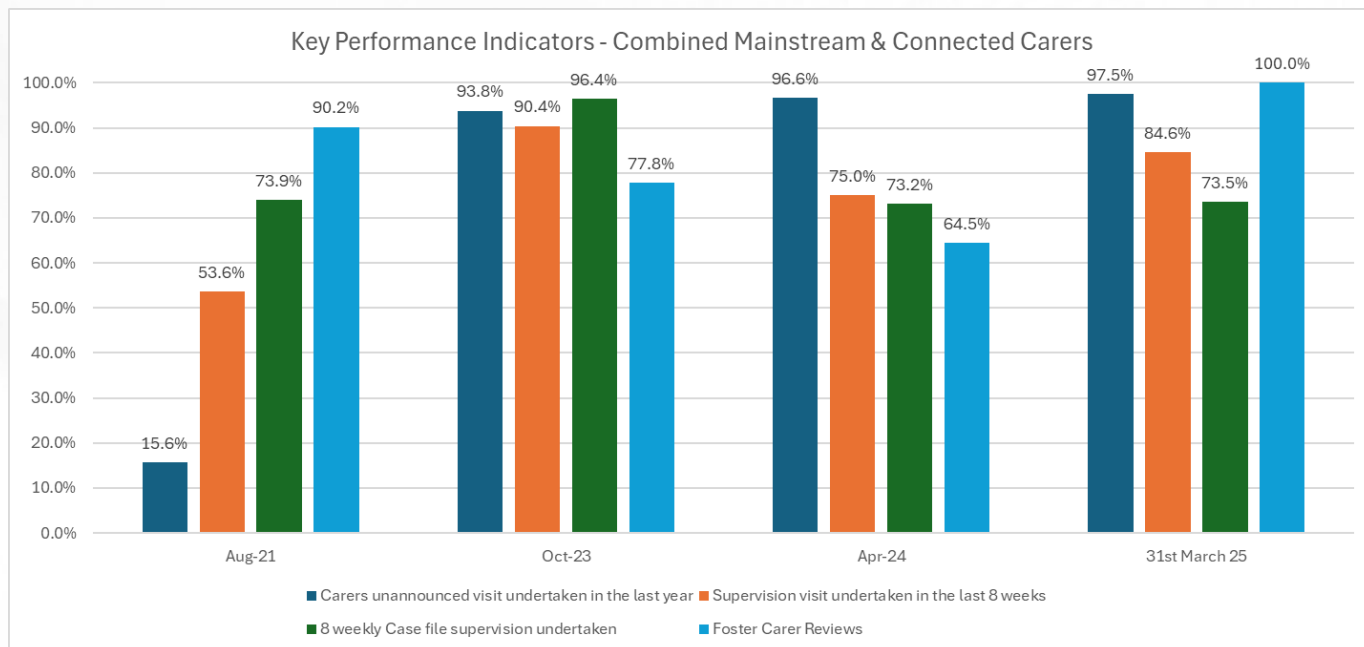
Children we Care for in the same Placement for 2+ years as of 31 March 2025 is at 78.9.5% for children placed with Sandwell Mainstream and Connected Carers in comparison to 65.2% for children placed with External Foster Carers.

Performance (Position 31 March 2025)



- Performance in key compliance and quality assurance areas remains generally strong, with several notable improvements over the past year. Weekly supervision visits continue to be delivered consistently, with completion rates at 87.2% for mainstream carers and 87.5% for connected carers. Delivery of unannounced visits has remained robust for both groups, sustaining levels above 90% for the past six months.
- Case file supervision for mainstream carers by team managers is well embedded, with 99% completion, evidencing strong managerial oversight. However, file supervision for connected carers is significantly lower at 48%, representing a priority area for improvement. The analysis of this data is aligned with the focus for improvement within the Fostering Service and a consideration as to how best use the resources available to support our connected person's foster carers as fully as we should.
- Supervising social workers have themselves received regular monthly personal supervision, with completion consistently above 80%.
- Completion of the Training, Support and Development (TSD) Standards workbook shows a mixed picture. Among connected carers, only 47% (37 of 79) have completed the TSD workbook, with 17 of the 45 outstanding cases being carers registered for over 18 months. This has been identified as a significant development area, and targeted TSD workshops have been introduced to accelerate completion. In contrast, 84% (65 of 77) of mainstream carers have completed their TSDs, with only one of the 12 outstanding cases exceeding the 12-month registration period. Again, analysis of this data forms part of the ongoing targeted improvement areas to ensure that our training offer is readily accessible by our cohort of connected person's foster carers.
- Timeliness of foster carer reviews for both mainstream and connected carers is now at 100%, a substantial improvement from May 2024 when mainstream review timeliness stood at 70%.

| | 31 Mar 22 | 31 Mar 23 | 31 Mar 24 | 31 Mar 25 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Carers unannounced visit undertaken in the last year | 51.1% | 71.1% | 96.1% | 97.5% |
| Supervision visit undertaken in the last 8 weeks | 54.2% | 55.9% | 71.2% | 84.6% |
| 8 weekly Case file supervision undertaken | 50% | 18.4% | 51.3% | 73.5% |
| Foster Carer Reviews | 94.2% | 82.2% | 67.5% | 100.00% |



- Over the previous three years, performance has improved across all KPIs (mainstream and connected carers combined) – August 2021 to March 2025 is 100%
- Unannounced visits to carers significantly improved consistently above 95% and as of 31 March 2025 is 97.5%
- Supervision visits (at least 8 weekly) have improved from 53.6% in August 2021 to 73.5%
- 8 weekly case file supervision undertaken has remained consistent from 73.2% to 73.5%.
- Foster Carer reviews sit at 100%.

Assessment Timeliness

The Assessment and Recruitment Team has experienced a notable increase in assessment activity during the current reporting year. Comparing year-to-date figures:

- **Schedule 4 IVA Assessments** increased from **123** to **173**, reflecting a **41% rise**.
- **Form C Assessments** rose from **89** to **98**, marking a **10% increase**.

Improvements in Assessment Timeliness and Data Performance

Assessment timeliness has been a key area of focus and continues to be closely monitored. This issue was highlighted during both our last SCCIF inspection undertaken between 14th – 18th October 2024 and the Local Government Association (LGA) peer review undertaken between the 31st January – 3rd February 2022. In response, several changes and new processes have been implemented, resulting in measurable progress - though some elements still require further embedding.

Key Improvements and Actions Taken:

- **Capacity Review and Staffing Adjustments:**
A capacity assessment by the Registered Manager confirmed that the service had sufficient staffing and resilience levels, providing long-term absences were backfilled and staff could be reallocated from Supervising Social Work Teams to the Recruitment and Assessment Team. As a result, we now have 12 dedicated assessment workers, aligning workforce capacity with demand. This has been an area of performance that has needed focus over the last twelve months and has been complicated by the additional extremely short timescales for assessments when court directed. The fostering service continues to strive to balance the instruction of the courts with ensuring robust and analytical assessments are taking place for applicants to ensure fair and due process of assessment and that recommendations for approval as foster carers is based upon triangulated and balanced reports, whilst also applying these same principles when counselling applicants out of assessment. All Form F assessments have been achieved within the 8 month statutory timescales for full assessment. It remains a focus to ensure requests for connected person's fostering assessments are achieved in a timely manner, noting the aforementioned challenges presented by the court timetabling.
- **Enhanced Management Oversight:**
The role of the Team Manager is recognised as central to improving assessment throughput. To support this, manageable spans of control need to be put in place, enabling more effective oversight and timely progression of assessments. This arrangement has recently been agreed.

New Processes Introduced:

- **Timely Allocation:** All assessments are now allocated within 48 hours.
- **Statutory Checks:** These are initiated within 5 working days, with a strong emphasis on tracking and follow-up.
- **Process Mapping:** New assessment timeliness process maps were launched in April 2024 to standardize and streamline workflows.
- **Legal Tracking Integration:** The Registered Manager and Assessment Manager now attend legal tracking meetings to ensure a whole-system approach to assessment quality and timeliness.
- **Performance Surgeries:** Weekly tracking meetings have been introduced since March 2025 to identify and address any delays early, using enhanced performance data.

Early Impact:

Although many of these processes are recent, improvements in assessment timeliness have already been observed through these messages being clearly laid out through expectations. From October 2024 to April 2025, there has been a noticeable positive trend, even before the formal implementation of some of these measures.

Form C Connected Carer Assessments Started Since 01 October 2024

| | Oct 24 | Nov 24 | Dec 24 | Jan 25 | Feb 25 | Mar 25 | Total / Average |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----------------|
| | 12 | 7 | 6 | 11 | 17 | 4 | 61 |
| Form C completed since 01/10/24 (of those stated) | 8 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 21 |
| Average time for completion WD | 145 | 120 | 100 | 81 | 56 | 25 | 87.8 |
| Average time for completion WW | 29 | 24 | 20 | 16 | 11 | 5 | 17.5 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|------|
| Forms Open | 4 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 16 | 3 | 40 |
| Average time still open WD | 137 | 115 | 101 | 75 | 53 | 31 | 75.0 |
| Average time still open WW | 27 | 23 | 20 | 15 | 11 | 6 | 15.0 |

Mainstream Carers Recruited 2024/2025

| | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total Carers Approved | 7 | 5 | 14 |
| Average no. of days between Eol & S1 start (Target 14 days) | 10 | 5 | 1 |
| Average no. of days between S1 start and S1end (Target 51 days) | 26 | 41 | 34 |
| Average no. of days between S2 start and S2end (Target 133 days) | 121 | 150 | 119 |
| Average no. of days between S2 start and Panel (Target TBC) | 43 | 58 | 40 |
| Average no. of days between stage 1 start & to ADM (Target 166 days) | 217 | 280 | 225 |

Although there is still work to be completed there is clear early signs of improvement year on year which meant we recruited the highest number of foster carers in a 3-year period with reduced timescales from 2023 to 2024 and closely mirroring 2022/2023.

Schedule 6 Monitoring

Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations (2011) outlines the matters that registered fostering providers must monitor in relation to each child placed with foster parents. This includes monitoring compliance with the child's care plan, all accidents, injuries, and illnesses, complaints, allegations of abuse, recruitment records, notifications of specific events (Schedule 7), and any instances of a child missing from the placement.

Schedule 6 Incident Summary

| Incident Type | Quarter 1 | Quarter 2 | Quarter 3 | Quarter 4 | Total |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Minor Bumps | 9 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 25 |
| Minor Accidents | 8 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 18 |
| Viral Illnesses/Infections | 5 | 5 | 9 | 4 | 23 |
| Missing Incidents | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| Emotional Dysregulation/Low Mood | 3 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 14 |
| Self-Harm Marks | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Broken Bones | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| Seizures | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Inappropriate/Indecent Images | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Bullying/Abuse | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Anti-Social Behavior | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Allegations | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Fights | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |

Health-Related Incidents

Minor Injuries and Accidents most monitored incidents:

- **Minor Bumps (25 incidents)**
Frequently involved toddlers and were generally low risk, occurring across all quarters.
- **Minor Accidents (18 incidents)**
Often occurred outside the foster home.
- **Viral Illnesses/Infections (23 incidents)**
These were consistently reported across all quarters.
- **Seizures (3 incidents)**
All occurred in Quarter 4 which is understood to be coincidental and not a sign of any emerging theme.
- **Broken Bones (4 incidents)**
Reported in Quarters 2 and 3, these incidents were isolated but required medical attention but no admission to hospital.

We have reviewed our foster care notifications and have developed a notification form within our recording system to enhance management and Registered Manager's oversight.

We have also reaffirmed the requirements under schedule 6 and 7 under Fostering Regulations (2011) to all fostering staff, and shared material to wider staff and our Emergency Duty Services (EDS). Practice guidance has been written in respect of managing any potential notifications out of hours and shared with Sandwell's EDS team, the Fostering social work teams and 'Children We Care For' Teams and Locality teams.

See Appendix 1

- Emotional and Mental Health Concerns
- Emotional Dysregulation/Low Mood (9 incidents)

These incidents involved behaviours such as head banging and verbal or physical dysregulation. Given the backgrounds of the children we care for—many of whom have experienced abuse and trauma—such behaviours are understandable. Our foster carers managed these situations effectively, and additional support was provided where necessary. Ongoing monitoring enabled a coordinated *Team Around the Child* approach.

Self-Harm Marks (5 incidents)

Reported during Quarters 3 and 4, these incidents underscore the importance of ensuring that both the children we care for and their foster carers receive appropriate support. This is facilitated through our *Team Around the Child* model, with additional input from our Intervention Hub or CAMHS when required.

Safeguarding and Risk

Missing Incidents (6 incidents)

Most involved children staying with family members and not returning to their homes.

Inappropriate/Indecent Images (3 incidents)

These were found on children's phones in Quarters 3 and 4. These incidents were managed through ongoing support through appropriate interventions and support for the child and foster carer. This included updating and review of safe care plans and individual child risk assessments and identifying any training needs of the foster carers as appropriate.

Bullying/Abuse (2 incidents)

Included peer bullying and a report of an abusive bus driver. Support was provided by the fostering service in both cases to the child and the foster carers.

Allegation (1 incident)

This was reported under Schedule 7 considerations, fully investigated and the child removed from fostering placement. Allegation of alcohol abuse and growing cannabis in the fostering household was substantiated and the carers were returned to fostering panel with a recommendation for Termination of approval. This recommendation was ratified by the ADM.

Schedule 7 Notifications

In the context of fostering services, Schedule 7 notifications refer to the specific events that fostering providers must report to Ofsted under Regulation 36 and Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations (2011).

These notifications ensure that Ofsted is kept informed about serious incidents, safeguarding concerns, and other significant matters that could affect the welfare of children in foster care or the integrity of the service. Schedule 7 notifications to Ofsted, must report on any incident requiring resuscitation, admittance to a hospital for more than 24 hours, a broken bone or fracture, dislocation of a major joint, loss of consciousness, or severe breathing difficulties. The Fostering Service must also report upon any allegation of serious harm or abuse, any event likely to affect the smooth running of the setting, the death of a child, or a serious accident, injury, or illness to a child.

Thematic Analysis of Incidents (Quarter 1–4)

| Reportable Incident | Quarter 1 | Quarter 2 | Quarter 3 | Quarter 4 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Serious Illness or Accident of a child placed with foster parents | 4 | | | 2 |
| Allegations & Safeguarding | 1 | 1 | 2 | |
| Serious Incident relating to a child placed with the foster parents necessitating calling the police. | 1 | | 1 | 1 |

Serious Illness or Accident:

Theme: Medical Needs and Hospitalisation

- Quarter 1: 4 incidents involved health concerns, all children received appropriate medical attention and have now recovered.
- Quarter 4: 2 serious health conditions meant children required hospitalisation, were managed appropriately and have now fully recovered.
- Trend: Health-related incidents are consistent, with appropriate responses from the foster carer and good medical oversight. All children have since recovered.

Allegations Against Foster Carers

- Quarter 1: Allegations led to LADO involvement, strategy meetings, and investigations. This related to anonymous referral relating to the foster carers misusing substances while caring for the child. This was responded to and investigated which led to deregistration following a PAR.
- Quarter 2: 1 Allegation of abuse – investigated which concluded child is not at risk of significant harm and that incident did not meet LADO threshold and further support and training provided.
- Quarter 3: 2 allegations resulted in a LADO investigation which led to the resignation of foster carers following the allegation. The matter was still presented to our fostering panel following the carers' resignation to determine what recommendation panel would have made should the carers not chosen to resign.
- All incidents received appropriate responses which included safeguarding the child while also supporting the foster carers. The foster carers always had access to Foster Talk and there is clear management and Registered Manager oversight.

Serious Incident to a Child in Placement with Foster Carer

- Quarter 1: 1 police call-out to a foster home, resulting in no further action.
- Quarter 3: 2 incidents. The first incident related to police attended a foster home due to a hoax bomb threat made by a child, leading to the arrest of the foster carer. The second incident related to an allegation sexual assault (not foster carers) made by a child we care for, with support provided by the connected carer.
- Quarter 4: Police were called in two separate incidents—one involving sibling conflict which ended up on the foster carer being assaulted. The second incident involved an assault by a connected carer's ex-partner on the carer.

All incidents were managed appropriately and proportionately, ensuring the safety and well-being of the children, with support provided as needed. Collaborative working between the children's social work team and the fostering services led to progress and resolutions. Additionally, a seven-point briefing is being developed for distribution to all Trust staff to raise awareness and embed a clearer understanding of the fostering service's responsibilities.

Summary of staffing position

Sandwell Fostering Service is comprised of three dedicated teams: the Recruitment and Assessment Team, the Connected Foster Care Team, and the Mainstream Fostering Team.

The majority of our social workers are experienced senior practitioners, with one team member currently progressing through their career development pathway. Our fostering service is proud to be a stable and well-established service, with low staff turnover and many long-serving members. During 2024–2025, staffing changes were minimal, with only two social workers and one Social Care Assistant leaving the service.

While the leadership team experienced transitions—namely the departure of our Panel Advisor and two Registered Managers—the Trust is prioritising securing strong, permanent leadership.

We have also successfully transitioned two agency social workers into permanent roles and appointed an additional full-time permanent social worker.

Our service takes pride in nurturing internal talent. Recent examples include:

- A Senior Social Worker stepping into the Panel Advisor role on an interim basis.
- A Social Worker being appointed as a Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer.
- An ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) progressing to a Senior Social Worker role within the Connected Foster Care Team.

Supervision and Support

We are committed to providing high-quality supervision and support:

- 80% of all staff received personal supervision.
- In the Mainstream and Connected teams, this increased to 88% and 81%, respectively.
- 79.2% of Team Managers received monthly supervision which increased to 100% since December.

We acknowledge that supervision within the Assessment Team has been less consistent (69%). To address this, we have recruited a fourth Team Manager to reduce caseloads and enhance support and supervision in this area. This arrangement has been put in place through an internal secondment opportunity initially.

All staff (100%) received an annual appraisal, reflecting our strong commitment to professional development and performance management.

Training and Development

As part of the Trust, our fostering service benefits from a comprehensive training offer, including specialist fostering training, regular reflective leadership hubs, and practitioner forums. These opportunities ensure our staff remain skilled, supported, and equipped to deliver the best outcomes for children and foster families.

Fostering panel

Panel Activity

Meetings continue to be held virtually using Microsoft Teams video software. The virtual meetings run effectively and there are benefits in continuing to hold virtual meetings. However, it is recognised that there is a need to move back towards in person panels as this is best managed face-to-face. At present in person panels can be requested which would be prioritised.

Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering Panel usually meets on a Friday twice monthly. Additional Panels were arranged due to increased demand.

Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering Panel continues to consider Mainstream and Connected Person(s) assessments, foster carer 1st and 3rd reviews, reviews where a change in the terms of approval is recommended, reviews following allegation or standard of care concern, resignations and terminations, and Regulation 25.

There were 32 Fostering Panels held 2024/2025.

| Total | Cases Presented |
|-------|---|
| 85 | Foster Carer Reviews/Changes of Approvals |
| 3 | Post Allegation Reviews |
| 39 | Connected Carer Assessments |
| 1 | Brief Report |
| 8 | Mainstream Carer Assessments |
| 55 | <p>Terminations of approval:</p> <p>Mainstream:</p> <p>A total of 23 mainstream foster carers had their terms of approval terminated. The primary reasons included resignation due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retirement • Health issues • Changes in family circumstances <p>Additionally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 carers transferred to another Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). • 1 carer resigned following concerns related to an allegation around standards of care. <p>Connected:</p> <p>There were 32 connected carer terminations of approval, including resignation due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) being granted. • The child turning 18. • The child returning to the care of their parents. <p>In a few cases, carers were no longer able to meet the child's needs.</p> |
| 24 | Regulation 25 |

Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, there were 2 challenges to the Fostering Panel recommendation and ADM decision, resulting in the Independent Review Mechanism being involved. This resulted in the Independent Review Mechanism recommendation to the service to review the decision in both instances.

Approvals and terminations of approvals of Mainstream Carers.

Registrations Mainstream Carers – yearly breakdown

There were 5 Mainstream approvals in 2023/2024 compared with 8 in 2022/2023. In 2024/2025, this increased from 8 to 13 mainstream carer households.

This trend has continued which is not surprising and consistent with other Local Authorities and national trends. This is expected to continue to rise with the Kinship government policies and in Sandwell we are currently developing our response to this with the development and implementation of our Kinship strategy.

We have responded to this need through shifting our resources to respond to the demand (Please see 'Staffing' for further details).

Termination of approval: Mainstream Carers

- In this reporting period we have seen 22 approvals terminated.
- Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2025, 66 mainstream carers were de-registered.
- 8 were initiated by the Fostering Service.
- 52 were initiated by the Foster Carer – usually due to retirement or personal reasons.
- 4 were the result of the granting of an SGO or Adoption Order.

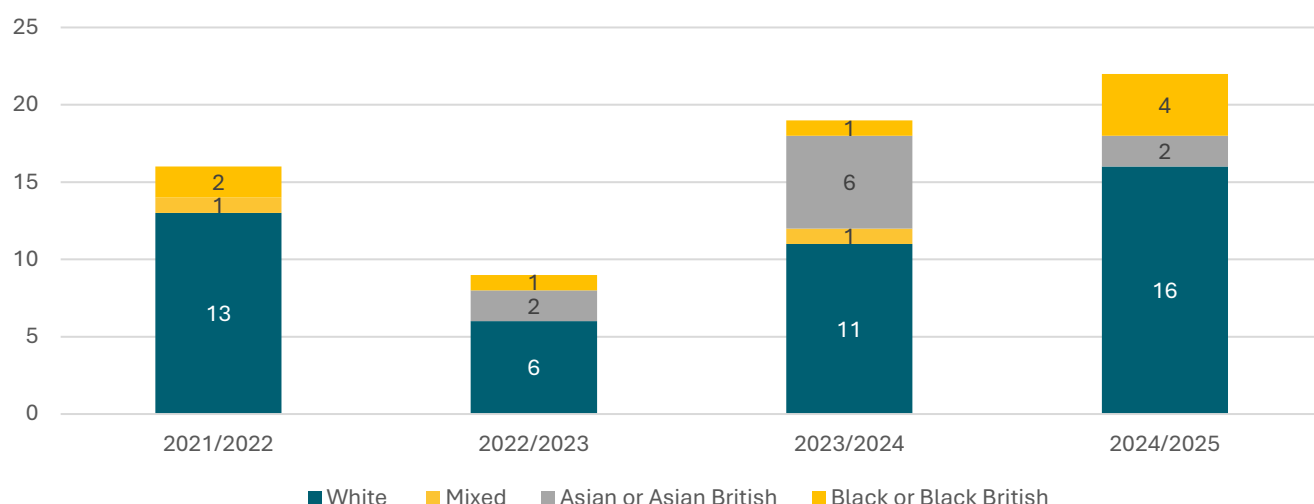
De-registration Category (Main Carer)

| | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Initiated by Fostering Service | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Initiated by Foster Carer | 13 | 8 | 16 | 17 |
| Family Adopted the Child/Children | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| SGO | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Grand Total | 16 | 9 | 19 | 22 |

Termination of approval category + Details (Main Carer)

| | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| DER 1 - Transferred to an IFA | | | | 2 |
| Transferred to an IFA | | | | 2 |
| DER 2: Initiated by Fostering Service | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Resigned following allegation | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Staying put arrangement | 1 | | | 1 |
| Termination of approval - not suitable to foster | | | 1 | 1 |
| Termination of approval - YP has turned 18 | | | | |
| DER3 – Transferred to LA | | | | 1 |
| Transferred to other LA service | | | | 1 |
| DER5 Family Adopted the Child/Children | 0 | | 1 | 2 |
| Adoption Order Granted | | | 1 | 2 |
| DER 7 Carer Retirement | 2 | 3 | 6 | 5 |
| Retired | 2 | 3 | 6 | 5 |
| DER8 Personal carer Circumstances | 7 | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons | | | | 5 |
| Resigned - Relocating | | | | 1 |
| DER9 Carer Resigned for other Reasons | 4 | 1 | 7 | 6 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (Career Change) | 1 | | 4 | 1 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (could no longer care for YP) | | 1 | | 5 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (Health) | 3 | | 2 | 0 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (Separation) | | | 1 | 0 |
| SGO | 1 | | 0 | 0 |
| Secured SGO | 1 | | 0 | 0 |
| Grand Total | 16 | 9 | 19 | 22 |

Carer De-Registration by Ethnicity Group (Main Carer)



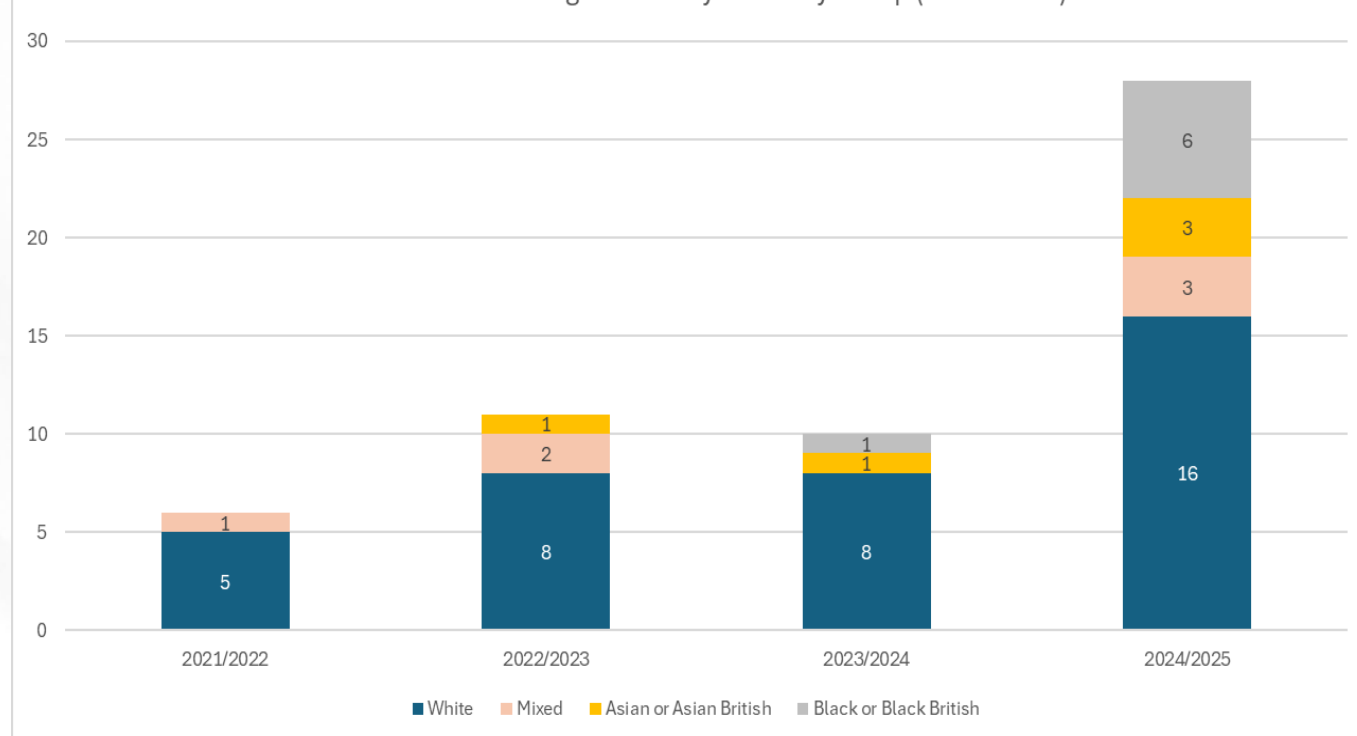
Approval of Connected Carers:

- There were 10 Connected Carer approvals in 2023/2024 compared with 11 in 2022/2023.
- This increased to 28 connected carer households approved in 2024/25.

Carer Registration by Age Group (Main Carer)

| | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 20-24 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| 25-29 | | 1 | | 1 |
| 30-34 | | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| 35-39 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| 40-44 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 45-49 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| 50-54 | | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| 55-59 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 60-64 | | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| 60+ | | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 6 | 11 | 10 | 28 |

Connected Carer Registration by Ethnicity Group (Main Carer)



Termination of approval: Connected Carers

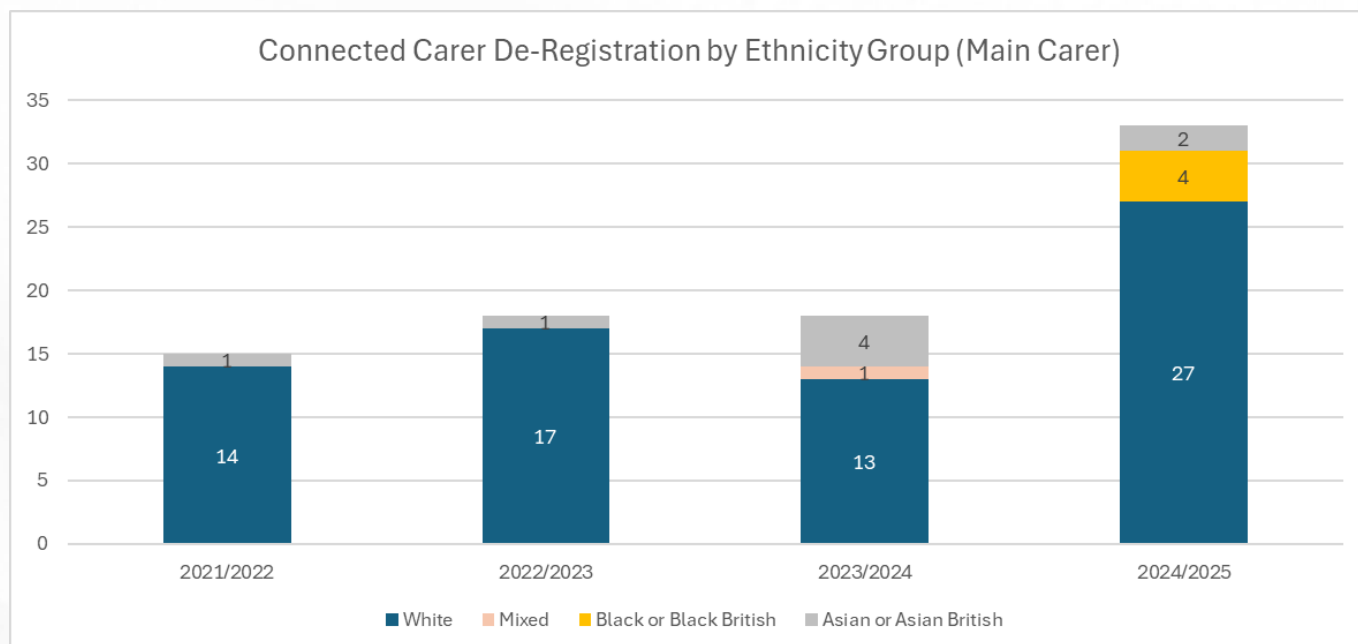
- In this reporting period we have seen 33 approvals terminated.
- Between April 2021 and March 2025 84 connected carers had their approval terminated.
- 25 were initiated by the Fostering Service.
- 13 were initiated by the Foster Carer.
- 1 Adoption Order Granted.
- 45 were the result of the granting of a Special Guardianship Order (18 in 2024/25 up from 8 the previous reporting year).

Connected Carer De-Registration (Main Carer)

| | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Initiated by Fostering Service | 5 | 5 | 6 | 9 |
| Initiated by Foster Carer | 4 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
| Family Adopted the Child/Children | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Special Guardianship Orders | 5 | 13 | 8 | 18 |
| Grand Total | 15 | 18 | 18 | 33 |

Connected Carer De-registrations reasons (Main Carer)

| | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Initiated by Fostering Service | 5 | 5 | 6 | 10 |
| Allegations/ standard of care | 1 | | | 9 |
| Staying put arrangement | 3 | 2 | 1 | |
| Termination of approval - health reasons | | | 1 | |
| Termination of approval - Foster Carer Died | 1 | | | |
| Termination of approval - not suitable to foster | | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Termination of approval - YP has turned 18 | | | 2 | |
| Termination of approval - YP returned to Birth parent(s) | | 2 | 1 | |
| Initiated by Foster Carer | 4 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons | | | 1 | 4 |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (could no longer care for YP) | | | 2 | |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (Separation) | | | 1 | |
| Resigned - Personal Reasons (YP has moved placement) | | | | |
| Resigned - YP has turned 18 | 4 | | | |
| Resigned following allegation/standards of care | | | | |
| Family Adopted the Child/Children | 1 | 0 | 0 | |
| Adoption Order Granted | 1 | | | |
| SGO/Child Arrangement Order | 5 | 13 | 8 | 19 |
| Special Guardianship Order | 5 | 13 | 8 | 18 |
| Child Arrangement Order | | | | 1 |
| Grand Total | 15 | 18 | 18 | 33 |



The fostering agency's Panel Chair ensures that assessments of prospective foster carers include all the necessary checks and explore issues pertinent to fostering. The Panel provides robust consideration and recommendation of the prospective foster carer's suitability to foster.

Panel members bring a range of experience of fostering, both personal and professional. The Panel Chair is suitably experienced, knowledgeable and diverse and has personal experience of previously being a foster carer.

The Foster Panel provides a robust quality assurance function while being sensitive to the applicants attending the panel. Panel members provide feedback to the agency on a regular basis on the quality of reports and the presentation of social workers. Managers keep Panel members informed of developments in the agency, and Panel members are appraised and attend regular training events. This helps to ensure that Panel members keep up to date with changes in practice.'

There have been 32 Fostering Panel meetings held in the last year, which dealt with 215 matters. The average number of matters listed at each Panel were 6. Only 6 matters were deferred, all of which required additional information to enable Panel to make a sufficiently informed and robust recommendation.

Panel has continued to provide feedback to the Trust on matters presented to Panel, and minute Assessment and Review timescales and also Unannounced Visit compliance. Panel comments on the quality of reports and offers the Fostering service advice on practice. This is done with the intention of helping to improve fostering practice and outcomes for children.

In the past year, following feedback from Panel, the Trust updated their internal record system to include a standard Termination/Resignation Report which is now populated with all the information Panel requires when noting Termination/Resignations, and includes any Safeguarding and Care concerns. This enables Panel to be assured in relation to Safeguarding and Care concerns during a Foster Carers period of approval, and to give advice where appropriate.

In addition, again following feedback from Panel, the Trust has also implemented a Compliance document for all Assessments, which is now signed off by the Assessment Team Managers. A similar Compliance document for all Reviews is now under consideration.

Training

In the past year, Panel members have attended two joint training/briefing sessions with the Trust:

1. “The Virtual School & Children We Care for Health Service - Supporting Foster Carers & Children” delivered by the Lead Advisory teacher (and Panel Member) from the Virtual School, and 2 members of the Named nurse team: 15 November 2024
2. “The new Connected Person(s) assessment template Form K” delivered by Coram BAAF: 13 February 2025.

During 2025, Panel is looking forward to further “Effective Fostering Panel Training” as an update for existing Panel Members and to support new Panel Members, and also more training in relation to Form K Assessments.

In addition, Panel Members would like to build on the training received at the Joint training held in 2023 “The Role of the LADO”.

(in relation to Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, particularly those involving Foster Carers).

New Panel Members will be completing Panel Mandatory training, which includes Effective Fostering Panel training, GDPR, Safeguarding, PREVENT, Sandwell EDI, and Secure Base. Previously, all Panel Members have also benefited from Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation training.

Panel Members continue to benefit from access to Sandwell’s E learning hub and have used this to access training completed by Foster Carers. This supports Panel to understanding of the content of, and range of training available to foster carers, and how accessible this is.

Sufficiency of Foster Carers

Foster Carer Retention and Recruitment – Challenges and our response

Challenges

Over the past two reporting years, Sandwell has experienced a **net loss of mainstream foster carers**, which has impacted our internal placement sufficiency. This trend is attributed to several key factors:

- An **ageing foster carer population**, with many carers retiring after years of dedicated service.
- We are operating in the West Midlands—one of the most competitive fostering regions nationally.
- **Deregistration’s** initiated by the service due to standards of care or following allegations.
- A notable number of **resignations for personal reasons**, including career changes, bereavement, caring responsibilities for elderly relatives, and relocation outside the Midlands.
- **High competition** from a dense concentration of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) with 15–19 active Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), compared to 6–8 in other UK regions. This requires Foster Sandwell to clearly define its unique offer and strategically target its marketing efforts.

Our Response

To address these challenges, we have taken proactive steps to implement a newly developed [Recruitment & Marketing Strategy](#) which comes into effect on 1 April 2025, as well as a significant drive to improve response and timeliness to our responding to enquiries

Since January 2025

53 ENQUIRIES RECEIVED



RESPONSE TIMES



28 PROGRESSED TO INITIAL SCREENING



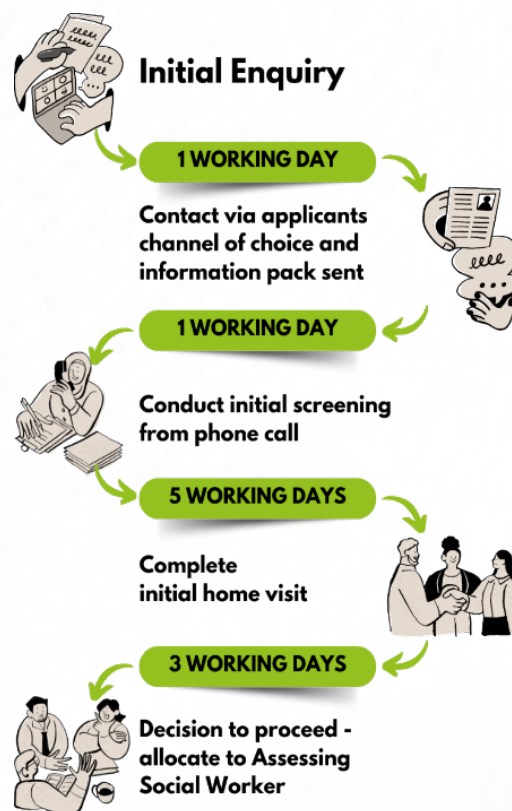
SCREENINGS COMPLETED



11 PROGRESSED TO HOME VISITS



VISITS COMPLETED



(Delays beyond 5 working days were due to applicant availability)

Alongside this Sandwell Children’s Trust are exploring the benefits of entering the proposed DFE funded Black Country Recruitment and Assessment hub, with this remaining an ongoing project.

Over the past year, the fostering team has actively engaged with the community through a vibrant and diverse calendar of events, showcasing a strong commitment to outreach and awareness. From promotional stands at West Bromwich Albion and Morrisons to heartfelt gatherings like coffee mornings and the Foster Carers Annual Celebration, each event has helped build meaningful connections. Participation in high-profile occasions such as Sandwell Pride, Voicefest, and the Growth & Employment Summit has further elevated the team's visibility and impact. Regular appearances at the Aquatics Centre and information sessions at Trust and partner buildings have ensured consistent engagement, while events like “Meet the Buyers” and “Careers in Sandwell” have opened doors to new opportunities.

Foster Care Reviews

Annual Reviews – Service Update and Improvements

Since June 2024, the **Annual Review function** within the Fostering Agency has undergone significant changes in both process and procedure. These changes are part of an ongoing improvement plan aimed at strengthening the quality and consistency of foster carer reviews.

Background and Rationale for Change

Previously, the **Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO)** role was positioned within the Quality and Assurance team, external to the Fostering Agency. This separation led to fragmented communication and misaligned processes. Recognising this vulnerability, the agency made the strategic decision to integrate the FIRO role within the Fostering Agency. This move has already shown positive outcomes, improving collaboration and alignment between the FIRO and fostering teams, ultimately benefiting both carers and children. As part of the FIRO annual review process, an internal quality assurance document is now completed to ensure oversight of the quality of the reports, the triangulation of the evidence submitted to support the recommendation for continued approval being made and to support the wider learning and development across the Fostering Service in respect of any key themes emerging.

Improvements in Review Timeliness and Process

- Since October 2024, **100% of annual reviews** have been completed within the required 12-month time frame.
- Previously, delays were caused by staff absences, incomplete documentation, and poor scheduling practices.
- **Supervising Social Workers (SSWs)** are notified of review dates a year in advance, with reminders sent three months prior.

Quality Assurance and Oversight

- The FIRO now **quality assures all review reports** independently before the review meeting.
- Findings are shared with Fostering Managers and escalated to Team Managers or the Registered Manager when necessary.
- This process ensures **transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement**.

Foster Carer Feedback and Voice

- A new **Foster Carer Feedback Form** was refreshed in January 2025 to gather insights post-review.
- This feedback is analysed to inform ongoing improvements in the review process and foster carer experience.
- Themes from reviews, including the **voice of the child and carer**, are regularly shared with the service to support learning and development.

Decision-Making and Compliance

- Since the last Ofsted inspection, the FIRO now acts as the **Decision Maker** for reviews where there are no changes to the carer's terms of approval.
- This change ensures clarity and compliance, replacing previous recommendations with formal decisions.

Performance Data

- From **1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025**, a total of **103 annual reviews** were submitted to the FIRO and Decision Maker for continued approval without changes to terms.

Complaints

| P1 | Information about complaints made about the fostering agency or service (including foster carers) between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025 | How many complaints did you receive? | How many of these were not upheld? |
|------|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | From: | Number | Number |
| P1.1 | Children/young people | 1 | 0 |
| P1.2 | Foster carers | 1 | 1 |
| P1.3 | Children and young people's social workers | | |
| P1.4 | Other professionals | | |
| P1.5 | Children and young people's parents | | |
| P1.6 | Others | | |

Complaints Overview for the Reporting Year

During this reporting year, two formal complaints were received—one from a care-experienced young person and the other from a foster carer. Both complaints centred around financial matters and were appropriately addressed through our formal complaint's procedure, with responses provided within the required timescales.

Complaint from a Care-Experienced Young Person

The first complaint was submitted by a young person who expressed concern about not receiving her savings. This issue was thoroughly investigated by the Care Experienced Service Manager, who met directly with the young person to understand and resolve the matter. As a result of this complaint, it became evident that the newly developed savings policy, while in place, requires further integration and consistent application across the service. This has been identified as a key area for improvement and learning.

Complaint from a Foster Carer

The second complaint was raised by a foster carer regarding delays in the processing of allowances through the online system. This concern was also formally submitted via our complaints service and was investigated within the designated timeframe. The investigation concluded that the complaint was upheld, confirming that the issue did occur. Steps have since been taken to ensure this does not recur.

Consultation

Sandwell Fostering has made significant improvements in how it consults with foster carers. Both the Registered Manager and the Team Manager now attend monthly fostering forums to hear directly from carers and understand their views.

A structured system is in place to gather feedback through foster carer reviews, audits, and panel discussions. The regular presence of the Team Manager and Registered Manager at these forums is highly

valued by carers and provides a consistent opportunity for feedback. In addition, the service is developing anonymous, targeted surveys to capture more specific feedback on key areas.

Fostering Managers Meetings and Quality, Practice, and Learning (QPL) meetings offer platforms to share and act on this feedback. These forums help ensure that carers' voices are heard and that their input informs service development. However, further work is needed to fully embed this feedback loop into everyday practice.

The Registered Manager also operates an open-door policy, meeting with foster carers outside of formal settings to address specific concerns. These meetings aim to find solutions or clarify policies and future actions when issues cannot be immediately resolved.

Recently, the Registered Manager met with three foster carers who raised concerns. Their feedback, along with input from the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO), is collected and shared through Regulation 35 reports and standard agenda items in fostering managers meetings. Additional feedback is also captured in quarterly Quality Assurance (QA) reports, which are shared with all staff.

The Registered Manager has also used forums to share outcomes from Ofsted inspections, audit findings, and service development plans, ensuring transparency and ongoing learning.

Foster carers' involvement in shaping future developments continues to grow, helping to foster a sense of belonging and value within the Sandwell Fostering community.

Notably, the recent recruitment of three supervising social workers included participation from both foster carers and the children in care. A heartwarming moment during Fostering Fortnight saw one of the newly appointed social workers thank a foster carer for their role in the interview process.

You Said, We Did – Foster Carer Feedback Summary

| You Said | We Did |
|--|--|
| Equipment allowances are not sufficient and do not reflect the rising cost of living. | Benchmarking is underway to ensure allowances and pay are competitive with other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies. |
| Supervising social workers are amazing and supportive. | We acknowledge and appreciate the dedication of our supervising social workers. |
| Payslips are not always received or clear; a secure portal would be helpful for reports, recordings, and payslips. | A secure portal is being developed to streamline access to reports, recordings, and payslips—acknowledging this is a significant project that will take time to develop and implement. |
| Support groups and guest speakers are appreciated. | We will continue to organize support groups and invite guest speakers. |
| Forums with team and registered managers are valued for updates and voicing concerns. | Consultation with foster carers has significantly improved and will continue to be a priority. |
| Decisions and changes are sometimes made without consulting foster carers. | We have consistently consulted with foster carers over the last 6 months with the consistency and visibility of our Registered Manager and Team Manager. |
| Recording with care forms feel more personal and child focused. | We will continue to emphasise the importance of our foster carers using recording with care forms to maintain a child-focused approach. |
| Pay incentives are lower compared to other Local Authorities and Agencies. | Benchmarking is underway to ensure allowances and pay are competitive with other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies. |
| Allegations are stressful, isolating, and lack transparency during investigations. | When allegations occur, a different Supervising Social Worker now completes the PAR report, allowing the original Supervising Social Worker to continue supporting the carer. |
| SGO assessments take too long to progress. | We are improving the efficiency of SGO assessments and all children ready for an SGO has an active assessment which will be completed within 12 weeks of this starting. |
| Assessors are supportive and make the process easier. | We acknowledge and appreciate the support provided by our assessors. |
| Flowers and cards of appreciation when children move on are appreciated. | We will continue to show appreciation with flowers and cards when children move on. |

Quality Assurance Activity

Methodology of quality assurance reviewing in the fostering service

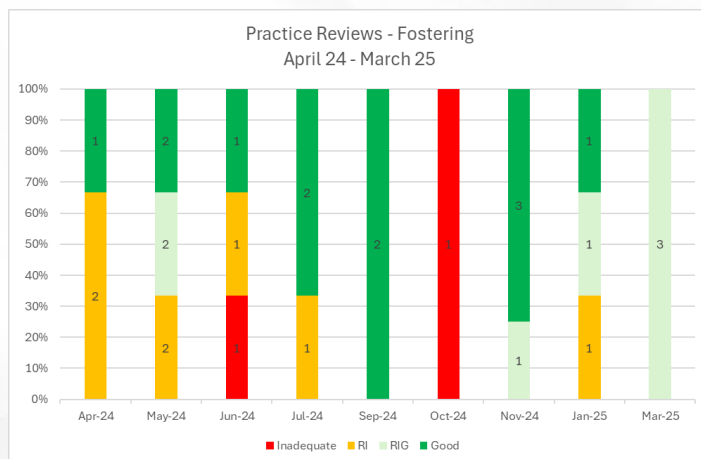
The Fostering Service undertake a variety of quality assurance activities that are in line with the Quality Assurance Framework for the Trust. These activities help and support the Fostering Service to understand the service they are providing; how they are meeting Fostering National Minimum Standards, meeting carers needs and supporting them, as well as meeting children's needs.

The Quality Assurance (QA) activities that support this are:

- Practice Reviews
- QA of key documents through management/panel oversight
- Supervision
- Feedback from children and young people
- Feedback from carers via Forum and Support Groups
- Fostering Panel QA and feedback
- Bi-monthly QA Communication Meetings
- External benchmarking/peer support

Practice Reviews Activity and Outcomes Findings

The graph below gives an overview of the distance travelled between April 2024 and March 2025, based on the practice reviews gradings relating to our fostering services.



Since April 2024, 28 Practice Reviews have been completed within the Fostering Service of which:

- 12 were rated as Good (43%)
- 7 Requires Improvement to be Good (25%)
- 7 Requires improvement (25%)
- 2 Inadequate (7%)

Every month, Managers within the Fostering Service complete Practice Reviews in line with the Quality Assurance Framework within the Children's Trust. A summary of findings is outlined in the report below.

In addition, there are a wide range of other quality assurance activities that are undertaken as a routine part of the Fostering Service. The findings of these are in the report below.

Areas of Strength

1. Relational Practice and Child-Centered Approach

- Strong implementation of the ST*P Practice Model and Secure Base principles.
- Supervising Social Workers have built trusting, supportive relationships with both carers and children.
- Children's voices are consistently captured through various tools (e.g., "recording with care" sheets, supervision records).

2. Cultural Competence

- Evidence of carers meeting children's cultural needs in creative and meaningful ways.
- Cultural considerations are increasingly being documented in Foster Carers' files.

3. Training and Development

- Increase in Foster Carers attending and completing required training, though there is still work to be completed.
- Training is contributing to improved care quality, though integration into supervision is still developing.

4. Documentation and Compliance

- Foster Carers' files are well-maintained, with up-to-date documents and statutory checks.
- Fostering Panel and management oversight ensure quality and compliance with national standards.

5. Feedback and Engagement

- Carers and children provide feedback through forums, reviews, and support groups.
- Feedback has led to service improvements and a more connected approach with carers.

6. Quality Assurance Infrastructure

- The introduction of a monthly Fostering Quality, Performance and Learning Meetings and fortnightly performance meetings support continuous improvement.
- Peer benchmarking and peer support are being introduced to enhance practice.

Areas for Development

1. Consistency in Documentation

- While relational and trauma-informed practices are evident, they are not consistently reflected in written records.
- Matching decisions and cultural planning is evidenced but it is recognised that this can be variable and needs clearer documentation, especially when cultural matches are not possible.

2. Supervision Quality and Impact

- Supervision sessions need to be more reflective, and outcome focused.

- Greater alignment is needed between supervision at different levels (Foster Carer to Supervising Social Worker and Supervising Social Worker to Team Manager).
- Personal Development Plans (PDPs) for carers should be regularly reviewed and linked to children's needs. These are not consistently being seen on files.

3. Supervision and Oversight

- Increased regular and structured supervision between Supervising Social Workers and Foster Carers, and between Team Managers and Supervising Social Workers is an area of focus to support care planning, training discussions, and reflective practice.

4. Joint Working with Children's Social Workers

- Co-working between Supervising Social Workers and Children's Social Workers is inconsistent.
- Improved collaboration would strengthen care planning for children.
- Further work is required to embed evidencing work completed with the child we care for on the child's file.

5. Training Integration

- Training and the impact of this including the impact of this on the child is not consistently discussed in supervisions with foster carers.
- Reflective discussions on how training influences daily practice and child outcomes are an area of development.

6. Child Engagement

- While supervision visits are regular, we recognise there is further work to be completed around the use of direct work and placing this on the foster carers and child's files following visits.
- Increased footprint to be seen on the child's file from Supervising social workers and managers to be further embedded.

7. Practice Review Process

- Practice Reviews since January have all been moderated by the Registered Manager which provides benchmarking and consistency.
- Improved use of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals going forward will be used to track progress.

8. Support for Carers' Families

- Some feedback highlighted the need for emotional support for carers' birth children, especially during transitions.

9. Foster Carer Agreements

- Some files lacked up-to-date Foster Carer Agreements, which more recently are evidenced on the file.

Strengths/ Achievements

- Strong panel with a clear focus on safeguarding children.
- Strong advocacy for our children and young people.
- The development and strengthening of refreshing word documents to be integrated within LCS to improve dashboards and reporting in upcoming periods.
- The ongoing review of the role of FIRO.
- Improving visibility of leadership at forums and other fostering events, focusing on listening to and understanding foster carers' views.
- Increased evidence of "you said, we did".
- Consultation and sharing of information.
- Increased involvement of foster carers and children/young people in interviews.
- Development of a new marketing and communication strategy.
- Increased timeliness in responding to initial inquiries.
- Stable workforce with good promotional opportunities.
- Most foster carers recruited within the 3-year reporting period.
- Increased management meetings, including the launch of a quality, learning, and practice meeting.

Areas of Focus

- Developing Supervision and management oversight even further.
- To ensure all out foster carers are attending TSD support sessions to complete their TSD's where this is outstanding.
- To further develop and enhance foster carers supervision with level of high support and high challenge focusing on competencies of foster carers and supporting our foster carers where this is not being met or achieved through needs led strategies.
- The creation of increased support through patch-based care for carers programme making use of local specialist services within one place equipped to help foster carers manage and respond to children we care for who have suffered trauma, attachment and abuse through improving resilience and care. This will incorporate the development of patch-based coffee mornings and foster care support ambassadors.
- The skilling up of our supervising social workers and foster cares in DDP, Non-Violence Resistance skillset.
- The launch in October of the refreshed Sandwell Foster Care deal to both attract and retain foster carers.
- Develop a 'Sons and Daughters' celebration event for foster carers' birth children within October of each year.
- Developing and enhancing the recording of direct work and life memory work with for children and young people.
- Embedding recording to child records by foster carers
- The launch of a new practice review toolkit and increased dip sampling to drive quality assurance and learning from with the service.
- The relentless focus on recruitment of specialist foster carers with the right support to offer placements for our children to offer local stable loving homes to children we care for.

Closing Summary

As we reflect on the period from April 2024 to March 2025, it is with a sense of pride that we acknowledge the consistent progress and achievements of Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering Service. This year has been marked by resilience, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to improving outcomes for the children we care for.

We have developed new, and reviewed existing, reportable forms into our record management system, LCS, to enhance reporting to continue to strengthen our timely decision making and outcomes for children.

We are excited to have big plans in place to launch increased support for our foster carers which is what we are calling our 'Care for Carers' in 2025 – 2026.

We have seen improvements across some key performance indicators, including a 100% timeliness rate for foster carer reviews. Our recruitment efforts have yielded the highest number of foster carer approvals in three years, and we are on the road to embedding new processes to enhance assessment timeliness and quality. We have achieved significant success in recruiting substantively to vacant positions, providing a more stable and substantive staff cohort within the Fostering Service, including the appointment of a permanent Registered Manager.

The fostering community has seen enhanced consultation, visible leadership, and a renewed focus on listening to and acting upon the voices of our carers and children. The continuation of monthly forums, increasing seeking feedback and the "You Said, We Did" approach has improved a culture of transparency, collaboration, and continuous improvement which we acknowledge still requires further development and innovation. The fostering service aspires to really be able to evidence the voice of our children in foster care and to understand how they experience their fostering placement in a meaningful and consistent way.



Sean Segal
Registered Fostering Manager