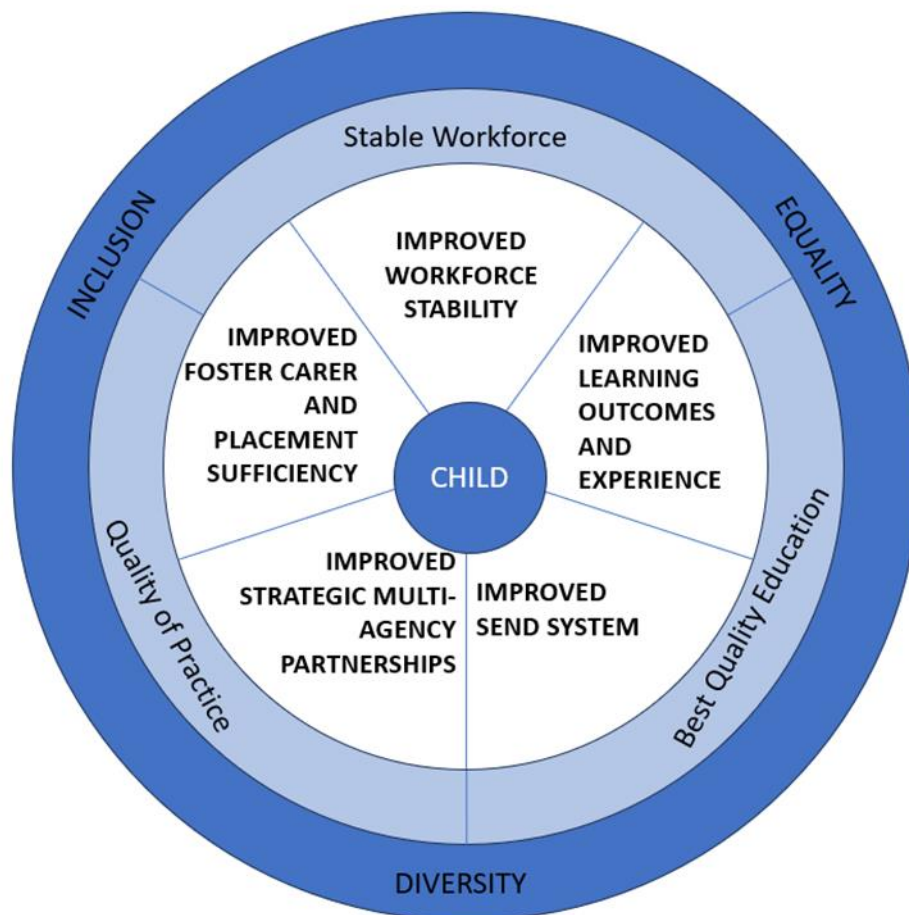


# REGIONAL PRIORITY PLAN

## 2024-2026



## Purpose

The purpose of this Regional Priority Plan is to articulate the aims and intentions of the West Midlands Local Authorities and Children's Trusts, working together as West Midlands ADCS Network, to harness our collective endeavours across the region to improve outcomes for children and young people. These aims are focussed on issues where we believe that there is a particular need or opportunity for us to impact at a regional level and are additional to work in each LA to deliver 'business as usual' and local and national policy priorities, such as 'Stable Homes Built on Love'. It also builds upon the legacy formed by work undertaken across 2022 to 2024 under our previous priority plan. To that end, the previous priorities are demonstrated in the visual graphic, as a reminder that they remain pertinent, alongside our 5 newly articulated priorities moving forward.

## Context for the West Midlands

The West Midlands area has 14 local authority areas. Alternative delivery models exist in three of these, with two trusts operating children's social care and one arms-length company operating all children's services on behalf of their council. However, the latter arrangement is due to end in September, with children's services activities returning to the control of the council.

As of September 2024, one local authority area is judged by Ofsted, under the Inspection of Local Authority Childrens Services (ILACS) criteria, to be Outstanding, seven are judged to be Good, four Require Improvement to be Good and two are considered to be Inadequate. This represents 57% being Good or Outstanding and is an improvement on 2022 where this was 50%.

As a region, we start from the premise that every service has strengths and areas of good practice that can be shared; and equally that everyone can learn from others and improve on their current practice in some areas.

A number of the region's local authority areas are currently involved in piloting activity in regards to Department of Education initiatives. City of Wolverhampton Council, Walsall Council and Warwickshire County Council are all pathfinder authorities under the [Families First for Children](#) initiative, whilst Telford & Wrekin Council and Staffordshire County Council are piloting the [Family Networks](#) Initiative. Birmingham Childrens Trust is an early adopter of the [Early Career Framework](#). Whilst the direct learning from being involved in any of this activity is limited to those local authorities involved, there is clear benefit to the region as a whole in terms of understanding what the future practice landscape might look like, thus enabling agile rollout at an appropriate time in the future.

## Context nationally

Whilst the priorities that have been identified in this plan have primarily been included based on regional analysis of need, all are seated within a broader, national context. Cross cutting to all of these is the financial challenges that all local authorities are currently facing. The Department for Education, in their [Annual Report](#) (page 28), have identified:

- **Local authorities' financial challenges**

*There is a risk that local authorities' financial challenges impede delivery of essential support services and reform activity across childcare; special educational needs and disability (SEND) and alternative provision (AP); and children's social care (CSC) worsening outcomes for the most vulnerable and exacerbating cost pressures.*

Their risk rating indicates the concern to be Critical (very likely), and the likelihood has increased over the last year.

The principals of this plan were agreed by the 14 Directors of Children's Services and two Trust CEO's in the spring of 2024. Shortly afterwards, and whilst the detail was being drafted, a General Election was called which ultimately resulted in a change of Government. Subsequently, it is likely that national policy will change over the life of the plan.

### **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**

Each of the Directors of Children's Services and Trust Chief Executives are committed to a value that equality, diversity and inclusion must be at the centre of all work collectively undertaken as a region. It is therefore implicit that the three key priorities embedded in this plan are supported within this overarching value.

### **Principles of this plan**

This is a high-level strategic plan that broadly highlights the direction of travel that the DCS Network have agreed to carry forward for the next two years, until August 2026.

This plan identifies five key priorities to focus cross-regional work on during this period:

- IMPROVED FOSTER CARER AND PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY
- IMPROVED STRATEGIC MULTI-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS
- IMPROVED WORKFORCE STABILITY
- IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCE
- IMPROVED SEND SYSTEM

Our six standing workstreams will each, in liaison with their DCS sponsor decide how their own individual workplans supports in each of the priorities. Whilst it is anticipated that no single workstream will be identified as the lead for any given priority, there will naturally be some which will become more involved in certain aspects of this priority plan.

For clarity the six standing workstreams are:

- Early Help & Targeted Support
- Education & Skills
- Quality of Practice & Performance
- Strategic Commissioning Network
- Strategic SEND Group
- Workforce & Leadership.

Additionally, it is expected the Strategic Performance Network will support, across plan, with data insights and analysis.

Overall performance of the plan will be monitored by the DCS sponsor for Regional Improvement and Innovation who will call each workstream in to DCS Network at least once a year so that they can account for their contributions to the plan.

To develop a sustainable strategy that delivers  
**IMPROVED FOSTER CARER AND PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY,**  
 and ensures children are placed in settings that meet all of their needs. Which provides sector leading support for the region's in-house carers and that delivers best value for the region's taxpayers.

#### CONTEXT

The Department for Education, in their [Annual Report](#) (page 28), have identified:

***Looked after children placement market failure***

*A risk that local authorities are unable to access appropriate placements to meet the needs of children in their care; and the prices they pay continue to increase. There is also a risk of disorderly exit of some providers from the market which would worsen the position.*

Their risk rating indicates the concern to be Critical (very likely), although they say the likelihood has remained stable across the last year.

ADCS, nationally also recognise, and are acting upon, concern in this area, specifically around the issue of profiteering. In his [President's speech](#) to annual conference, Andy Smith, said:

*"...Prior to the general election, the DfE's Market Advisory Group...started to consider what national action is needed to address the spiralling costs of placements for children in care and the profit that is being made as a result...we are ready and willing to support this work and any action the new government is willing to take to ensure that the resources we have available are directed towards improving the lives of children and not shareholders or hedge fund investors."*

Regionally we have identified that the 10 highest cost placements that each local authority commissions contribute significantly to the overall placement spend, and they may not consistently meet the appropriate needs of the child. Similarly, there are a high number of children with the most complex needs, often requiring a secure children's home placement, who are having to be placed in alternative settings, often at significant expense.

According to 2023 data, 16% of the region's children are placed more than 20 miles from their home address, whilst this is better than many other regions and the England average as a whole (17%) it still means that almost 1900 are displaced from their home networks.

#### PLAN

- To engage with the market so as to influence supply, quality and cost of both fostering and residential placements.
- To collectively engage with both fostering and residential frameworks so as to promote efficient commissioning of placements.
- To work collaboratively in seeking solutions to internal foster care recruitment concerns.
- To collaborate and support in ensuring sufficient in-house residential placements are maintained.
- To seek opportunities both as individual local authorities and collectively, to increase the supply of in-house residential provision.
- To collaborate in finding solutions to workforce recruitment and retention issues within our own residential provision.
- To continue to work with the Department of Education to ensure the successful building and launch of a region owned Secure Childrens Home, providing in region placements for West Midlands young people.
- To work collaboratively to recruit, retain and train in-house foster carers.
- To engage fully and proactively in any future government initiative aimed at supporting and sustaining placement sufficiency.

#### OUTCOMES for CYP and Families

- Children and young people to be placed in geographically matched placements.
- Reduced multiple placements moves.
- Children with the most complex needs to be placed in provision that fully meet their needs.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduction in placement costs, so as to allow resources to be used more efficiently in meeting the needs of children and young people.</li> </ul>		
LINKED WORKSTREAMS/SUBSTREAMS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality of practice &amp; performance</li> <li>Strategic Commissioning Network</li> <li>Strategic SEND Group</li> <li>Workforce &amp; Leadership.</li> </ul>		
MEASURABLES		
QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE	VOICE OF THE CHILD
Analysis of placement budget and average placement costs.	Qualitative survey of a sample of Reviewing Officers.	Analysis of children's feedback to their Looked After Child Reviews.
Analysis of placement distance from child's home.		
Analysis of number of placements moves and placement duration.		

<p>To use the collective strength of the region's DCS Network to ensure  <b>IMPROVED STRATEGIC MULTI-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS,</b>  including health, police and probation to deliver the best outcomes for children and young people.</p>		
CONTEXT		
<p>Working effectively across multi agency partnerships, needs to start from the top. To this end, Andy Smith, in his <a href="#">President's speech</a> to annual conference, observed:</p> <p>"While the Department for Education has a lead role, several other government departments front different aspects of children's policy. The system is fragmented which leads to silos and limits our ability to positively work with children and families in a holistic way and have full impact..."</p> <p>Within the region there is sufficient feedback that indicates working relationships across multi-agency forums is not always as efficient, nor equitable, as it should be. Specifically, the relationship between local authorities and ICB's, and often Police, would benefit from further development to ensure a joined up and holistic focus.</p>		
PLAN		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working with local authority CEO's and Local Government Association colleagues to deliver a number of forums aimed at bringing strategic leaders from key partner agencies together.</li> <li>Collectively lobby central Government in regard to enabling better cross department decision making that is child focused.</li> <li>Whilst multi-agency territorial footprints often do not match those of the region, or sometimes, any single local authority area, we will seek ways to collectively build collaborative relationships with strategic partners.</li> </ul>		
OUTCOMES for CYP and Families		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whilst this priority is aimed at strategic partnerships, collective working at this level will enable better and joined up frontline practice that meets the need of the child more effectively.</li> <li></li> </ul>		
LINKED WORKSTREAMS/SUBSTREAMS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early Help &amp; Targeted Support</li> <li>Education &amp; Skills</li> <li>Quality of practice &amp; performance</li> <li>Strategic Commissioning Network</li> <li>Strategic SEND Group</li> <li>Workforce &amp; Leadership.</li> </ul>		
MEASURABLES		
QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE	VOICE OF THE CHILD
	<p>Given the high-level nature of this priority, we will collate a record of activity undertaken to improve partner relationships and gather examples of good practice and their impacts with a view to crystallising specific future priority actions and measurables.</p>	

## IMPROVED WORKFORCE STABILITY

across disciplines of the sector and that continues to promote the West Midlands as the “go to” region for children’s services professionals.

### CONTEXT

The Department for Education, in their [Annual Report](#) (page28), have identified:

- **Social worker capacity**

*A risk that the workforce lacks capacity and stability to meet demand, in the context of recruitment and retention challenges.*

Their risk rating indicates the concern to be Critical (very likely) and likely has increased over the last year.

Data to 2023 shows that whilst the region’s social worker vacancy rate had reduced on the previous year to 19.3% (from 21%), it was still higher than six other regions and the England average as a whole (18.9%).

Whilst similar data is not explicitly available for non-social worker sectors of the workforce there are clear indicators in the region of concern, especially relating to educational psychologists and residential staff.

### PLAN

- To share practice that helps to increase the capacity of frontline social work staff through a combination of increased staffing numbers, a review of core social work tasks and increased development opportunities.
- Through marketing and recruitment increase permanency in the regional workforce and reduce the number of staff leaving the region.
- To consider the experience of workers from the Global Majority in regards to seeking senior positions and to look to find ways to further support their development/experience.
- To work closely with identified project leads including those funded by external stakeholders such as the DfE, to ensure regional decisions are made with support of recent research and data.
- To develop and approve a regional social work pathway for both career progression and continual professional development. This will include a start to finish career academy.
- To seek ways to work collaboratively with other regions, or as a nation, to disrupt the agency market, so as to both reduce reliance on temporary workers and reduce the overall cost.
- Continue to explore routes to resource further leadership development support.
- Working with colleagues from Birmingham Children’s Trust, gain an understanding of the benefits and challenges of the Early Career Framework (which they are early adopters of), so as to be able to agilely role the final model out across the region, when appropriate.
- Consider emerging themes in regard to the use of non-social work qualified staff across the system.
- Find initiatives that support recruitment and retention within the residential staff sector.
- Consider if initiatives already in place to support social work recruitment and retention could be replicated to support other professional disciplines, such as educational psychology.

### OUTCOMES for CYP and Families

- To reduce our reliance on agency staff, initially to a rate more consistent with the national average and then seek to become the best performing region.
- To decrease the number of social work vacancies to a rate that is better than the national average, both as a region and individually to those LA areas that significantly exceed the national average.
- Narrow the gap between the highest and lowest rates across turnover, vacancy and agency indicators, contributing to children experiencing fewer changes of social worker.
- Reduce agency spend for all LA’s/Trusts across the region.

### LINKED WORKSTREAMS/SUBSTREAMS

- Workforce & Leadership
- Strategic Performance Network
- Early Help & Targeted Support
- Quality of Practice & Performance Group
- Principal Social Workers

### MEASURABLES

QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE	VOICE OF THE CHILD
<p><i>Stability of SW for LAC KPI</i></p> <p><i>Develop a dataset that demonstrates individual and regional performance against both 2021 benchmarks and ongoing national comparators and that covers, as a minimum:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Agency Spend</i></li> <li>• <i>Agency rate</i></li> <li>• <i>Vacancy rate</i></li> <li>• <i>Staff turnover</i></li> <li>• <i>BAME post holders at tiers 1-3 (DCS, AD, HOS – or equivalent)</i></li> </ul> <p><i>This information should be available at least quarterly and will be shared with DCS Network, Programme Governance Board and all appropriate workstreams. (Workforce Workstream and SPN)</i></p>	<p>Compile and analyse exit interviews and data so as to identify reasons for leaving and offer comparisons between those moving on for positive opportunity vs. those leaving for perceived negative reasons. Consideration to also be given to average number of years that leavers have remained in the local authority area and consideration to the use of a quick fire 30 seconds regional survey once a year to all SW and allied staff, with analysis to inform a dynamic recruitment and retention plan. <i>(Workforce &amp; Leadership)</i></p> <p><i>Share analysis of LGA and local SW Heath check survey to identify effective workforce strategies and understand what matters and works for staff</i></p>	<p>Feedback report from the voice of children across the region detailing their experience of changes in social workers and IRO's, to include non-SW qualified staff as appropriate <i>(Participation Network and Principal Social Workers)</i></p>



IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCE		
for all children and young people across an inclusive and high-performing schools system, promoted through positive partnerships with all schools and sector partners		
CONTEXT		
National ADCS recognise that learning outcomes, especially within a framework of inclusivity is presenting a challenge. In his <a href="#">President's speech</a> to annual conference, Andy Smith, said: "As a nation, we need a new all-encompassing vision for education that government, employers, parents, carers and learners can sign up to. One that is inclusive, not exclusive, where the differing needs of children are recognised as a strength in a school, not a burden to it, and where resources allow for additionality to be appropriately catered for. ADCS believes this vision must be rooted in place through the development of place-based school partnerships, based on strong collaboration and driven by a shared moral purpose across partners."		
PLAN		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To support schools to make informed decisions around academisation/multi-academisation, including as appropriate a shared response to local authority led academies.</li> <li>To continue to support, as appropriate, the education system, and more specifically children, with the recovery from Covid lockdown issues.</li> <li>Education performance to be considered more explicitly within the annual Peer Challenge cycle.</li> <li>To share best practice around working with Multi-Academy Trusts and ensure that any necessary challenge to the DfE is joined up and collaborative.</li> </ul>		
OUTCOMES for CYP and Families		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To ensure that learning is shared across the region and moves toward academisation are effectively planned, well informed and that educational outcomes for children are positively impacted by such a move.</li> <li>An improved picture of good and outstanding schools across the region</li> <li>Improved attainment data.</li> </ul>		
LINKED WORKSTREAMS/SUBSTREAMS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education &amp; Skills</li> <li>SEND</li> <li>Quality of Practice &amp; Performance Group</li> <li>Participation Network</li> </ul>		
QUANTITATIVE	MEASURABLES QUALITATIVE	VOICE OF THE CHILD
Regional monitoring dashboard to be devised and utilised to track both schools and SEND Ofsted judgements so as to understand the impact of implementation of the White and Green Papers. (Education & Skills Network)		Key themes to be filtered and analysed from the School Survey so as to demonstrate the impact and outcomes upon children (Education & Skills Network)

To collectively influence the national conversation regarding an  
**IMPROVED SEND SYSTEM,**  
 so as to be able develop effective services that meet the realistic needs of children, young people and their families.

#### CONTEXT

The Department for Education, in their [Annual Report](#) (page28), have identified:

**High needs cost pressures**

*A risk that despite substantial real terms increases in high needs funding, high needs pressures continue to outstrip available funding significantly, making the SEND and AP system financially unsustainable. Increased funding for high needs has been driven in part by rising demand for education health and care plans (EHC plans).*

Their risk rating indicates the concern to be Critical (very likely) and that the likelihood has worsened over the last year.

The percentage of pupils with a Statement of Educational Need has steadily increased since 2013, with this now being 4%. Additionally, the weekly unit cost of a SEN placement has also risen, by more than inflation, over that period. Subsequently the financial pressures that local authorities are currently exposed to in this regard are considered unsustainable in the long term and make it increasingly challenging to meet the needs and expectations of children, young people and parents.

#### PLAN

- For SEND project delivery to be broadly aligned with the wider education priority plan.
- To continue to promote and deliver a robust SEND peer review framework.
- SEND be considered more explicitly within the annual Peer Challenge cycle and further consideration to integrating the SEND peer review framework into this.
- Belonging, inclusion and early intervention- developing approaches to promote inclusion in local communities and provisions.
- Innovate and share successes with regard to managing SEND resources, and ensuring SEND issues are responded to early and well.
- Ensuring best value for specialist provisions
- Share good practice in gaining and responding to the voices of children and families with SEND
- Alternative Provision- SEND and AP- auditing and understanding what arrangements are currently operating across the region in AP provision; building upon best practice.

#### OUTCOMES for CYP and Families

- Children, young people and their families will receive a service that is realistic and that meets their needs.
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#### LINKED WORKSTREAMS/SUBSTREAMS

- Education & Skills
- SEND
- Strategic Commissioning Network
- Quality of Practice & Performance Group
- Participation Network

#### MEASURABLES

QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE	VOICE OF THE CHILD
Data and benchmarking is available for services and agencies to ask 'So What?' Qs and inform decision making in LAs	SEND peer review to be designed and analysed so as to offer a qualitative window upon broad, regional service provision. ( <i>SEND Network</i> )	To consider the appointment of a team of young researchers linked to a WM university to gather views of CYP at both SEN Support and with EHCPs across the region, building on the excellent work of RIP-STARS formerly of Coventry University
Local data sets includes health data linked to the tableau due to the project work with health		

Focus on wider outcome collection with lived experiences more paramount		
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