



Local Government Boundary Commission for England

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Council Size Submission

March 2024

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1. Introduction

- 1.1.1 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE) review of Sandwell's council size started in August 2023 with a preliminary meeting, at which an indicative timetable for review was outlined.
- 1.1.2 The review was initiated due to the passage of time, the last review having been undertaken over 20 years ago and implemented in 2003. In addition, 2 of the wards now have a variance greater than +/- 10% compared to the average within the borough. The LGBCE undertakes reviews of local authorities that have a variance greater than +/- 10% in 30% of wards or where one ward has a variance +/- 30% so this criterion was not engaged.
- 1.1.3 This submission presents Sandwell's 'Council Size Submission'. This provides the LGBCE with the Council's view on the optimal council size, accompanied by supporting evidence across three broad areas based on LGBCE review criteria. These areas are:
- a) Strategic Leadership – the role of councillors in decision making and council business demonstrating how responsibilities are distributed across the council.
 - b) Accountability – the role of councillors in holding decision makers to account and to ensure that the council can discharge its responsibilities to outside bodies.
 - c) Community leadership – how councillors represent and provide leadership in their communities and how this affects workload responsibilities.

Summary

- 1.2.1 The purpose of this report is to outline the Council's recommendation to the LGBCE in terms of proposed council size. This represents the preliminary stage in the Council's Electoral Boundary Review process.
- 1.2.2 The recommendation proposed by the Council is based on -
- a) the future strategic vision for Sandwell and changes in the nature of the relationship between residents and the Council which seek to achieve greater empowerment of local communities in designing solutions to the challenges that they face;
 - b) ensuring levels of elected representation are commensurate with the challenges and opportunities facing the borough;
 - c) the intention to improve effectiveness and transparency of governance and decision-making arrangements in the short and medium term which will lead to opportunities for greater efficiencies;

- d) the intention to consider the required number of Councillors actively involved and serving on bodies with a role in the Council's formal decision-making structure; and
- e) changes in the way that residents are interacting with the Council and are able to communicate with Councillors developing and implementing modern practices reflecting the aspirations of the Council moving towards a digital first organisation using technology to increase engagement in and participation with the Council.

Recommendation – Council Size

A council size of 72 is recommended to ensure an efficient structure whilst meeting key representational requirements relating to strategic leadership, accountability, and community leadership.

2. Borough Profile – the six towns of Sandwell

Sandwell is the twenty-seventh largest English district by population and is located within the Black Country and West Midlands at the heart of England.

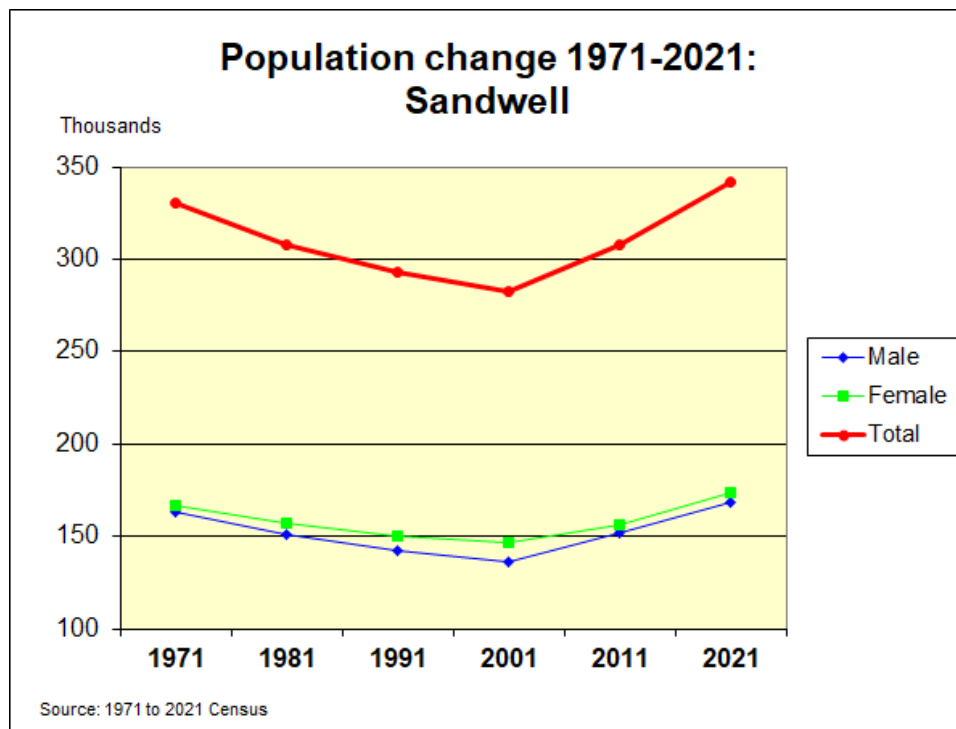
The borough comprises six distinct towns – Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich – each with their own unique characteristics, cultures and identity but sharing many unifying features. The borough is predominantly urban in nature and borders Birmingham, Dudley, Walsall, and Wolverhampton. Spanning the borough are the parliamentary constituencies of West Bromwich West, West Bromwich East, Warley, part of Halesowen and Rowley Regis, which crosses into Dudley borough.

A boundary review for Sandwell was last undertaken in 2004 when the population was 288,849 with an electorate of 206,728. As of the most recent ONS mid-year estimate in 2022, its population was 344,210 with an electorate of 235,216.

a) Profile

2.1.1 Sandwell's population has remained stable over the past two decades with an increased rate of growth since 2001 and this trend is forecast to present over the coming years, reflecting the borough's role as a major economic driver within the wider West Midlands region and the UK economy overall (Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 – Population change in Sandwell



- 2.1.2 Between the last two censuses (held in 2011 and 2021), the population of Sandwell increased by 11.0%, from around 308,100 in 2011 to around 341,800 in 2021.
- 2.1.3 The population here increased by a greater percentage than the overall population of the West Midlands (6.2%), and by a greater percentage than the overall population of England (up 6.6% since the 2011 Census).
- 2.1.4 In 2021, Sandwell was home to around 28.5 people per football pitch-sized piece of land, compared with 25.7 in 2011. The area was the second-most densely populated local authority area across the West Midlands (after Birmingham).

b) Population, People & Diversity

- 2.2.1 The last Boundary Review for Sandwell was undertaken in 2004, when the population was 288,849 with an electorate of 206,728. Since 2004 substantial regeneration has continued which, combined with natural migration has seen the population grow to 344,210 in 2022, which is a 19.2% increase.
- 2.2.2 Sandwell Forecast Model (SFM) projections show that the borough’s population is set to reach 361,389 by 2030, with those age 18+ from which the electorate is drawn reaching up to a potential 271,676 and a projected electorate of 247,060 (see **Appendices 2 and 3** for detail).
- 2.2.3 For electorate forecasting purposes, 2023 electorate data is used as a base line as this was the mid-point in the electoral cycle and is not artificially impacted by General Elections, Referenda, or absence of local elections.
- 2.2.4 The following table (Figure 2) illustrates population and electorate change from 2004 to 2022/3, and projections to 2030 –

Figure 2 – Population change in Sandwell

Population Change		Electorate Change	
ONS Mid-Year Estimates to 2022/23		ONS to 2023	
Total Population		Total Electorate	
2004	288,849	June 2004	206,728
2019	340,198	June 2019	227,342
2022	344,210	June 2022	235,216
		June 2023	233,725
Additional Population	55,361	Electorate Change (from 2004)	26,997
% Change	19.2%	% Change (from 2004)	13.1%
SFM Forecast 18+ Population		SFM Forecast Electorate 2030	
2030	271,676	2030	247,060
Population Change (from 2023)	11,943	Electorate Change (from 2023)	16,652
% Change (from 2030)	4.6%	% Change (from 2023)	7.2%

2.2.5 Within the population of adults aged 18+, not all adults will be registered to vote. This is important because the LGBCE uses the number of electors per ward (people registered to vote) to determine “electoral fairness”. The LGBCE uses the concept of variance from the Sandwell average per ward and will intervene if over 30% of all wards have an electorate of +/- 10% from the average electorate for the authority. Figure 1 outlines the most recent data sourced from the LGBCE; Wolverhampton had six wards (30%) with a +/-10% variance, which was on the cusp of mandatory intervention. Figure 3 outlines the most recent position pre-review.

Figure 3 – Voter ratios in Sandwell for 2023 (LGBCE/SMBC-sourced data)

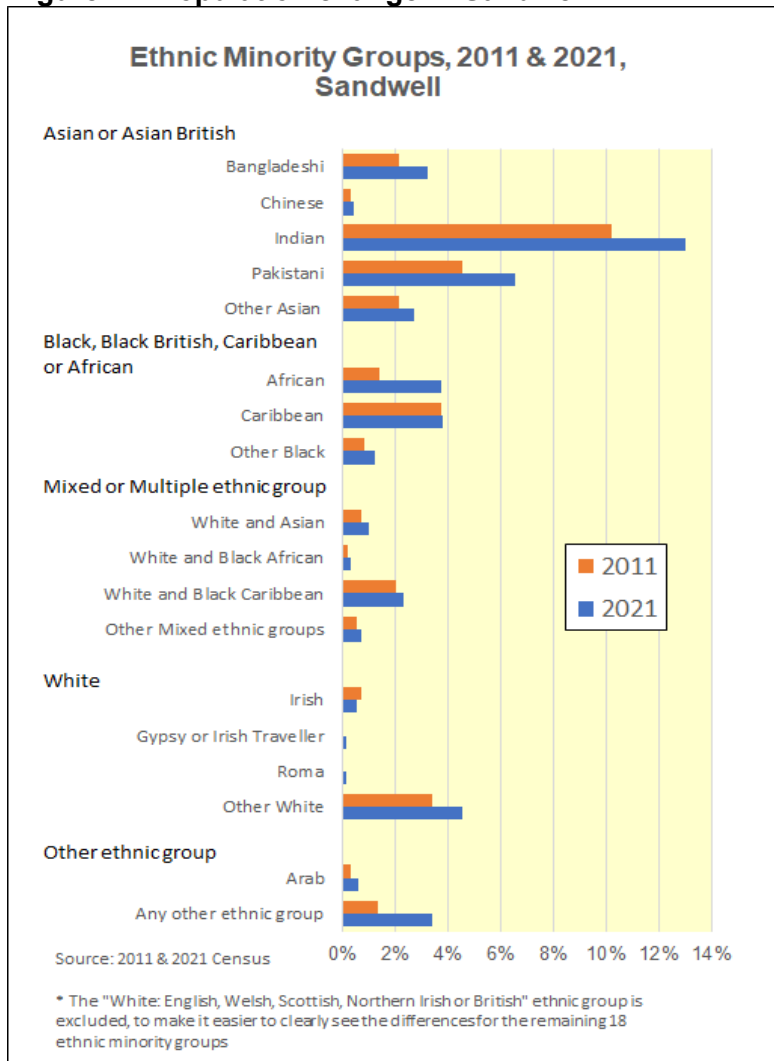
Ward	Electorate	Average	Difference
Abbey	8,491	9722	-12.7%
Blackheath	9,228	9722	-5.1%
Bristnall	9,009	9722	-7.3%
Charlemont with Grove Vale	9,343	9722	-3.9%
Cradley Heath and Old Hill	10,518	9722	8.2%
Friar Park	8,840	9722	-9.1%
Great Barr with Yew Tree	9,818	9722	1.0%
Great Bridge	9,862	9722	1.4%
Greets Green and Lyng	9,530	9722	-2.0%
Hateley Heath	10,295	9722	5.9%
Langley	9,584	9722	-1.4%
Newton	8,683	9722	-10.7%
Old Warley	9,236	9722	-5.0%
Oldbury	10,242	9722	5.3%
Princes End	9,455	9722	-2.7%
Rowley	9,853	9722	1.3%
Smethwick	9,948	9722	2.3%
Soho and Victoria	11,023	9722	13.4%
St. Paul's	10,667	9722	9.7%
Tipton Green	10,707	9722	10.1%
Tividale	9,198	9722	-5.4%
Wednesbury North	9,260	9722	-4.8%
Wednesbury South	10,217	9722	5.1%
West Bromwich Central	10,328	9722	6.2%
Total	233,335		
Average per ward	9,722		

2.2.6 Sandwell's population is younger than England's average, with 27.4% of the population below the age of 20, compared to 23.1% for England as a whole. 49.4% of the population is male and 50.6% female (2022 data). 2.3% of Sandwell's population (aged 16 & over) identifies as having an LGB+ orientation (2021 Census). Sandwell's demographic profile reflects its rich heritage as a manufacturing and industrial hub which emerged during the industrial revolution. Sandwell has historically attracted a diverse population

from a wide range of cultures and the borough is home to 163,900 from non-White British groups (47.9%)

2.2.7 The following chart shows the borough’s population breakdown at the time of the 2011 & 2021 Census. The ethnic makeup of Sandwell has seen extensive changes since 2001. Just over half of Sandwell residents now class themselves as being of White British origin and a further 5.2% are of Other White origin (which includes Irish and Gypsy Travellers). 42.8% of Sandwell’s population are from other ethnic backgrounds. These Sandwell figures compare with England & Wales averages of 74.4%, 7.3% and 18.3% respectively. The largest minority ethnic groups in Sandwell in 2021 are Indian (13.0%) and Pakistani (6.5%), as illustrated below (Figure 4)

Figure 4 – Population change in Sandwell



2.2.8 The distribution of people from BAME communities is not uniform across the borough, with higher proportions seen across the traditional inner core areas of the borough. Smethwick town has the highest ranked proportion of residents from Minority Ethnic groups in Sandwell (that is, all ethnic groups other than White British). These groups make up 75.6% of the town’s population, which is considerably higher than West Bromwich town which ranks second with 55.8% of its population from Minority Ethnic groups.

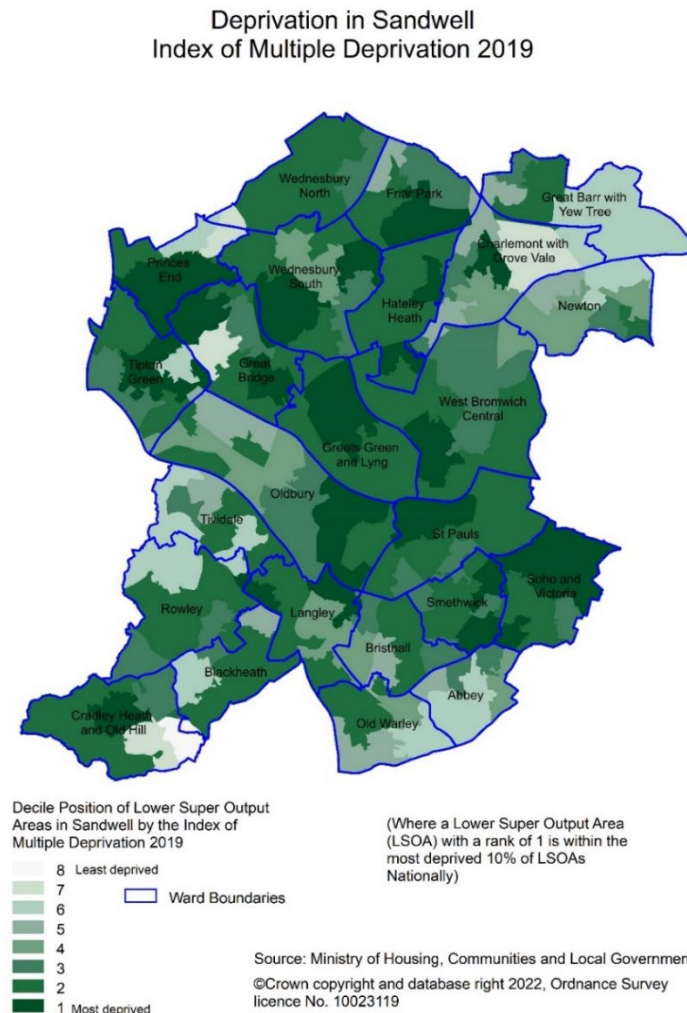
- 2.2.9 BAME communities tend to live in larger households than White groups, with the 2021 Census showing that 34.7% of White residents live in households of 4 or more compared to 72.9% of Asian residents. In contrast, 14.9% of White residents live in single person households compared to 3.9% of Asian residents. This suggests that those towns with a larger BAME population may be disproportionately affected by future growth in electorate size.
- 2.2.10 According to the 2021 Census, in Sandwell, 20% of residents were disabled under the Equality Act, compared with 17.8% in England & Wales. 9.9% of Sandwell residents were disabled and said their disability limits their day-to-day activities a lot. 27.4% of Sandwell households included 1 disabled person (25.6% in England & Wales), whilst 8.3% of households contained 2 or more disabled people (6.7% in England & Wales).
- 2.2.11 This corresponds with higher demand on social care support services as well as accessible housing, the design and structure of the physical and built environment (including highways, pavements, public transport, and retail). This is reflected in casework undertaken by Councillors and the challenges experienced by several Councillors who themselves are disabled.

c) Deprivation & Inequality

- 2.3.1 The Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019) shows Sandwell as having 19.9% of its Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the most deprived 10% nationally. According to the average deprivation score, it is the 12th most deprived local authority in the country (out of 317). In Wednesbury Town and Tipton Town 75% and 71% respectively of LSOAs fall within the 20% most deprived in England.
- 2.3.2 Each local authority has been assigned a score based on deprivation levels, and also a rank based on each of the scores. Scores and ranks are provided for the following: average score, average rank, extent, local concentration, proportion of LSOAs in most deprived 10% nationally, income scale and employment scale. Sandwell's ranks are as follows (where 1 is most deprived):
- Average Score – 12
 - Average Rank - 8
 - Extent - 10
 - Local Concentration - 53
 - Proportion of LSOAs in most deprived 10% nationally - 44
 - Income Scale - 9
 - Employment Scale - 12
- 2.3.3 Sandwell's rank of local concentration is lower than the other deprivation measures – this shows that deprivation in Sandwell is not concentrated in pockets, but more widespread across the borough than in other areas.

2.3.4 Of the two supplementary indices that have been produced, Sandwell is ranked 31st most deprived for Income Deprivation Affecting Children, and 27th most deprived for Income Deprivation Affecting Older People nationally. 60.3% of Sandwell residents and 63.6% of children live in the 20% most deprived areas in the country (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Index of Multiple Deprivation – Sandwell (2019)



2.3.5 This data underpins the high and complex caseload experienced by Councillors in the borough (as shown in Appendix 1 - Councillors' Survey) and challenges in representing a diverse and modern borough population.

Conclusion

Sandwell is a diverse borough comprising many communities and faiths. The borough is one of the most socially deprived in the UK with its residents and communities presenting complex and challenging casework and service needs to their local Councillors. It is essential that there are sufficient Councillors to meet local need balanced with wider representational requirements.

3. Policy Context, Challenges & Priorities

3.1.1 Sandwell's Vision 2030 is shared by all partners in the borough and contains 10 ambitions for Sandwell. The Council and its partners are in the process of refreshing the approach to Vision 2030 with a view to launching in Summer 2024.

3.1.2 The Council's commitment to delivering Vision 2030 is set out in its Corporate Plan. The plan was refreshed and updated in June 2023.

3.1.3 The Corporate Plan sets out the six strategic outcomes for the Council:

- The best start in life for Children and Young People;
- People Live Well and Age Well;
- Strong, Resilient Communities;
- Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods;
- A Connected and Accessible Sandwell; and
- A Strong and Inclusive Economy.

3.1.4 The Corporate Plan sets out the Council's role as a partner, enabler and leader and the importance of partnership working to the delivery of the Plan. It incorporates elements such as:

- Responding to national and regional policy for local government.
- Leading on innovative approaches to working differently.
- Acting as a civic leader, in collaboration with residents, communities and partners (public, private and voluntary and community sectors).
- Working with residents and communities to find solutions to challenges faced in local neighbourhoods.
- Being an effective partner in the West Midlands Combined Authority.
- Being at the forefront of working with Government through the Levelling Up Partnership and leading local anchor networks.

3.1.5 Delivery of the Corporate Plan is monitored regularly through the Council's Performance Management Framework. The Council has adopted a Golden Thread approach to business planning and performance management, to ensure everyone understands how they fit in and support delivery of the strategic outcomes in the Corporate Plan.

3.1.6 Business Plans are in place at Assistant Director Level across the Council, to ensure alignment with both the Corporate Plan and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. A wide evidence base is used as the foundation for the business planning process, this ensures that the views of residents and other key stakeholders, as well as performance data, are considered when planning and developing service provision.

3.1.7 Key elements of the evidence base are: -

- Annual Resident Wellbeing and Perception Survey;

- Annual Budget Consultation;
- Annual Tenant Survey;
- Local Government Association (LGA) Equality Framework Audit; and
- Employee Engagement Survey.

3.1.8 In March 2022, a process of statutory intervention was initiated by the Secretary of State in response to an External Auditor Value for Money (VfM) Governance Review. In seeking to address the recommendations of several key statutory reviews, the Council, overseen by Commissioners, responded by adopting an Improvement Plan, the delivery of which has been closely monitored by the Council's Leadership Team, Cabinet, Scrutiny function and Full Council.

3.1.9 The Council has made great strides in securing improvement across the organisation, addressing the recommendations set out in the reviews. As part of the Council's ongoing improvement journey, there is a continuing focus on embedding these improvements and securing lasting changes to organisational values and behaviours.

3.1.10 Crucially, in seeking to move beyond statutory intervention the Council adopts a mature and realistic assessment of its current position and has a clear understanding of future requirements to sustain transformative improvement and service delivery and maintaining effective governance frameworks which provide appropriate assurance balanced with agility of decision-making.

3.1.11 In addition, there are two statutory plans that support the economic growth of the borough. These are -

- The Local Development Plan (or Local Plan) – this is the statutory land use planning document which identifies where new employment and housing development will be located and where investment for new infrastructure, such as transport, schools and green space will be made. It consists of;
 - ✓ Black Country Core Strategy (2011) - the overarching strategy framework for the four Black Country LAs.
 - ✓ Sandwell Site allocations & Delivery Plan (2012)
 - ✓ Area Action Plans for Tipton (2008), Smethwick (2008) and West Bromwich (2012).
- The West Midlands Local Transport Plan (LTP) (Movement for Growth, 2016) which is prepared by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and sets out the transport policies and a programme of interventions which include supporting economic growth as a primary objective.

3.1.12 Legislation requires that both plans are periodically reviewed. Joint working at a Black Country level on strategic planning matters ceased in 2022. Sandwell's new Local Plan will cover the period to 2041 and will replace all the documents that currently form the Local Development Plan. The Draft

Local Plan was consulted on at the end of 2023. The new Local Plan is expected to be adopted in late 2025 following an examination by the Planning Inspectorate.

- 3.1.13 The Draft Local Plan is a document that plans the future development of the borough. It sets out how and where we expect to build the new homes we need up to 2041, and what land is required to accommodate new jobs. It also sets out how we will address challenges like dealing with climate change, protecting our natural environment, supporting our high streets, and encouraging sustainable travel.
- 3.1.14 The Draft Local Plan identified that there is a need for 29,773 homes (2022-2041). However, the Draft Local Plan acknowledged that there is only sufficient land suitable and available for housing to deliver 11,167 homes, of which 5,063 are estimated to be built by 2029. With regards to employment land, the plan established a need for 185 hectares (ha) of vacant land and proposed to allocate 1,206ha of employment land (of which 29ha is currently vacant).
- 3.1.15 The WMCA is currently preparing a replacement for the 2016 LTP. This is likely to be completed in 2025 and will be endorsed by all the WMCA's constituent authorities.

Conclusion

The significance of the policy and strategic landscape for Sandwell does not support a reduction in the number of Councillors. Strong and robust partnerships, commitments to system change with local partners and moves toward empowering individuals and communities through the development of a new model for neighbourhood service structure and delivery will current levels of representation to be maintained to ensure communities needs are fully represented.

4 Strategic Leadership, Governance & Decision-Making

Councillors are the heart of local government, providing political and local community leadership as well as helping shape the development of services and ensuring investment and regeneration takes place for the benefit of residents and communities. Details of the key roles played by Councillors in Sandwell are explored below.

a) Context & Overview of Governance

- 4.1.1 Sandwell Council has 72 Councillors who in turn represent 24 wards, each of which has 3 Councillors. Councillors are currently elected by thirds each year, with a fallow year every four years when no local elections are held.
- 4.1.2 The political composition of the Council as of 1 March 2024 comprises 61 Labour, 8 Conservative, 3 Independent.
- 4.1.3 A range of opportunities were provided for members of the public to address meetings virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council's democracy and decision-making systems were made accessible in a way not previously thought possible in such an accelerated timeline and this approach continues through the ongoing use of webcasting – broadening access to local democracy. It is hoped that consideration of virtual meetings will be reintroduced by Government following their successful introduction during the Covid-19 pandemic.

b) Full Council

- 4.2.1 Full Council typically meets up to 8 times a year, with between 6-8 weeks between each meeting There are 4 types of Full Council meeting, including –
- **Annual Meetings** – typically held on the third Tuesday of May following local elections and which sets the Constitutional frameworks, delegations, committee structures and Councillor responsibilities for the forthcoming year;
 - **Budget Meeting** – this meeting is typically held no later than the first Tuesday in March and is the meeting at which the budget – and Council Tax – for the forthcoming financial year are set;
 - **Ordinary Meeting** – these meetings deal with a mixed range of business, including policies, plans and strategies together with motions which are typically on topical issues of local interest and concern; and
 - **Extraordinary Meetings** – these meetings are convened for Councillors to debate single issues of special significance for the borough. These may include recognising outstanding contributions of individuals or institutions active in the life of Sandwell.

- 4.2.2 Council meetings are usually well attended by Councillors with only minimal apologies. Public attendance varies depending on local topical issues and matters included on the published agenda for debate. Meetings are livestreamed to maximise public access to discussion.
- 4.2.3 There is therefore no indication that there will be a reduction in the number of Full Council meetings.

c) Political Leadership

- 4.3.1 The Leader and Cabinet provide political leadership for the Council, balanced with the Opposition Leader and Opposition Group(s) who hold the Leader and Cabinet to account as well as setting forward their alternative ideas for the borough. Details on the various roles and responsibilities are set out below.

Council Leader

- 4.3.2 The Leader has a duty to set out plans and policies that drive forward economic growth in the borough. Such activity includes transport, planning and development, housing, economic development and regeneration in addition to skills (including education and schools) and employment, culture, health and a range of environmental issues including low carbon and green technology.
- 4.3.3 The Leader also plays a significant role in the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and associated Committees and is portfolio holder for Employment & Skills, alongside sitting on the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and a mix of regional and national bodies.

Cabinet, Cabinet Member & Portfolio Responsibilities

- 4.3.4 The Leader has appointed 2 Deputy Leaders (who also have their own individual portfolio of responsibility) alongside 7 other Cabinet Members who each have an individual portfolio of responsibility. The Leader, Deputy Leaders and Cabinet Members work closely together on establishing and driving a range of political and strategic economic priorities, which, once adopted, then becomes the policy frameworks within which services are delivered across the borough.
- 4.3.5 Cabinet meets on a monthly cycle and considers a range of complex and wide-ranging reports. Decisions are made in public on a collective basis and this model of collective decision-making by Cabinet provides clear lines of accountability. The Leader and Cabinet Members also seek to ensure that Councillors at all levels are engaged in the decision-making process, with those Councillors who are not Cabinet Members all being actively involved in the Council's scrutiny process and serving in other decision-making frameworks.

4.3.6 The Leader has assigned a designated portfolio of services to each Cabinet Member, as detailed below –

- Leader - Inclusive Communities;
- Finance and Resources;
- Health and Adult Social Care;
- Children, Young People and Education;
- Public Health and Communities;
- Environment and Highways;
- Housing and Built Environment;
- Leisure and Tourism; and
- Regeneration and WMCA.

4.3.7 Cabinet Members are outward facing too and, as well as the behind the scenes working in helping keep the Council running, will regularly attend a range of ad-hoc meetings with Officers, community organisations and businesses and partners across the public, private and voluntary sector.

4.3.8 Most Cabinet Members carry out their responsibilities whilst also holding full-time employment - the demands and expectations of hours worked by individual Cabinet Members is high and is on top of their roles as ward Councillors. Cabinet Members also make decisions individually as required and details of this work are fully published on the Council's website.

Opposition Group Leader

4.3.9 The role of Opposition Group Leader in local government is recognised as complex and demanding and extends beyond the internal processes of the Council. The Opposition Leader is a key community representative in their own right and are prominent in the political life of the borough and also represent a powerful voice beyond Sandwell on many occasions transcending the traditional divisions of party politics alongside the Leader and other regional Leaders to emphasize the importance of Sandwell's issues being heard, understood and responded to.

Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis above that the Council has a significant number of strategic plans either in place or in development, set against an ambitious transformation and improvement programme. This requires strong, efficient, strategic leadership for the borough and the Council.

Delivery of these plans in an inclusive and empowering way, requires active and responsive local Councillors ensuring the voices of all communities are heard.

5 Accountability, Regulatory & Scrutiny Functions, Partnerships

Whilst the Leader and Cabinet have responsibility for the executive functions of the Council, all remaining Councillors are active participants in discharging Council, regulatory and scrutiny functions on behalf of the Council. Details of the key roles played by Councillors in these aspects of the Council's governance, decision-making and accountability structures are explored in this section of the report.

a) Council, Regulatory & Statutory Functions

- 5.1.1 In common with all authorities across England and Wales and in accordance with the requirements of local government legislation, the responsibility for functions is split into those reserved to the Executive (in the case of Sandwell the Leader who may delegate and assign as considered necessary), to Full Council or at local discretion.
- 5.1.2 Several Council functions and responsibilities relate to the discharge of regulatory functions, such as those relating to determining planning, licensing, and street trading applications.
- 5.1.3 The Council's Constitution sets out arrangements as to how these decisions are made, through a combination of delegations to key Officers and Service Areas as well as the establishment of dedicated Regulatory Committees to discharge non-executive functions. For Sandwell, these include –
- Audit and Risk Assurance Committee;
 - Chief Officers Appointments Sub-Committee;
 - Chief Officers Terms and Conditions Committee;
 - Ethical Standards and Member Development Committee;
 - Ethical Standards Sub Committee;
 - General Purposes and Arbitration Committee;
 - Governance and Constitution Review Committee;
 - Land and Asset Management Committee;
 - Licensing Committee and Sub Committees; and
 - Planning Committee.
- 5.1.4 The Constitution sets out the regulatory decisions that are delegated to officers. In practice, this is most planning and licensing applications. In the case of planning decisions, the Committee will only consider applications that are of considerable public interest, large in scale or where objections have been received.
- 5.1.5 The Council's Regulatory Committees meet regularly, reflecting the volume of complex and sensitive applications for development or licensing of premises. Even with most regulatory functions being delegated to Officers, there remains a substantial role for Councillors in determining these matters and discharging regulatory functions.

b) Delegation to Officers

- 5.2.1 Whilst there is an extensive range of functions and responsibilities discharged collectively by the Leader and Cabinet as well as other member decision-making bodies, a detailed Scheme of Delegation also exists. The Scheme of Delegation provides for a range of Executive Functions otherwise reserved to the Leader and Cabinet to be discharged either through Sub-Committees of Cabinet or by Officers under specific delegations as set out within the Council's Constitution.
- 5.2.2 In addition to the delegation of Executive Functions, a range of other functions also exist which either cannot be exercised by the Leader and Cabinet, are reserved to Full Council or are matters where the Council has a choice over how they are delegated. These are addressed within Part 3 of the Council's Constitution and include those which -
- a) cannot be the responsibility of the Leader and Cabinet and specifies which part of the Authority will be responsible for them. It also specifies to whom, if anyone, those functions have been delegated. For instance, in the case of planning and development control, all functions are delegated to the Head of Planning and relevant professional planning officers for discharge except those which are specified as being the responsibility of the Planning Committee;
 - b) are classified as local choice functions which may or may not be Leader and Cabinet responsibilities and specifies which part of the Council will be responsible for discharging them. It also specifies to whom, if anyone, those functions have been delegated by the Council in the case of Council functions, or the Leader in the case of Executive Functions; and
 - c) are not solely executive responsibilities, including plans and policies reserved for determination by Full Council and which form the Council's Policy Framework are also detailed along with what role the Cabinet will play in relation to those plans, policies, and strategies. Essentially, the Cabinet will develop and consult on the plans, policies and strategies listed and will then refer them to Full Council for consideration and approval. If approved, the Leader and Cabinet will then be responsible for ensuring they are implemented.
- 5.2.3 There are some decisions reserved to Full Council that cannot be delegated, except to the Chief Executive in circumstances of emergency when decisions otherwise reserved to a member body cannot be discharged, as utilised during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council must be able to have a process for urgent decisions within the legal framework and this has been stress-tested by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regulatory processes

Planning functions

- 5.2.4 The Council discharges a range of statutory decision-making obligations for regulatory processes relating to planning and licensing matters amongst others.
- 5.2.5 The Council has a distinct role as Local Planning Authority with responsibility for the assessment and determination of a wide range of planning matters, from small scale household application to large scale strategic regeneration applications. Responsibility for decision-making is discharged through Councillors as members of the Planning Committee and by officers through delegation made to the Head of Planning & Building Control.
- 5.2.6 An analysis of data for the four years 2020 to 2023 consistently shows 4-5% of applications are determined by a member body. These are typically complex and major applications which require significant preparation and commitment to attend meetings, hear representations and reach decision. The volume of applications is illustrated in the table below -

Applicable dates (1 January – 31 December)	No of planning applications received	No of planning applications determined	% of applications determined by Officers	% of applications determined at planning committee
2020	1,067	954	907 (95%)	47 (5%)
2021	1,201	1,224	1164 (95%)	60 (5%)
2022	1,223	1,179	1,128 (96%)	51 (4%)
2023	1,000	966	923 (96%)	43 (4%)

- 5.2.7 It is also of note that the Planning Committee may defer consideration of a applications for either additional information or site visit, resulting in applications received in one year being determined in the following year and requiring additional time commitments from Members.

Licensing functions

- 5.2.8 The Council acts as Licensing Authority with responsibility for the assessment and determination of a wide range of licensing matters including taxis and premises licences. Responsibility for decision-making is discharged through Councillors as members of the Licensing Committee and Sub-Committee and by officers through delegation made to the Head of Licensing.
- 5.2.9 Meetings of the Licensing Committee and Sub-Committees take place on a regular basis and are often reactive in response to emergent matters of operational or licensing compliance concern. Each meeting requires significant preparation and time commitment to attend meetings, hear representations and reach decision.

5.2.10 The volume of applications and proportions determined by Members or Officers through delegation are illustrated in the table below –

Municipal Year	No. of Decisions	Member Review Hearing Decision (%)	Matters determined by Officers (Delegation) (%)
Taxis			
2021-22	184	19 (10%)	165 (90%)
2022-23	88	41 (47%)	47 (53%)
Premises			
2021-22	826	13 (2%)	813 (98%)
2022-23	629	22 (3%)	607 (97%)

c) Scrutiny Structures & Councillor roles

5.3.1 Sandwell currently has several Scrutiny Boards, which meet regularly. Sandwell's Scrutiny Boards for 2023/24 are –

- Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board;
- Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board;
- Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board;
- Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board; and
- Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

5.3.2 The volume of meetings and matters considered by Scrutiny Boards over the last 3 years, is summarised below -

2021/22

- 33 meetings of Scrutiny Boards;
- 76 items of business dealt with; and
- 9 meetings of Scrutiny Working Groups.

2022/23

- 38 meetings of Scrutiny Boards;
- 95 items of business dealt with; and
- 6 meetings of Scrutiny Working Groups.

2023/24 (as of January 2024)

- 22 meetings of Scrutiny Boards;
- 51 items of business dealt with; and
- 5 meetings of Scrutiny Working Groups.

5.3.3 The role and responsibilities of each Scrutiny Board are subject to a process of continuous review and confirmation at the Annual Meeting of Full Council or Ordinary Meetings of Full Council as otherwise may be required.

- 5.3.4 The scrutiny process is embedded within the culture of governance and accountability operated by the Council, with each Scrutiny Board seeing attendance from the Leader and Cabinet Members with relevant portfolio responsibilities, together with Directors, Assistant Directors and key Statutory Officers as required depending on the nature of business scheduled for discussion.
- 5.3.5 Each of the Council's Scrutiny Boards may establish a Scrutiny Working Group when a particular subject or service requires more in-depth analysis and study. Scrutiny Boards comprise a smaller number of Councillors, typically 3-4 most often drawn from the membership of the appointing Scrutiny Board and as far as possible, including representatives from at least 2 political groups (or more depending on the political composition of the Council).
- 5.3.6 The annual scrutiny report indicates the effects and role of scrutiny on the Council, what policy and practice changes have been made and its effectiveness, such as fractional investment and the work with our partners on health and social care integration. All non-executive Councillors serve on at least one Scrutiny Board.

d) West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

- 5.4.1 The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) comprises 18 local authorities, including Sandwell Council and four Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) including Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP, working together to move powers from Whitehall to the West Midlands.
- 5.4.2 The primary role of the WMCA is to drive and deliver economic growth through co-operation across the constituent authorities and partners and, in turn, promote healthy, happy, and well-connected communities. This has seen the WMCA focus on a series of core objectives relating to economic growth, employment, environment, health and wellbeing, housing, productivity and skills, public service reform and transport.
- 5.4.3 The Combined Authority Mayor acts as the Chair of the WMCA, with Council Leaders from each of the constituent authorities including Sandwell collectively forming a strategic WMCA Board.
- 5.4.4 The WMCA has in turn established several Committees to assist with the discharge of its responsibilities and hold the Combined Authority Mayor to account, including –
- Economic Growth Board;
 - Employment Committee;
 - Environment & Energy Board;
 - Housing & Land Delivery Board;
 - Investment Board;
 - Wellbeing Board;
 - Audit, Risk & Assurance Committee;

- Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee;
- Overview & Scrutiny Committee; and
- Transport Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

5.4.5 The Council nominates Councillors as members of each of the Committees listed above. Those Councillors nominated to the Committees undertaken additional responsibilities aside of their core representational and decision-making roles for Sandwell MBC. These additional responsibilities extend to include attendance and participation at regularly scheduled meetings of each Committee, as well as the associated pre- and post- meeting preparations and actions. As these meetings typically are hosted outside of borough but within the wider region, additional time is also required for travel.

5.4.6 Feedback through the Members Survey 2024 shows members appointed to these roles are spending an increased amount of time meeting these responsibilities, typically up to 5 hours per month. This requires their fellow ward councillors to provide additional support and cover. With the likelihood of further delegation of powers and funding from central Government to regional bodies such as the WMCA, it is reasonable to anticipate further increases in demands for representation, attendance, and engagement from members across each of the constituent authorities. This reinforces the need to ensure an appropriate level of representation exists to meet these competing demands for time.

Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA)

5.4.7 Sandwell is located within the West Midlands and lies at the heart of an area known as the Black Country – made up of the four local authorities of Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton which together are home to over one million people, the location for 430,000 jobs and a net economic contributor of £17.2 billion gross value added (GVA) per annum.

5.4.8 The authorities work together closely and co-operate through the Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA) which acts as a shared forum to co-ordinate work to drive economic growth and establish a shared vision for the future, working in partnership with business and the wider community.

5.4.9 In 2013, ABCA agreed that a Black Country Executive Joint Committee would be set up to lead the decision-making forum for the Black Country Growth Deal. Central government has devolved certain powers as part of these deals in 2014 to increase economic growth. The Leader of the Council and two further Cabinet Members are involved in the four bodies that have developed from this further example of devolution.

Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (BCLEP)

5.4.10 The Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (BCLEP) was established with a remit to bring greater prosperity to the Black Country area. This objective is to be achieved through facilitating co-operation and co-ordination between public, private, and voluntary sector across a range of key strategic

areas including education, infrastructure, environment, and economic development.

- 5.4.11 The BCLEP has a separate governance structure which includes a Board and several thematic sub-groups. The Council Leader is a member of the BCLEP Board alongside Council Leaders from the other four constituent authorities and several other Councillors hold roles on the thematic sub-groups.

Impacts of regional frameworks on Councillor capacity and caseload

- 5.4.12 The establishment of the Combined Authority and the associated devolution agreement saw the transfer of a range of functions and responsibilities to this new body from Government, however, this did not see functions transferred from the local authorities of the Region which form its constituent parts.
- 5.4.13 The effect of this means that the WMCA - and its various Committees - place additional demands on the time, capacity, and resource of those Councillors appointed to those bodies. The Leader serves on the WMCA Board and several Sandwell's Councillors serve across the WMCA on joint boards. Allowances, where they exist, are published.
- 5.4.14 The areas of responsibility covered by the WMCA and the Combined Authority Mayor do not substantially impact on Councillors capacity in Sandwell. For example, matters relating to bus and train travel may be anticipated to more often be referred to the WMCA as opposed to local Councillors.
- 5.4.15 Whilst the WMCA and its various committees play a pivotal role in the Region, its functions and responsibilities are distinct from those of the Council. This has resulted in some diversion of casework issues to WMCA structures, but this effect has largely been limited. It is not considered that the WMCA roles are a factor to significantly reduce the number of Councillors in Sandwell.

e) External Partnerships

- 5.5.1 Sandwell as a borough and as a Council does not exist or operate in isolation. Alongside the WMCA regional governance arrangements summarised earlier in this report, a range of structures and frameworks exist or are emergent in the health, social care and public health sectors of local government.

f) Local Authority Companies

- 5.6.1 Sandwell Council has several wholly owned companies/subsidiary bodies and several associate companies. These include Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) which delivers statutory children's social care functions on behalf of the Council and Sandwell Leisure Trust (SLT) which funds several leisure centres across the borough on behalf of the Council. The Council continues

to review the governance and future direction of these companies in accordance with best practice.

g) Strategic Direction

- 5.7.1 The overarching principle articulated in the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030 is about empowering people to take control of their lives and building resilience at a family and community level to improve outcomes leading to reduction in demand for hard pressed public services.
- 5.7.2 A key element of the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030 is the alignment of Council resources with partners to create a shared focus on outcomes at both a borough scale and neighbourhood level with a prevention and early help model at its core.
- 5.7.3 Moving forward the Council will continue to review the effectiveness of its scrutiny function to ensure emergent best practice is enacted. Whilst the number of committees of all types may change, the Council is planning on establishing a neighbourhood model of delivery as part of the Sandwell Plan objectives and changing the relationship between the Council and residents which will involve all Councillors.
- 5.7.4 The development of a new neighbourhood delivery model forms a key component of the Council's continued transformation and improvement. Increased emphasis will be placed on locality and community, enabling a better understanding of local priorities and focus on the delivery of vital Council services, as well as informing and influencing emerging strategies – ensuring the needs of each neighbourhood are understood and considered.
- 5.7.5 The Council is focussed on -
- more effective joint working across the Council focussed on the needs of residents and localities;
 - more use of data, insight and evidence at a neighbourhood level to build a better understanding of needs and opportunities, inform strategy development, local investment and service design and partner interventions where appropriate;
 - an inclusive approach to empower and engage residents and build community capacity for decision making and issues affecting their neighbourhoods; and
 - a more efficient and more responsive but less dependent and less complex customer journey that can resolve local issues.
- 5.7.6 The Council will seek to adopt a collaborative community-focused approach working with elected members, residents, and communities as well as key partners, ensuring core services are delivered using data and insight to enable a differentiated approach.
- 5.7.7 A new Neighbourhoods Strategy will be developed in parallel through consultation and engagement with relevant stakeholders. The operation of

any new model will require fundamental changes to how the Council and Councillors operate across the six towns. These changes will take effect through new local forums and structures, all requiring additional time and engagement from Councillors both at initialization and to embed their role within local communities and with stakeholders.

- 5.7.8 By way of illustration, the expected new model will put Members at the heart of the way in which the Council operates at a neighbourhood level - driving the development of ward plans informed by data and local priorities and determining how local budgets will be spent to make improvements and meaningful changes to our communities. In this sense, the new model will support democratic renewal by increasing the levers available to Councillors to have genuine impact and get things done.
- 5.7.9 New structures established to support neighbourhood working will also be subject to oversight and review through existing member bodies including the scrutiny structure of the Council. It is essential that all of the governance and decision-making frameworks of the Council – at regional, corporate, and local community levels – are underpinned by an appropriate and efficient levels of Councillor representation to be both effective and to revitalize local democracy at grass roots community levels. The proposed council size of 72 achieves this objective.
- 5.7.10 The Council will continue to require clear, robust, transparent, and accountable political leadership. In turn, political leadership is not defined as being solely the role of a Council Leader or a Mayor. Political leadership is vested in and delivered by every Councillor as community leaders.
- 5.7.11 Any changes will be subject to detailed reports and debate at Full Council that, by definition, will need to be led and informed by enough Councillors to balance multiple and complex competing factors.

Conclusion

To discharge statutory and regulatory functions, it is essential that there are sufficient Councillors for this purpose. The involvement of Councillors in scrutiny is a critical element of effective and accountable governance in any executive decision-making model, whether at strategic or local level.

Taking account of the Council's ambitions summarised in this submission - balanced with the critical role Councillors will continue to play - 72 Councillors is considered a robust and sufficient number to enable efficient working, both in the context of the resources available and the Council's commitment to support active, engaged democracy.

6 Community Leadership & Representational Roles of Councillors

Councillors are community leaders and play an essential role for their communities. In Sandwell, this role is substantial. Not only is casework complex and substantial in number, Sandwell's communities are diverse.

Councillors themselves have identified this workload as substantial in the Councillor Survey (**Appendix 1**). Although technology assists in the quick resolution of casework, it also means that Councillors are much easier to access and can result in more rather than less workload.

a) Community Leadership, Representation & Engagement

- 6.1.1 The role and responsibilities of Councillors and particularly the relationship with the communities and individuals they serve, is changing. At the heart of the Sandwell Plan is a desire to promote empowerment of local communities and work with our partners on an asset-based model of delivery, where we build on the strengths of individuals and communities rather than say what is wrong and provide a menu of solutions.
- 6.1.2 The delivery of the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030 will change the nature of the relationship between Councillor and communities. This will see Councillors' role as enablers expanded further, to support greater empowerment for residents and communities.
- 6.1.3 The Sandwell Plan promotes a vision of integrated service delivery at a neighbourhood level with partners, supported by workforce development and empowerment of front-line staff. This model of service delivery means that while Councillors still have a vital and important role to play in their communities, the nature of caseload should be less as these structures and delivery models are implemented.
- 6.1.4 The development of neighbourhood structures will enhance the visibility and accountability of local Councillors who will be required to lead on the development of these neighbourhood structures moving forward.

b) Technology, Local Government Representation & Casework

- 6.2.1 The Council in preparing this report has sought to better understand the realities of Councillors roles and responsibilities. The Leader and Councillors were asked to complete a Survey in early 2024 (detailed results being set out at **Appendix 1** to this report).
- 6.2.2 The Councillor Survey demonstrates the scale of work undertaken by Councillors to engage with and work on behalf of their residents and communities. Crucially, the survey evidences continued demand for support from residents on a complex range of issues, reflecting the key role of Councillors as enablers, influencers, decision-makers, and advocates.

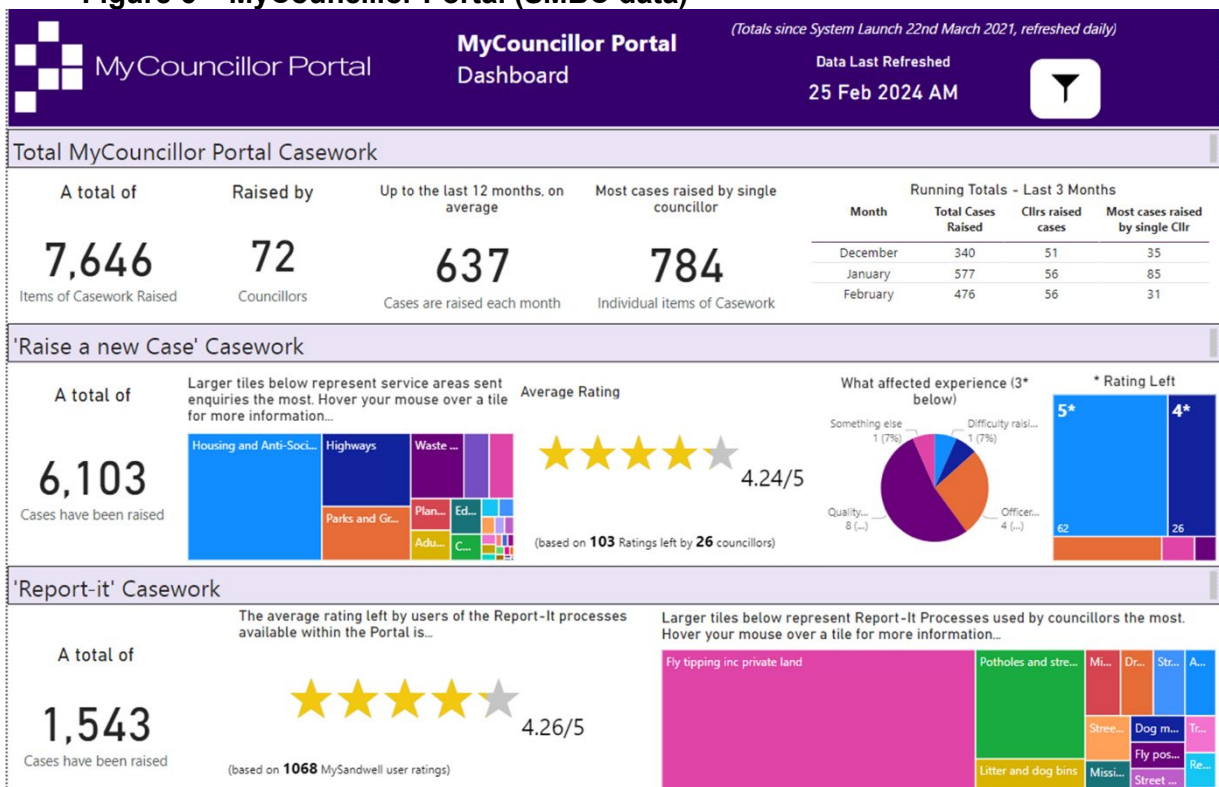
6.2.3 Key findings relating to communications and the use of technology include -

- Councillors still largely rely on traditional communication methods, typically face to face in person, telephone or email;
- most Councillors spend several hours each week publishing information on and responding to residents through social media;
- most Councillors use social media networks such as X (Twitter), Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram and Councillors across all political groups report increasing use of social media as part of their role; and
- the continued development of social media and technology has greatly benefitted Councillors and residents in providing an easy, readily available tool by which they can be available.

6.2.4 Key findings relating to the types of casework include –

- most Councillors casework is on behalf of the borough’s most vulnerable and deprived residents and communities; and
- Councillors deal with a high volume of casework issues each month. The dataset below represents casework in the last 12 months (data as at 25.02.2024) shows an average of 637 items of casework raised each month (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – MyCouncillor Portal (SMBC data)



6.2.5 Member Survey data demonstrates the breadth of casework undertaken by Councillors. Whilst a significant volume of casework is recorded in the MyCouncillor Portal, Councillors continue to deal with high volumes of work outside the Portal – it is important to recognise the true scale and volume of casework dealt with by Councillors and to not under-estimate by relying solely on Portal data.

Attracting and retaining Councillors

6.2.6 Sandwell continues to attract many candidates seeking to stand in the borough's local elections. The number of candidates who stood for local elections during recent years were –

- 76 in 2018
- 88 in 2019
- 93 in 2021
- 66 in 2022
- 94 in 2023

6.2.7 The average length of service of the Councillors of the present Council is just over 6 years; the longest serving Councillor on the Council currently has 24 years of service.

c) Training for Councillors

6.3.2 All Councillors are required to attend and complete essential training. Any new Councillors will also have to undertake or participate in those essential training sessions. Any Councillor who does not meet this requirement is then ineligible to serve on any Scrutiny or Regulatory Committee until this requirement is met.

6.3.3 Following the election, all Councillors participate in an intensive Induction Programme. This focusses on core knowledge and skills requirements to provide each Councillor with a solid grounding from which to build during their first year in office – and crucially beyond, as this is a continuous programme.

6.3.4 A standing Ethical Standards & Member Development Committee is in operation, which meets as required to review training and development frameworks for Councillors and to identify areas for additional support. This will oversee, with support from the LGA, the member training programme and continuous development of elected members. The LGA will also be supporting a development programme for the leadership team. Important elements of the Improvement Plan for the Council will require considerable commitment from Councillors and Officers with supporting capacity and resource.

6.3.5 Moving forward, a comprehensive development and training framework will continue to be required to address the skills and knowledge requirements of Councillors as the Council's relationship with residents and communities evolves. Overseen by the Ethical Standards & Member Development

Committee, continued commitment is required from Councillors in terms of time and effort to retain the required skills and knowledge to undertake their diverse responsibilities.

d) Ward Co-ordination

- 6.4.1 Fundamental to neighbourhood delivery is integrated services for people, communities, and place. This approach in Sandwell is underpinned by an asset-based approach to ward working, where Councillors recognise the community and residents as assets with the solution to many issues they face. This also supports a modal shift in the relationship between the Council and residents, from transactional to enabling.
- 6.4.2 The historical approach of the Council “fixing” problems has moved to increased partnership working and co-production with communities. Whilst this approach is the right way to operate to achieve sustainable improvements, it is also resource intensive and Councillors representative role has, as a result, changed significantly over time.
- 6.4.3 Anchor organisations within wards including registered housing providers, NHS and public sector partners, children’s centres, voluntary and community sector organisations are increasingly as (if not more) central to Councillors ward activity than more traditional council services. It is vital that this is properly reflected in how the Council operates moving forward
- 6.4.4 Integrated Care Teams (ICTs) are well-established in Sandwell. Historically, Councillors have been involved at a strategic level through the Health and Well Being Board and the various Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) across the borough. Recognition of the wider determinants of health and the broadening out of the ICTs to Multi-Disciplinary Teams which is likely to see an increased role for Councillors in informing decisions around the commissioning of services for the communities they serve.
- 6.4.5 To support communities to be self-supporting and resilient, we need to agree a footprint where partners can form collaborates and services integrate resulting in reduced demand and improved service to communities, maximizing efficiency.

Conclusion

The Council is currently embarking on an ambitious and far reaching review of its neighbourhood working arrangements. This is likely to see a fundamental shift in arrangements and structures and will bring decisions and actions down to community level. This in turn will refresh the linkages between the Council, Councillors and the communities they both serve. It is of vital importance that there are enough Councillors to balance all these competing objectives.

7 Comparison Data & Alternative Options

a) Comparison Data

- 7.1.1 Comparisons between individual local authorities or core cities are of limited weight in terms of assessing the optimum council size. All local authority areas are unique with different community requirements and models of delivery and governance.
- 7.1.2 However, they are useful to demonstrate that the proposed council size falls within an average range of representation of cities and metropolitan districts in England. It is for these purposes that the following comparisons are suggested – firstly an analysis of metropolitan districts, mean and median levels of electorate per Councillor.
- 7.1.3 The chart below at Figure 7 identifies that Sandwell's current representation levels are only slightly above the mean and median for comparator metropolitan districts.

Figure 7 – Electorate comparison data with peer authorities

Local Authority	Population	Electorate	No. Wards	No. of Councillors
Birmingham	1,144,900	748,811	69	101
Coventry	345,300	232,194	18	54
Dudley	323,600	234,257	24	72
Sandwell	341,900	230,408	24	72
Solihull	217,487	161,646	17	51
Walsall	286,700	119,254	20	60
Wolverhampton	263,700	183,153	20	60

- 7.1.4 The Council undertook a public consultation during 2022 to gather views on how often elections for Councillors should be held. Two options were available – elections by thirds or elections every four years. Reports submitted to Full Council and placed in the public domain during the consultation process were supported by an analysis of each option. This analysis identified both benefits and dis-benefits for each option. As the current boundary review process does not propose changes to this electoral cycle, this analysis is not repeated in this submission.
- 7.1.5 The 2022 public consultation generated a limited public response rate of 0.25% of the boroughs residents (487 responses) of which 69% supported retaining the current model of elections by thirds. Due to the low response rate Full Council determined to retain elections by thirds and that a future public consultation revisiting this matter be undertaken the conclusion and implementation of the outcomes of the current boundary review process, after the all-out elections in May 2026.

b) Alternative Options

7.2.1 The Council in developing this submission has carefully considered alternate options for council size. Each option balanced against core objectives, service delivery and emergent future needs in respect of:

- Strategic Leadership;
- Accountability; and
- Community Leadership.

7.2.2 Four options for council size have been considered and are explored below –

1. An increase in council size;
2. Maintaining the council size; and
3. A reduction in council size.

Option 1 - Increasing Council size

7.2.3 This option has been discounted as a viable option for the following reasons.

- a) The last review conducted in 2003 resulted in a reduction to current levels. Whilst this number has remained constant since 2004, the roles, responsibilities, and governance context within which Councillors are required to operate, has been subject to radical transformation and substantially differs to that seen in 2004.
- b) An increase in council size, would result in proportionate increases in the size of Committees and decision-making bodies but would see a reduction in the average population and electorate of each Ward and represented by each Councillor below that of comparable authorities.
- c) This period has also seen substantial financial pressures and budget cuts which the Council has worked hard to deliver with engagement from local communities and stakeholders. That has required trust and transparency and a commitment to deliver efficiency savings right across the Council. An increase in the size of the Council does not align with the nature of those conversations with the electorate.

Option 2 – Maintaining Council Size

7.2.4 The breadth of this submission sets out a range of data and comparators which make a compelling case for maintaining the existing Council size of 72. These include but are not limited to required governance arrangements, Councillor caseload, socio-economic challenges and opportunities for Sandwell as the authority moves beyond intervention and seeks to take forward.

7.2.5 As a counterpoint, Sandwell Council is moving beyond intervention and is committed to transformation, improvement and innovation in structure and service delivery, underpinned by effective governance and agility of

decision-making.

- 7.2.6 Scrutiny and accountability are intrinsic to the decision-making process. Any reduction in the numbers of Councillors would greatly impact capacity and weaken the effectiveness of scrutiny processes.
- 7.2.7 Continuing economic regeneration and investment across Sandwell and each of its six towns in the form of new residential, commercial and retail development continue to be overseen by the Council in its capacity as Local Planning Authority, with the Planning Committee at the heart of decision-making.
- 7.2.8 It is also important to look beyond the realms of the Council, to recognise the key role played by Councillors across the communities of Sandwell which this submission explores in detail.
- 7.2.9 The role of Councillor is often misunderstood or understated - yet all Councillors works tirelessly every day to reach, engage and represent residents. Their roles extend to building new community organisations, networks and the business community alongside campaigning on issues of local concern across the six towns on behalf of and representing residents.
- 7.2.10 The reasons why 72 remains the optimum council size are summarised as:
- a) A continuing requirement for robust, transparent, and accountable leadership based on a recognition of the scale of the challenges facing the Council, borough and its communities counterbalanced with significant opportunity for development and transformation. The size of the executive is not anticipated to reduce below the current number of eight, reflecting the extent of responsibilities of a large metropolitan authority and level of change facing the Council.
 - b) A programme of continuous review of scrutiny arrangements taking account of national sector best practice to align with the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030.
 - c) The Council discharges a range of regulatory and partnership functions which, whilst largely delivered through delegation, still requires sufficient Councillors to discharge these responsibilities alongside the other duties they hold as Councillors.
 - d) The role of Councillor is fundamentally changing with a focus on supporting greater empowerment for residents and communities. This will see of new neighbourhood structures developed, ensuring visibility and accountability of local Councillors, and providing an overarching structure to support our communities. It is essential that there are enough Councillors to discharge these responsibilities balanced with the other representative and community leadership roles which lie at the heart of Councillors remit.

7.2.11 Data within this submission shows comparable local authorities operate effectively and efficiently with a lesser number of Councillors and it is therefore right that the Council consider alternative options. The Council has therefore considered options to reduce the council size, explored in more detail below.

Option 3 - Reducing Council size

7.3.1 Two options for a reduced Council size were considered, to either 66 or 60. Analysis of the future governance and strategic direction of the Council against the core components of - Strategic Leadership; Accountability; and Community Leadership – have led the Council to conclude that such a significant reduction in Councillors would have significant negative impacts.

- a) The role and functions of the executive will remain under any council size; however, it is crucial that there is capacity to ensure robust, transparent, and accountable leadership. A reduction in council size to 66 or below would inhibit the effectiveness and capacity of the Council executive, weakening strategic and political leadership and compromising community leadership.
- b) A reduction would directly impact on accountability and holding the executive to account through the effectiveness of the scrutiny function and the ability and capacity of the Council to discharge regulatory and partnership functions, even with the high levels of delegation already seen. It remains critical that there are sufficient Councillors to discharge these functions whilst maintaining capacity for community leadership to develop and delivering against emergent neighbourhood structures alongside the objectives of the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030.

Conclusion

This submission sets out the clear aims of the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030, and how these will see a range of new neighbourhood structures developed, ensuring visibility and accountability of local Councillors, and providing an overarching structure to support our communities.

These actions require sufficient Councillors to undertake key roles at community and partnership level. Any reduction in council size would significantly weaken Council's ability to achieve genuine engagement with its diverse communities and to ensure effective levels of community representation.

8 Conclusion

8.1.1 The Council has, in line with the Boundary Commission's requirements, produced this submission having regard to the current and future direction of the Council in these key areas:

- **Strategic Leadership** - providing evidence about the current Council decision-making structure, involvement and workload of those Councillors involved as well as on the Scheme of Delegation and other bodies and emergent future trends for governance;
- **Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory Functions & Partnerships)** - providing evidence about how Councillors hold decision-makers to account and ensure that the Council can discharge its responsibilities to other organisations and how these responsibilities will evolve in the coming years; and
- **Community Leadership** - providing evidence about how Councillors interact and engage with their communities, their caseloads and the support required to represent local residents and groups effectively and on emergent trends for the future, including how the relationship between Council, Councillors and communities will continue to develop.

8.2.2 Whilst this review is undertaken following the natural passage of time, it provides an opportunity for pause and reflection. Reviewing and assessing the future needs of the Council in terms of resident expectations and the operational structure of the organisation allow for a positive reset of both the Council's governance and its relationships with citizens, service users, business community and partners.

8.2.3 This is designed to increase transparency and trust in the Council, change the culture and enable the Council to deliver on its ambitions in the Sandwell Plan.

Conclusion

The Council has a positive view of the future relationship between itself and its electorate, which is an essential part of the delivery of the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030, enabling and empowering local communities to do more for themselves.

A council size of 72 remains the optimum number for that relationship to develop and embed over the long term and will lead to the positive improvement in outcomes that the Sandwell Plan and Vision 2030 envisages.