

Report to Cabinet

17 July 2024

Subject:	The Future of Neighbourhood Working in Sandwell
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Suzanne Hartwell Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Community
Director:	Assistant Chief Executive James McLaughlin
Key Decision:	Yes – significant in terms of impact on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards of the Borough
Contact Officer:	Assistant Chief Executive James McLaughlin james_mclaughlin@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

For the reasons set out within this report, it is recommended that:

- 1.1 The review of Neighbourhood Working be endorsed;
- 1.2 The Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy be approved and adopted;
- 1.3 The recommendations for a new model of Neighbourhood Working be approved and adopted, and authority delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive to implement the new model;
- 1.4 A requirement be introduced for Ward Plans to be produced outlining ward priorities and activities aligned to the refreshed Council Plan 2024-2027, to be published on a cyclical basis;
- 1.5 A requirement be introduced for Ward Profiles to be developed for each of the 24 wards detailing the demographics and community assets of the area;









- 1.6 An Annual Report on Neighbourhood Working be produced and submitted to both the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board and Full Council;
- 1.7 The establishment of ward budgets for each Member be approved in principle and incorporated into the development of the 2025/26 revenue budget;
- 1.8 A future report be submitted to Full Council recommending amendments to the Constitution.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The Council has stated its ambition to transform and has long signalled the importance of working in neighbourhoods, making people feel valued and connected in their communities. The review reported here was commissioned to independently examine the current approach of the authority towards neighbourhood working, its effectiveness and any shortcomings and to identify opportunities for transformation and improvement.
- 2.2 The recommendations within this report arise from the finding that the current arrangements are unlikely to deliver and retain the support of Members and a new case for change has been set out. The proposed new model for neighbourhood working taken from the new strategic direction provides a framework for improved outcomes and accountability.
- 2.3 The recommended approach acknowledges and accommodates the unique circumstances and identities of the six distinct towns that make up the borough and the allegiances that residents have to their towns. Furthermore, it recognises that effective neighbourhood working needs to be delivered at a Ward level, where ward councillors can fully respond and prioritise as community leaders.
- 2.4 The new model proposed in this report enables a fresh approach where local priorities can be established and the challenging issues that communities face in Sandwell can be addressed at a local level.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Best start in life for children and young people The proposed approach and model for Neighbourhood Working in Sandwell is designed to support this objective.</p>
	<p>People live well and age well The proposed approach and model for Neighbourhood Working in Sandwell is designed to support this objective.</p>
	<p>Strong resilient communities The approach outlined within the review report seeks to build on the strengths of our communities in developing a new model of neighbourhood working and placing councillors as local leaders in a stronger community leadership role capable of instigating improvements in their wards.</p>
	<p>Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods The proposed approach supports the Neighbourhood and Community Standard set out by the Regulator of Social Housing, which came into force in April 2024. Whilst the proposed model will be distinct from the existing housing focus to neighbourhood working that has operated previously, there will continue to be an intrinsic link between the landlord function and the new approach to empowering councillors and communities.</p>
	<p>A strong and inclusive economy Non-specific contribution to this objective.</p>
	<p>A connected and accessible Sandwell Non-specific contribution to this objective.</p>



4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 The Chief Executive indicated immediately upon taking up post in February 2023 that neighbourhood working was a priority for strategic review. This recognised the ambitions the Council had to be better connected to and engaged with its communities, and crucially to provide a platform for ward councillors to operate effectively as community leaders with greater means to deliver against priorities for their wards and residents.
- 4.2 A review commenced in October 2023 which sought to examine current practices in respect of neighbourhood working and develop a new, refreshed coherent and cross-council model for neighbourhood working which would see Member and communities at the core delivering outcomes in their localities. Any new model emerging from the review would need to:
- Have buy-in from Members and officers.
 - Provide a compelling case for changing the existing approaches.
 - Align with the Council's strategic objectives.
 - Be affordable, sustainable, and fundable over time.
 - Be inclusive.
 - Put neighbourhoods and localities at the heart of the Council's activities.
 - Reflect the needs of individual localities and neighbourhoods.
 - Be legible and readily understandable for customers, partners, and communities.
 - Deliver demonstrable outcomes for localities.
- 4.3 A four-stage process underpinned the review which examined and analysed current practice to develop a bespoke model which could be recommended to the Council. From the outset, the review team undertook a listening exercise with multiple service areas involved in neighbourhood and locality activity and service delivery.
- 4.4 Members had the opportunity to input into the review through specific meetings or providing feedback on their experiences and aspirations for the future. The review team also met with representatives of authorities that have made significant improvements to their neighbourhood working models in recent years to consider examples of good practice and learn from their experiences of implementing new approaches.



- 4.4 The review was supported by a Member Steering Group, chaired by the Leader of the Council and comprising Town Leads, who received regular updates on each stage of the review from the project team. The proposals detailed within this report have been endorsed for submission to the Cabinet and Council by the Member Steering Group.

Findings

- 4.5 The review has confirmed that neighbourhood working is dispersed across the Council, often with teams and officers having similar responsibilities. An exercise was undertaken to cross reference job descriptions from the Neighbourhood Engagement Team (Assistant Chief Executive), Neighbourhood Partnership Team (Place – Housing Services), Housing Services (Place – Housing Services), Anti-Social Behaviour Team (Place – Borough Economy) and Public Health. This exercise demonstrated duplication of effort and the disparate nature of locality working across different directorates of the Council.
- 4.6 The outcome of the cross-referencing exercise was supported by anecdotal feedback from Members. It was generally considered that there is a wealth of officers operating under the current model yet there were concerns in respect of accountability, ownership and responsiveness to issues raised by Members with officers resulting in queries taking too long to resolve or not being resolved at all.
- 4.7 Members do recognise the pressures on services and the important role that front line officers have to play in neighbourhood working. Feedback received suggests that the new Ward Coordinator roles have provided a single point of contact and brought structure to ward meetings and are pushing for actions from officers to be delivered on. However there is a clear view that the current model is set up to disenfranchise Members and allows the standard of delivery to be low for officers, coupled with poor communication between officers and Members.
- 4.8 The review identified that the five core teams supporting the current neighbourhood model are made up of 94.5 FTE. Housing Services represents a distinct function and was not considered as being appropriate for inclusion within a pure analysis of neighbourhood working given the primary focus on the landlord and tenancy management function. The review has therefore concluded that there are 44.5 FTE employees directly working in roles that can be described as contributing



towards neighbourhood working. The total cost of this resource is £2,079,476.

4.9 In addition to the staffing resource supporting the Council's current approach to neighbourhood working, the review also identified the various budgets administered for neighbourhoods which fall into three categories:

- Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)
- Local Area Budget (LAB) – £60k for problem solving (£10k per town)
- £30k events budget (£5k per town)
- Innovation Grant Budget - £76,500

The review concluded that there was insufficient awareness of these funding pots amongst Members and that any future approach would require reform of the funding available and how it could be used by Members for their communities.

4.10 Best practice from Liverpool City Council, Nottingham City Council and Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council was researched as part of the review. The learning from these authorities is that:

- A ward-based approach is successful in developing councillors as community leaders in their neighbourhoods.
- Such an approach needs support from a dedicated Neighbourhoods Team, with other services organised on a locality basis to support the model.
- Local priorities are made clear through Ward Plans, underpinned by the Council Plan, and supported through devolved budgets.
- Focused and measurable outcomes demonstrated through annual reporting improves accountability.
- Ward level communication promotes activities and issues and demonstrates the value of the elected representative role of Members, as well as reaching diverse communities.
- A neighbourhood approach appeals to partner organisations in the public and voluntary & community sectors as a means for locality-based delivery.
- All underpinned by cultural change and workforce development within those authorities.

4.11 Overall, the review confirmed the need to address the current approach and move to a model that is structured to deliver better outcomes with a



truly local focus that concentrates not only on the place but the strengths of communities.

Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy

- 4.12 The findings of the review signpost a new direction of travel that is required. It is recommended this be underpinned by a Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy that sets out what the Council wants to achieve to make the communities of Sandwell thrive and flourish. The strategy is focused on the needs of all residents and aims to make their neighbourhoods places where people want to live and be proud of. It also recognises the crucial role of Members as community leaders who can affect short-and longer-term changes in their Wards.
- 4.13 This strategy will underpin a new working model for the Council that relies on organisational cultural and structural changes to improve joint working across the authority that is focused on the needs of residents and localities. With increasing intelligence, insight and evidence from Sandwell's neighbourhoods the Council will be able to build a greater understanding of needs and opportunities which will help to inform strategy development, local investment, service design and partner interventions.
- 4.14 Establishing an inclusive approach to empower and engage residents and build community capacity for decision making and addressing issues that affect neighbourhoods is implicit to the success of the new model. With a more efficient and more responsive, but less dependent and less complex customer journey, the strategy points towards a model that proactively seeks to resolve local issues with communities.
- 4.15 The four elements of the approach defined within the Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy are:



A 'place' based approach	A 'people' based approach	A 'strengths'-based approach	An 'opportunities'-based approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That has neighbourhoods that are safe and where residents are proud to belong. • That has clean streets and welcoming green spaces. • That has vibrant local town centres. • That have warm and secure homes and welcoming neighbourhoods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where residents are happy and healthy • That is inclusive and allows people to interact and meet the needs of diverse communities. • Where people are less lonely and isolated • That offers the best start in life for our young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where we harness the skills and knowledge in communities • That effectively uses the community leadership role of all our councillors. • Where we work with communities collaboratively and with partners to problem solve • Where we listen and build community capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where data and insight informs decision making at town and ward levels • That enables involvement and influence by residents in setting local priorities. • That allows for healthy lifestyles and prevention. • Where local assets are harnessed • Where the focus can be on seizing tangible improvements to localities

4.16 The new model will also be action focused to enable positive collaboration to address priorities identified by communities in our neighbourhoods

Theme	Action	How
Prioritise	Identify needs, priorities and issues in our wards and towns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce ward profiles. • Produce evidence based annual ward plans. • Schedule ward meetings. • Walkabouts and ward audits with action plans/ trackers. • Intelligent tracking of complaints and enquiries.



Theme	Action	How
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish service work programmes. • Analyse resident's surveys and seek resident and tenant's views. • Collaborate with partners priorities. • Utilise collective knowledge and resources at Town meetings.
Collaborate	Bring residents, community groups, partners and voluntary sector together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and influence community led events. • Organise ward-based meetings and events. • Collaborate and convene partner events on cross cutting issues. • Inform residents and share issues using localised communications. • Tackle long standing, hard to solve matters collaboratively.
Lead	Problem solve and action planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Councillors, Town Leads intervening as appropriate. • Utilise Council neighbourhood team resources. • Utilise ward budgets and grant funding as appropriate.
Evaluate	Review outcomes, and report.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town Leads oversight on ward priority issues. • Annual ward reports. • Good news stories in wards.

Implementation of Review Recommendations

- 4.17 The review recognises the effectiveness of the Six Town model which has been the basis for local service delivery in Sandwell. A neighbourhood model needs to operate at a much more local level to allow for Ward based community leadership to become embedded.
- 4.18 The recommended model looks to build on the established Town based leadership roles for Members as a strategic lead for those functions that should operate at a Town level. The review recommends the adoption of a cross-Council protocol to provide clarity on which functions or services should operate or respond on a Town or Ward level.



4.19 Central to this new approach to neighbourhood working is improved collaboration, reduced duplication and greater consistency of approach from services operating at that level. Having identified that there is a significant staff resource invested in neighbourhood working presently, the review recommends that the two teams with the largest stake in neighbourhood working (Neighbourhood Engagement and Neighbourhood Partnerships) should be merged into a new Neighbourhoods Service under the Assistant Chief Executive. A plan of consultation and engagement is being prepared in order to share proposals with affected staff and the Joint Trade Unions for the establishment of a new Neighbourhoods Service. It is expected that the new service will be effective from January 2025, with the existing teams operating in a transitional arrangement until that process is completed.

4.20 The review has recommended changes to the existing budgets administered in respect of neighbourhood working and events. Specifically, that the Local Area Budget and Innovation Fund are deleted with new Ward budgets for each elected Member of £1,500 be established, along with a Neighbourhoods Support Grant, which would be used for local Ward or Town-based priorities from Ward Plan through a bidding and assessment process. These recommendations will be built into the budget setting process for the 2025/26 financial year and will be effective from 1 April 2025.

4.21 Enhanced intelligence and data to inform priorities and plans for wards is a key aspect of the review's recommendations. It has concluded that ward profiles will enrich the approach to neighbourhood working and recommended that ward plans need to be concise and set ward-based priorities that should be a mix of:

- Corporate priorities – ensuring the golden thread to corporate plans and service plans.
- Political priorities – arising from walkabout action planning.
- Data and insight – evidence-based issues, including data from the Member Portal and My Sandwell to identify hotspots and be a basis for targeting resources.
- Residents' priorities – including any issues from residents' surveys.
- Work programmes for key service areas detailed annual planned investment in wards.



4.22 The review has recommended that a targeted and effective communications approach will be necessary to support the new neighbourhood model. A web-based newsletter published at regular frequencies has been proposed and the current restructure of the Communications service will ensure that a post is established to support this activity and ensure that residents get news about what is happening in their ward and how they can get involved.

4.23 The proposed new model identifies that ward councillors should be better supported to act as community leaders working with local people and communities to tackle identified priorities. The chart below sets out the expectations of councillors in Sandwell as community leaders:



4.24 In implementing a new model, the review recommends that measures need to be established as part of the corporate performance framework and service planning to demonstrate the impact of the new approach. It also recommends:

- the presentation of annual Ward and town reports to Council
- quarterly updates on ward-based activity to be presented to Cabinet



- the publication of a statement on annual ward budget, event budget and Neighbourhood Support Fund, detailing spend and how Members have invested in their neighbourhoods
- the submission of an annual report to Cabinet and Council including a review of the Neighbourhoods Strategy and annual resource allocation

4.25 The new model represents a significant change in the way that the Council works with Members and residents. Implementing new ways of working will be run parallel to the process for the establishment of a new officer structure for neighbourhood working. The transitional period will run until April 2025 to provide sufficient time for the Council's decision-making frameworks and policy suite will be reviewed as part of a wider refresh of governance arrangements that will seek to integrate arrangements to deliver the new neighbourhoods model.

4.26 Amongst the recommendations from the review are changes in the budgets for neighbourhood working available to Members to effect improvements in their wards. This will need to be built into the budget setting process for 2025/26 to establish the new budgets. In addition to this, formal delegations and governance arrangements for decision making into relation to the use of such budgets will need to be confirmed. As decision making on such matters cannot be delegated to Members, it will need to be discharged by officers to give effect to the use of monies proposed by Members in their wards.

4.27 Further changes to the Council's Constitution will be required to accommodate the recommendations for regular reports from ward councillors on delivery against ward priorities and plans at Council meetings. This will also require careful planning to ensure that each ward has an opportunity to highlight the impact and successes of the new approach on an annual basis.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 Do nothing – this option would retain the current approach to the Council operating at a neighbourhood level which is considered not to serve communities well with Members not feeling that services are joined up. The review has identified how the current approach can be improved in respect of efficiency, outcomes and responsiveness therefore retaining the current approach as it operates presently cannot be recommended.



- 5.2 Adopt a replica model from another authority – this option would involve taking an ‘off the shelf’ model from another local authority and attempting to make it fit the local circumstances of Sandwell. This approach would fail to take account of local needs and views, would not have the buy-in of ward Members or staff. This option is not recommended.

6 Implications

Resources:	These are described in detail in the body of this report, with significant implications for relevant services in the scope of the review, as well as support services which will contribute to the development and implementation of the new structure and neighbourhood working model.
Legal and Governance:	The report describes the changes required to the Council’s Constitution to accommodate proposals to introduce ward updates to meetings of the Council. It also notes the need to plan further amendments to ensure that decision making is discharged appropriately in respect of the use of budgets associated with neighbourhood working.
Risk:	A Project Board has been established to oversee the implementation of the new model of Neighbourhood Working, with the Assistant Chief Executive acting as Project Sponsor. A clear project plan and critical path has been established for the delivery of the recommendations in the review. As set out elsewhere within the report, consultation and engagement is planned with staff and trade unions in relation to changes relating to structures and roles supporting the delivery of neighbourhood working.
Equality:	The proposals to enhance and support neighbourhood working should improve the Councils ability to respond to the specific needs of Sandwell’s diverse communities. The needs and requirements of the citizens, businesses and communities in each ward are different and the new approach allows the flexibility to respond to these needs by making the ward the building block for community engagement. Additionally, the production of Ward Plans will enable



	a targeted response to community concerns and priorities.
Health and Wellbeing:	Implications of the proposals on health and wellbeing of our communities
Social Value	No specific implications
Climate Change:	No specific implications
Corporate Parenting:	No specific implications, but indirectly the proposed strengthening of neighbourhood working arrangements should better enable the voice of children and young people to be heard in responding to community issues and priorities for Wards.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Review of Neighbourhood Working at Sandwell Council
Appendix 2 – Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy

8. Background Papers

List source/background documents

