

Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

10 September 2024

Subject:	Neighbourhood Working – Implementation of the new Model
Director:	Assistant Chief Executive James McLaughlin
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 To consider and comment upon the implementation of the new model of Neighbourhood Working for Sandwell.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The implementation of a new model of neighbourhood working is a key strategic priority for the Council in how it better responds to the needs of the communities it serves.
- 2.2 The input of the scrutiny function in overseeing the implementation of the new model provides appropriate accountability and transparency, as well as providing valued feedback to be considered by officers in the delivery of neighbourhood working.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

One Council One Team	The new model of neighbourhood working should directly assist in the delivery of high-quality inclusive services for all our customers. It will also contribute towards the objective of all our residents, including our children and young people, being active participants in influencing change – through being listened to and their opinions are heard and valued – within Ward Plans and Ward Priorities.
Living in Sandwell	The new model of neighbourhood working will contribute significantly to this objective through enhanced community engagement and the establishment of plans and priorities that will be focused on improving access to local services
Growing Up in Sandwell	The implementation of the new model does not directly deliver against these objectives of the Council, but it will indirectly contribute to the delivery through the development of Ward Plans and Priorities that should include actions in respect of these objectives.
Thriving Economy in Sandwell	
Healthy in Sandwell	

4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 At its meeting on 17 July 2024, the Cabinet approved recommendations in respect of a new model of neighbourhood working in Sandwell. These recommendations had emerged from the Review of Neighbourhood Working commissioned by the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council in the autumn of 2023. A copy of the review report and the report considered by the Cabinet can be found on the Council’s website here – <https://sandwell.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=143&MId=6935>
- 4.2 The review found that neighbourhood working is dispersed across the Council, often with teams and officers having similar responsibilities but not working in a joined-up way. Analysis of job descriptions for roles involved in neighbourhood working, along with anecdotal feedback from Members in their roles as ward councillors, indicated that there was ambiguity in respect of accountability, ownership and responsiveness to issues being raised. This, coupled with queries taking too long to be resolved or not be resolved at all, highlighted that the way of working was not delivering for communities or councillors.

- 4.3 The findings from the review led to the development of a new direction of travel and working model. This is underpinned by the Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy, which was also approved by Cabinet on 17 July 2024. This document sets out what the Council wants to achieve to make the communities of Sandwell thrive and flourish. It 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 long-term changes in their wards.
- 4.4 The new working model can only be delivered through cultural and structural change in the organisation to improve joint working across the authority that is focused on the needs of residents and localities. Cabinet has delegated authority to the Assistant Chief Executive to implement the new model and operating structures for a new Neighbourhoods Service.
- 4.5 At the time of preparing this report, work is underway to prepare documents for consultation with Trade Unions and affected staff. It would therefore be inappropriate to refer to any staffing and structural proposals within this report. By way of assurance, since the approval of the Cabinet report in July 2024 the Assistant Chief Executive has appointed an Interim Head of Neighbourhoods to oversee the implementation of the new model and act as project lead. Since commencing in post, the Interim Head of Neighbourhoods has been preparing proposals for consultation. Subject to the feedback received during consultation and any amendments accepted by management arising from the consultation with staff, it is expected that the new structure of the Neighbourhoods Service will be confirmed by the end of the calendar year with appointments made to roles as soon as possible after that time.
- 4.6 Beyond activity to establish a new structure, there are several other work streams associated with the implementation of the new neighbourhood working model. These are set out in the table below and whilst at various stages of progress do indicate that significant changes that will be required to implement the new model by 1 April 2025:

Area of focus	Tasks	Specific requirements
Procedural matters and supporting documents	Produce and standardise ward profiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use corporate template with branding. • Incorporate data and insight information to enable a rich picture of key issues in each ward.
	Prepare Ward Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of corporate template and ensure that plans are evidence based and reflect ward-based issues and priorities. • Priorities to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Corporate ○ Political – local matters ○ Key evidence from data and insight ○ Residents' priorities – any resident surveys etc ○ Annual work programmes from key services detailing ward-based investment and improvements.
	Prepare ward meeting schedules for 2025/26	
	Prepare ward walkabout schedules for 2025/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake 'ward audit'. • Identify pressing issues in wards.

Area of focus	Tasks	Specific requirements
	Create protocol for the use of ward budgets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a menu of acceptable and unacceptable use of ward budgets. • Base on best practice examples from other authorities. • Protocol will need to be approved by Cabinet.
	Prepare explanatory protocol for new Neighbourhoods Support Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To include the bidding and warding process • Ensure sign off by Cabinet. • Include key criteria for bids such as supporting Council priorities.
	Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – explanatory leaflet for Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with Finance and Planning on reviewing process and Member involvement in any associated processes
	Events budget criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No change to existing process but needs to be part of broader advisory briefing note for Members on the new Neighbourhoods budget package.
Communication	Agree and implement new ward-based communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practice available from other local authorities • Local newsletters • High good news stories at ward level
	Partner briefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key partners to be briefed on modus operandi of new model.

Area of focus	Tasks	Specific requirements
Financial	Work with Finance Team on establishment budget split between General Fund/ Housing Revenue Account and Public Health Grant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposals have been worked up with Finance to ensure no increased proportion of HRA in new structure
	Consolidate new budget package – working with Finance Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAB and Innovation Fund to cease and new budget package for neighbourhoods to be created. • Includes four elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ CIL ○ Events Budget ○ Members Ward Budget ○ Neighbourhoods Support Fund
Democratic	Set out new role descriptions of Town Leads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to make role more strategic and provide clarity over ward-based matters and town matters. • Scope and function of Town Meetings, including clarity of attendance from officers and others, to be reviewed.
	Annual Review of Neighbourhood Working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be produced after first year of operation of new Model • Will include a review of strategy, as well as analysis of outcomes in localities (towns and wards)

Area of focus	Tasks	Specific requirements
	Annual Ward and Town Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be presented by Ward Councillors and Town Leads at every Council meeting • Introduce a standard reporting template using corporate branding to differentiate from other Council reports.
	Quarterly updates to Cabinet on progress against Ward Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can form part of the Council Plan Performance Monitoring
	Publication of annual statement on spend against ward budgets, events budget, and Neighbourhoods Support Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency on spend and accountability increased

4.7 The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community has oversight of and political accountability for the implementation of the new model of neighbourhood working. This remains one of the key strategic priorities for the authority and will continue to be a matter of interest to Cabinet and Scrutiny Members, as well as all Members in their ward councillor roles.

5 Implications

Resources:	As referred to in the body of this report, there will be significant implications for relevant services that are within scope of the restructuring required in implementing the new Neighbourhoods Services. There will also be implications for support services, such as HR, which are contributing to the development and implementation of the new structure and neighbourhood working model.
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Legal and Governance:	There will be changes required to the Council's Constitution arising from the reporting of Ward Updates to future meetings of the Council following implementation of the new model in April 2025. The budget report to be considered by the Council in February 2025 will detail arrangements for new ward budgets and the decision-making processes and the discharge of delegated authority associated with those budgets.
Risk:	A clear project plan and critical path has been established for the implementation of the new model of neighbourhood working. At the time of preparing this report there are no specific risks to draw to Members' attention but it should be appreciated that consultation and engagement with Trade Unions and staff on the changes relating to structures and roles supporting the delivery of the neighbourhood working will require regular review of the RAG rating attached to this project.
Equality:	The decision by Cabinet to implement a new model of neighbourhood working should improve the Council's ability to respond to the specific needs and expectations of Sandwell's diverse communities. The needs and requirements of citizens, businesses and communities in each ward are different and the new model will allow 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:	There are no health and wellbeing implications arising directly as a result of this report.
Social Value:	There are no social value implications arising directly as a result of this report.
Climate Change:	There are no climate change implications arising directly as a result of this report.
Corporate Parenting:	There are no specific implications, but indirectly the 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.

6 Appendices

None.

7. Background Papers

Review of Neighbourhood Working at Sandwell Council – March 2024
Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy.