

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Local Government Boundary Review

Ward Pattern Submission

September 2024



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1.0 Introduction & Summary

- 1.1 This report comprises Sandwell Council's submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) on a proposed ward pattern for Sandwell from 2030. This represents the second stage in the electoral review process.

Recommendation

- 1.2 **Sandwell Council recommends a ward pattern of 24 wards each represented by 3 members based on a council size of 72** in accordance with the following rationale –
1. the required structural, ward and neighbourhood-based arrangements to support the council's continued transformation and improvement programme which are the subject of separate reporting frameworks;
 2. the future strategic vision for Sandwell, including changes in the nature of the relationship between residents and the council which are seeking to achieve greater empowerment of local communities in designing solutions to the challenges that they face and a modal shift in the delivery of services to residents and communities;
 3. ensuring levels of elected representation for all communities are commensurate with the challenges and opportunities facing Sandwell;
 4. the intention of improving the effectiveness and transparency of governance and decision-making arrangements in the short- and medium- term which will lead to opportunities for greater efficiencies;
 5. 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 structures, which is part of a commitment towards best practice in governance and to engage with current and emergent regional devolved structures; and
 6. changes in the way that residents interact with the council and communicate with Councillors, including developing and implementing modern innovative practices reflecting the aspirations of the council moving towards a digital first organisation using technology to increase engagement in and participation with the council.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Sandwell is a very different place to when our last boundary review was undertaken in 2004. The borough has seen sustained population growth allied with regeneration and social transition which has reshaped the economies and communities of the six towns which make up our borough.
- 2.2 The six towns which make up Sandwell – Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury, and West Bromwich – each have their own unique characteristics, cultures and identity but sharing many unifying features which this proposal seeks to take account of.
- 2.3 The borough is predominantly urban in nature and borders Birmingham, Dudley, Walsall, and Wolverhampton. Spanning the borough are the parliamentary constituencies of Smethwick, Tipton and Wednesbury, West Bromwich and Halesowen which crosses into Dudley borough.
- 2.4 The borough is diverse comprising many communities and faiths. The borough is also 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.
- 2.5 The ward pattern proposed in this submission forms the critical building blocks for future community representation, community identity, sense of place, and set the context for new, neighbourhood-focussed structures which will shape the delivery of services for years to come.
- 2.6 The proposed ward pattern and boundaries – supported by detailed ward profiles – provide a model which better represents the communities of Sandwell integrated with the unique identities of each of the six towns, demonstrating clearly identifiable communities with shared interests and identities within clearly recognised geographical boundaries.
- 2.7 This submission proposes a ward pattern, boundaries and structures which meet the three principles which are the statutory basis against which the LG BCE will make its decision -
 - 2.7.1 delivering electoral equality for local voters.
 - 2.7.2 interests and identities of local communities; and
 - 2.7.3 effective and convenient local government.

3.0 Ward pattern

- 3.1 The starting point for the warding pattern has been data and forecasts generated through the Sandwell Forecasting Model (SFM). 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 271,636 and a projected electorate of 247,059.
- 3.2 The council's previous submission on council size was supported by comprehensive methodology for population and electorate forecasts and with detailed supporting data. The SFM developed by the council explains why the increase in the population is not matched by the same proportion as the electorate.
- 3.3 Some residents are not registering to vote at all, not keeping their registration up to date or may also have left leaving their registration active. It is similarly seen across all polling districts that there can be a lag between electoral roll updates and changes in occupancy due to deaths, residents moving into or away from the area outside of these categories seeing an artificial uplift effect. This is reflected in our projections.
- 3.4 The proposed warding pattern has in turn been developed to reflect the well-established physical 'building blocks' provided by the various natural and man-made physical characteristics which define the borough. This approach – combined with a review of how residents and communities identify on a local level was then used as a starting base from which to apply the three criteria which govern the second stage of the review process.
- 3.5 Starting from a pattern of indicative communities focussed around our 6 towns and guided by clear forecast models on future development and movements of people, a pattern of 24 wards has again emerged, some of a larger geographic size but all broadly equal size in terms of population and electorate, crucially meeting each of the 3 criteria which the LGBCE apply to the second stage of the review process.

4.0 Delivering electoral equality

- 4.1 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. The resultant electorate in 2022 was 235,216.
- 4.2 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 271,636 and a projected electorate of 247,059. The proposed warding pattern has been assessed against both datasets.

- 4.3 For electorate forecasting purposes, December 2023 electorate data was used as a base line. This was then combined with Office for National Statistics (ONS) mid- year population estimates for 2015 to 2109 at the lowest available geography as the bedrock which underpins the forecast model.
- 4.4 There are very few neighbourhoods where the number of people has not increased since the last electoral review in 2004. however as actual and forecast data shows, this is not consistent. Some areas do not have substantial development land available and change at a slower rate. Others have large scale sites earmarked for development resulting in substantial changes in population and electorate.
- 4.5 Based on these historic population and electorate, trends a linear forecast was used to predict the 18+ population for each Output Area in 2030. These geographies were then amalgamated and apportioned into our existing 162 polling district geographies.
- 4.6 A detailed analysis of future demographic change, population growth and new residential completions, which are the key measures most likely to impact on the number of the electors up to 2030, provides supporting evidence for proposals in those areas where higher than average growth is anticipated. This is in turn reflected in how the warding pattern has evolved – to meet the realities on the ground.
- 4.7 Estimated electorate populations for all proposed planning development sites (assuming 100% occupancy in 2030) based on delivery rates and unit size for every area of the borough were calculated and then projected forward. When combined with robust projected future numbers of households of multiple occupancy this produced an overall estimated electorate in 2030.
- 4.8 This forecasting method has formed the basis on how the new ward boundaries were drawn to meet the range of acceptable tolerance required by the LGBCE for equality of electoral representation based on the calculation below –

Max 10% below	Max 5 % below	Target 18+ Population 2030	Max 5% above	Max 10% above
10,186	10,752	11,318	11,884	12,445
Max 10% below	Max 5 % below	Target Electorate 2030	Max 5% above	Max 10% above
9,267	9,779	10,294	10,809	11,323

4.9 All the 24 proposed wards fall within the range of 10% above or below the borough average electorate as illustrated in the table below –

Number of wards and variance range							
Projected 18+ Population 2030							
	10% below	5-9.99% below	0.11-4.99% below	Target average 18+ population 11,318	0.1-4.99% above	5-9.99% above	10% above
No. Wards	0	5	8			7	4
Projected Electorate 2030							
	10% below	5-9.99% below	0.11-4.99% below	Target average forecast electorate 10,294	0.1-4.99% above	5-9.99% above	10% above
No. Wards	0	4	7			10	3

4.10 The proposed ward pattern represents the real communities of Sandwell, taking close account of the unique identities of each of the six towns, supported by compelling data which then is taken beyond wards to define how communities interact and engage. This model will help shape how the council is structured, operates delivers services and interacts with communities for years to come and represents a fundamental realignment of the relationship between council and residents.

5.0 Interests & Identities of Local Communities

5.1 The starting point for this stage of the review was understanding how forecast data from the SFM methodology reflected the communities of Sandwell, taking account of the unique character of the six town. That sense of community and place can be interpreted in many differing ways all of which are equally valid. The perceived boundaries between communities and areas are often blurred and overlap which makes the development of any warding pattern challenging.

5.2 The council's approach to defining communities was therefore to combine data from both the SFM and ONS with both current and historic records of Sandwell, producing a map of indicative communities, based on –

- 5.2.1 community identities (current and historical);
- 5.2.2 demography;
- 5.2.3 physical infrastructure and landscape; and
- 5.2.4 natural or manmade boundaries – principal highways, canals, railway lines, parks, and greenspaces.

5.3 The challenge then turned to how to reflect the identities of the indicative communities and to choose boundaries which are fair and consistent throughout the entire borough.

- 5.4 Working with the cross-party working group and guided by the LGBCE criteria, the following principles were applied –
- 5.4.1 boundaries as far as possible to be located to rear of residential properties to unify roads and communities;
 - 5.4.2 boundaries located in line with or running along the mid-point of designated A or B roads or other main roads - these act as natural divisions; and
 - 5.4.3 natural or man-made to be used including as railway lines, embankments, retail or industrial parks, woods, parks, cemeteries, greenspaces, canals, and other watercourses.
- 5.5 These principles acted as the starting point from which the proposed ward boundaries have been derived, guided throughout by the three criteria outlined above which govern this stage of the review. A comprehensive analysis of historic, current, and forecast data has in turn been completed which shows the locations of –
- 5.5.1 parks and greenspaces of all sizes;
 - 5.5.2 council facilities and services;
 - 5.5.3 educational institutions;
 - 5.5.4 health services;
 - 5.5.5 transport and highway networks;
 - 5.5.6 recreational facilities; and
 - 5.5.7 retail.
- 5.6 The location of these facilities and services acts as a guide to identify areas around which a community has evolved and established, as well as acting as a draw to a wider area or neighbourhood and which links all of Sandwell's communities together.
- 5.7 Combining this information with forecast data and applying the 3 criteria for developing a warding pattern result in the proposals set out in this report. The proposal for each ward has been shaped by data which supports a clear sense of community and place and with direct reference to each of the LGBCE review criteria.

6.0 Effective and convenient local government

- 6.1 Each of the 24 proposed wards represent a unified, recognisable community of a geographic and electoral size that enables effective representation by 3 elected local Councillors. This will ensure each local community are able to identify and recognise their local representatives and have choice as to whom they seek to speak to.
- 6.2 The council as part of its continued improvement journey and delivering against the aims of the new Council Plan is undertaking a radical transformation. The challenges facing Sandwell are in some cases unique but in the main are consistent with those faced by almost all metropolitan

authorities in the UK, Europe and beyond including –

- 6.2.1 reducing carbon emissions and tackling climate change;
 - 6.2.2 helping people become more active to improve health and well-being;
 - 6.2.3 reducing loneliness by developing that sense of community and connection; and
 - 6.2.4 improving and re-animating our high streets and neighbourhoods that have suffered long-term stagnation and decline.
- 6.3 This review provides a basis for how the council reshapes itself for the future. For purposes of how proposed wards and communities interact, Sandwell's approach is the concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood. This approach is not unique but draws together best practice from a range of neighbourhood models. Many urban boroughs, cities and regions across the UK, Europe and beyond have similar models which seek to define the key components of a community to help shape services better. The benefits of approaching how and we and our partners view communities and deliver functions are wide ranging and include healthier communities, reducing inequalities, stronger local economies, cleaner air, and better resilience against climate change.
- 6.4 So, what is the 20-minute neighbourhood? Viewed from the perspective of an individual ward, for a typical person average walking pace is 3 miles per hour. For a walking distance of 20 minutes or one mile from the boundary of each ward, that defines a 20-minute neighbourhood where essential functions are accessible. This approach takes every proposed ward in Sandwell and reaches out to recognise the realities of our communities – the ward boundaries exist in maps only. People move, travel, and interact locally and beyond ward boundaries which this structure recognises.
- 6.5 Each proposed ward is supported by a detailed ward profile. Each of the 3 LGBCE criteria are addressed directly, and the council's submission goes further to set each ward in the context of the wider communities – the 20-minute neighbourhood.
- 6.6 Sandwell's model for neighbourhoods supports established communities and clusters of wards linking back to the six towns where people of all ages and levels of fitness are happy to travel actively for short distances from home to access the services they need daily. That these services and functions are accessible to everyone whatever their budget or physical ability and without use of a car or vehicle. The council's submission and detailed evidence supporting each ward profile provides the foundation for this approach.
- 6.7 The council's neighbourhoods approach is fundamentally about strengthening and empowering established communities to have a direct say in how their ward and neighbourhoods change and to provide a structure for the council and partner organisations to deliver services that create places that meet the needs of the least healthy and the least well-off.

- 6.8 Building on the foundation of the proposed 24 wards, the council will continue to develop its emergent neighbourhood over the coming months to form a series of ward and community clusters, structured around the six towns. This will provide a structure for co-operation and support between elected members for each ward, united and working together on shared issues of local concern.
- 6.9 The council's neighbourhood approach is intended to address this directly and provide the basis for new support structures which ensure the absence of any elected member does not negatively impact on how wards and communities are represented. This will extend to include how allowances and support arrangements operate.
- 6.10 Ward and community clusters which emerge through the 20-minute neighbourhood model are also likely to be assigned a range of roles and responsibilities by Full Council. New forums will be established and act as an additional linkage to address with matters of local and community concern which cross ward boundaries. Any proposals will be developed in accordance with principles laid down within the new Council Plan, and will seek to further enhance working with public, voluntary, private and third sector partners across the borough, black country, and wider region.

7.0 Conclusions

- 7.1 In developing this submission, the council has had regard to its ongoing improvement journey and with direct reference to Sandwell's communities and electors, local identities, local need, and service structures in respect of the following areas which are a requirement of the LGBCE –
- 7.1.1 **Delivering electoral equality for local voters** – the council's submission provides robust evidence which demonstrates that each councillor will each have roughly the same number of voters so that the value of each vote is the same regardless of where a resident and elector lives in Sandwell. Every proposed ward falls within +/- 10% of the borough average electorate for each councillor;
- 7.1.2 **Interests and identities of local communities** – the council's submission proposes a clear electoral pattern for the borough which, as far as possible, avoids splitting local ties and uses clear boundaries that are easily identifiable and recognisable; and
- 7.1.3 **Effective and convenient local government** – the council's submission proposes a clear, effective warding pattern which ensures every ward can be represented effectively by its elected representative(s). These electoral arrangements will enable the council to conduct business effectively and focus on outcome delivery for our communities.

- 7.2 The council's warding pattern proposals have been developed in consultation with and under the oversight and direction of a cross-party working group, comprising representatives from each political group, and all materials and proposals made by the working group circulated to all political group leaders throughout the review process.
- 7.3 Representatives appointed to the cross-party working group in turn engaged and consulted with all elected members in their respective groups and provided direct feedback the proposed warding pattern throughout the review process. A clear, consistent, structured work programme was followed by the cross-party working group based on –
- 7.3.1 **an intensive work programme.** Using the existing 6 towns model to focus on each area of the borough in sequence, working north to south. Large-scale town and borough-wide maps were provided at each meeting during which indicative boundaries and potential revisions for each were examined in sequence by the working group;
- 7.3.2 **robust population and electorate forecasts combined with detailed mapping data for all areas of Sandwell** – the Technical Report and Sandwell Forecast Model (SFM) approved by Full Council and the LGBCE at the first stage of the review forms the bedrock from which this submission was developed. The SFM incorporates data from multiple sources including the Office for National Statistics (ONS), electoral roll and local planning authority amongst others;
- 7.3.3 **a methodical analysis of every area, community, and neighbourhood** – supporting data produced as part of the first stage of the review comprising current and historical identified communities provided a baseline from which a warding pattern was developed. Large scale maps for each zone were examined in detail, each meeting of the working group generated extensive feedback both directly at the working group and indirectly from representatives as views were canvassed from respective political groups. Proposals or revisions were then examined by the Senior Responsible Officer who analysed these with due regard to the 3 LGBCE criteria of –
- delivering electoral equality for local voters;
 - interests and identities of local communities; and
 - effective and convenient local government.

During the course of an intensive 4-week work programme, a total of 8 iterations of the warding pattern were produced, assessed by the Senior Responsible Officer against these criteria and reported on to the working group;

7.3.4 **clear and consistent principles for the location of boundaries based as far as possible on natural or well-acknowledged boundaries** – working with the cross-party working group and guided by the 3 LG BCE criteria, the following principles were applied –

- boundaries as far as possible to be located to rear of residential properties to unify roads and communities;
- boundaries located in line with or running along the mid-point of designated A or B roads or other main roads as these act as natural divisions; and
- natural or man-made boundaries to be used including as railway lines, embankments, retail or industrial parks, woods, parks, greenspaces, and watercourses.

7.3.5 **a consensus-led approach to suggested names** – as each iteration of the warding pattern was produced, representatives on the working group provided continuous feedback from across all political groups, drawing on extensive local knowledge of key historic physical and social identifiers from which names for proposed wards were drawn.

7.4 Representatives appointed to the cross-party working group have in turn engaged and consulted with all elected members in their respective groups alongside independent members and provided direct feedback on the proposed warding pattern throughout the review process. This has been an inclusive and open process throughout.

7.5 The proposals in turn allow for a positive reset of both the council's governance and its relationships with citizens, service users, business community and partners. 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 Council Plan. The council has a positive view of the future relationship between the council and its electorate - the proposed warding pattern, making local representatives closer to, more directly identifiable and accountable to the communities they represent is an essential part of the transformation and improvement journey for the council, enabling and empowering local communities to do more for themselves.

7.6 The proposed warding pattern is an essential element in the council's improvement journey, enabling the council to discharge its statutory and regulatory functions, fulfil its duty as a strategic place maker, and deliver high quality and efficient services. These considerations have been made recognising the future improvements in service delivery and governance that the council is seeking to implement and have informed how these proposals have evolved.

7.7 This submission and accompanying appendices conclude the second stage of the review process on the part of the council, delivering a clear, structured, well-evidenced proposal for a ward pattern of 24 wards each represented by 3 members based on a council size of 72.

Sandwell Council
September 2024