

Report to Cabinet

16 October 2024

Subject:	Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-2030
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Business and Skills, Councillor Sukhbir Gill Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Councillor Jalal Uddin
Director:	Director Children and Education, Sally Giles
Key Decision:	Yes
Contact Officer:	Skills and Employability Service Manager, Kelly Harris Kelly_harris@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That approval be given to the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-30 as attached at Appendix 1.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The Skills and Employment Strategy will commence in October 2024 and replaces the previous Skills Strategy 2020-2023 approved by Cabinet in September 2020.
- 2.2 The Strategy responds to the current Skills and Employment challenges in the borough including youth unemployment and low skills levels and sets our ambitions and key actions and priorities to respond to the challenge.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	The Strategy supports the transition of young people from Education to Employment.
Living in Sandwell	Employment outcomes can provide health benefits to residents.
Thriving Economy in Sandwell	The Strategy aims to support businesses by upskilling residents to fill skills and recruitment gaps.
Healthy in Sandwell	Employment has been proven to improve the resilience and mental health and wellbeing of individuals.

Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 The Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy is an overarching document which sets out the borough's skills challenges and key priorities. The Strategy is aligned to the WMCA Employment and Skills Strategy which similarly sets out the region's skills challenges and key priorities.
- 4.2 The Strategy brings localised challenges to the forefront and aspirations for the future and is a collaborative approach delivered by key stakeholders from the Employment and Skills sector.
- 4.3 Substantial consultation has been carried out with stakeholders and partners including the West Midlands Combined authority, Department for Work and Pensions, Chamber of Commerce and Voluntary Sector organisations.
- 4.4 Officers from across the Council have been engaged in the shaping of the Strategy, assuring alignment to the corporate plan and related plans and strategies including the Sandwell Business Growth plan.
- 4.5 Engagement sessions have been organised across the borough with Sandwell residents using co-production and co-design approaches to gain the residents' voice. This work has led to some residents being engaged in the shaping of provision and delivery models to respond to the current skills and employment challenges.
- 4.6 The Strategy is a refresh of the Sandwell Skills Strategy 2020-2023 which was approved by Cabinet in September 2020. The scope of the new Strategy has been expanded to include Employment.

4.7 The key skills and employment challenges highlighted in the strategy include:

- Low employment rates in the borough, at 69.8% compared to 75% nationally.
- High levels of unemployment at 6.7% compared to 3.7% nationally.
- High levels of youth unemployment at 9.5% of young people aged 18-24 in receipt of Universal Credit compared to 5.1% nationally.
- School attainment gap, numbers achieving GCSE Maths and English by age 19 is 65.4% compared to 75.2% nationally.
- High numbers of residents with no qualifications, the percentage has decreased since the 2019 from 20.3% to 11.8% but remains above the national average of 6.5%.
- Apprenticeship numbers have declined in Sandwell since Pre-Covid, with 2110 starts in 2023/4 compared to 2870 in 2018/19.
- A high number of residents in low paid jobs, with 30% of residents earning below the Real Living Wage.
- High levels of economic inactivity, with 29.7% of Sandwell's working age population economically inactive.

4.8 The strategy contains a set of key outcomes to counter these challenges and to reduce the gap with the West Midlands and national performance.

- All Sandwell Pupils to gain the expected level of attainment or above in reading, writing and maths at KS2 and KS4.
- Maintain the NEET and not known figure of 2.7%.
- Increase of apprenticeship starts to 2,870 per annum; recovering to pre pandemic levels in line with 2018/19 data.
- Employment rate of 75% to close the gap with regional and national data.
- A reduction of Unemployment Benefit claimants to 4.5% to close the gap with regional data.
- A reduction of Youth Unemployment benefit claimants to 5.2% to close the gap with the national average.
- Decrease the percentage of residents with no qualifications to 9% to close the gap with the West Midlands.
- Increase the percentage of resident with level 3 qualifications to 58% to close the gap with the West Midlands.
- Increase the percentage of resident with level 4 qualifications to 38% to close the gap with the West Midlands.

4.9 Key actions have been identified to meet these ambitions including:

1. Improve the future prospects of our children.
2. Prepare our young people for future life, work and careers with specific support for disadvantaged groups.
3. Improved adult attainment - Reduce the number of residents with no/low qualifications and increase those with level 3/4 and above qualifications to close the gap with West Midlands and England.
4. Ensuring our residents can participate in the labour market.
5. Increase the number of accessible jobs within the borough, with clear pathways into our local businesses, growth sectors and promote the careers of the future.
6. Develop stem skills in Sandwell for growth sectors.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 There are no alternative options, the Strategy has been carefully considered with no other feasible alternative options.

6 Implications

Resources:	<p>The delivery of the Strategy is predominantly funded by external sources including the Education Skills Funding Agency, UK Shared Prosperity Fund, West Midlands Combined Authority, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education.</p> <p>The majority of the funding and grants referenced to deliver the strategy are not owned by the Council, they are funding that comes into the borough into a range of providers such as Colleges and training providers. The Council is formally responsible for funding the Adult Education Budget contract delivered by Sandwell Adult Family Learning. The Council also currently holds contracts for UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Commonwealth games legacy funding. Facilitation, co-ordination and monitoring of the Strategy and action plans will be conducted by the Council utilising existing resources.</p>
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	<p>Delivery of the Strategy partly relies on external funding sources, a large proportion of existing external funding is due to cease in March 2025. This has been highlighted within the risk register.</p> <p>Activities of internal Council teams also contribute to the delivery of the Strategy with a mixture of Council core budget and external funding resources used.</p>
Legal and Governance:	<p>Governance of the Strategy will be delivered by the Employment and Skills Partnership chaired by the Assistant Director Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement, with representation from key stakeholders within the Employment and Skills sector.</p>
Risk:	<p>The Corporate Risk Management Strategy (CRMS) has been complied with - to identify and assess any significant risks associated with this decision/project. This includes (but is not limited to) political, legislation, financial, environmental and reputation risks.</p> <p>A risk assessment is being carried out to assess the risks associated to deliver the Strategy. Any risks identified will be addressed with a series of actions to mitigate the risk. At present three risks have been identified as significant and are in respect of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delivery partners having the resources to deliver on the priorities and outcomes for the Strategy since a large amount of funding is due to cease in March 2025. - The Strategy not meeting the needs of residents and beneficiaries. - Lack of engagement of beneficiaries to the delivery of the Strategy. <p>Measures will be put in place to manage these risks to an acceptable level.</p>
Equality:	<p>An equality impact assessment (EIA) screening has been carried out which has been reviewed by the EDI team. As the outcome found that there are no adverse impacts on protected characteristics, a full EIA is not required for this proposal.</p> <p>Within the Strategy we will consider measures to address barriers faced by individuals from lower</p>

	socioeconomic backgrounds to ensure equitable access to education, training, and employment. Targeted supports such as financial assistance, mentoring, and tailored career advice will be considered. Monitoring the impact of these measures on social mobility will be necessary.
Health and Wellbeing:	The Strategy contributes to the health and wellbeing of residents due to the association of positive health benefits as a result of employment and skills outcomes. Mental health and resilience has been highlighted as a key priority in the Strategy, to ensure any employment and skills provisions developed incorporate this need.
Social Value:	The strategy supports the employment benefits of social value by increasing accessibility and upskilling residents to be ready for the world of work.
Climate Change:	The strategy highlights the need for green skills and the growth in green industries in Sandwell
Corporate Parenting:	The strategy is aligned to the Children in Care/Care Experienced Young people NEET strategy and supports the priorities and objectives for improved outcomes for the cohort.

7. Appendices

Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-2030.

8. Background Papers

List source/background documents.