

Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy

Strengthening Skills and Employment for a Thriving Economy

2024 – 2030





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Foreword

Councillor Jalal Uddin - Cabinet Member for Children and Families

The launch of the Skills and Employment Strategy is key in supporting our young people to prepare for their future careers. We want to ensure that our children have the best start in life and leave school with the skills and qualifications needed to progress. We want to support them to understand the local economy and choose careers where there are good and sustainable jobs for them to move into.

The number of young people out of work is a huge challenge and it is recognised that additional support is needed to give them the experience and self-confidence to compete in the labour market. Our children have been significantly impacted by the covid pandemic and the recovery of key services. This strategy provides a dedicated set of actions to ensure that we are doing all we can to support them to thrive in their adult lives. Within Sandwell we have a number of vulnerable groups that need additional support from our services. We are committed to increasing access to employment and skills provision for those with disabilities and health conditions; to ensure equality and inclusivity of our workforce. We recognise the importance of working collaboratively with our Care Experienced and young people who offend to provide tailored pathways into employment.

The aim of the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy is to support the Sandwell Growth Plan, providing the best support for individuals to benefit from regeneration opportunities. It also supports delivery of the Council Plan both in terms of ensuring our young people have the skills and tools to enter the job markets and in relation to delivering Sandwell's Thriving Economy. The collaborative approach of partners; working together to the benefit of Sandwell residents will ensure the greatest success. This total commitment and alignment of resources is essential to enable Sandwell residents and businesses to excel.



Councillor Jalal Uddin

Cabinet Member
for Children and Families

Foreword

Councillor Sukhbir Gill – Cabinet Member for Business and Skills

The launch of our Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy is a commitment of our partners to the residents and businesses within the borough. It is both ambitious and challenging to ensure that we strive for a holistic skills environment, an inclusive labour market, and a robust economy to attract inward investment in the area.

The continuous development of skills is core to all aspects of life. We recognise that those who have a good level of skills are generally more likely to find sustainable employment and earn higher wages. We want to provide a skills system that is flexible and provides support at all levels. We want to ensure that the skills we provide are those needed by the labour market and better prepare residents for the needs of our local businesses.

Skills development also has a positive effect on physical and mental health. We recognise the importance of upskilling our local people in work too, giving them the knowledge and confidence to progress within the workplace. We want our residents to be able to compete with their regional and national peers, to gain the best employment opportunities available.

The increase of skills is important to business development and growth. We want Sandwell businesses to thrive, to increase their productivity and be able to offer increased wages. It is essential that our workforce can support businesses to compete in the local economy. We encourage local companies to help shape the skills training that is delivered to ensure that local people are best placed to gain the future opportunities.

Our strategy aims to provide a long-term plan to ensure we are best placed for the jobs of the future, driving skills development in areas such as the environment and digital sectors. We recognise that these skills will be key to a much wider range of employment opportunities, and we want our residents to be leading the way.



Councillor Sukhbir Gill

Cabinet Member
for Business and Skills



Executive Summary

Sandwell is a diverse borough with a rich history of traditional industries, practical skills, and deep-set community values. With the advancement of technology and the diversification of business, Sandwell residents too need to adapt and gain skills to support them in the future economy.

Although Sandwell has made significant progress in recent years, there are still areas which require additional attention. They include:

- Low skill levels in the population, with fewer people qualified to Level 4+ and more people with no qualifications, compared to other areas
- Issues of poverty for those in employment, driven by low wage levels and unsecure employment
- Skills shortages faced by employers, particularly in roles that require advanced and/or higher skills
- Lower attainment by young people through early years, primary and secondary education

Following the launch of the Sandwell Skills Plan in 2020, work is already underway to address these challenges. Some areas require additional focus to boost our labour market and meet the needs of our businesses. We also recognise the need to plan for the growth sectors of the future that will also require more specialised skills.

Sandwell partners are committed to support the skills and employment agenda of the borough. The Sandwell Skills and Employment Plan 2024 sets out priority actions and aspirations to lead this work. The main aims of the plan are:

- Improve skills attainment at all levels
- More people to move into sustainable employment
- More people to progress into higher skilled jobs
- More skilled employees available to support business

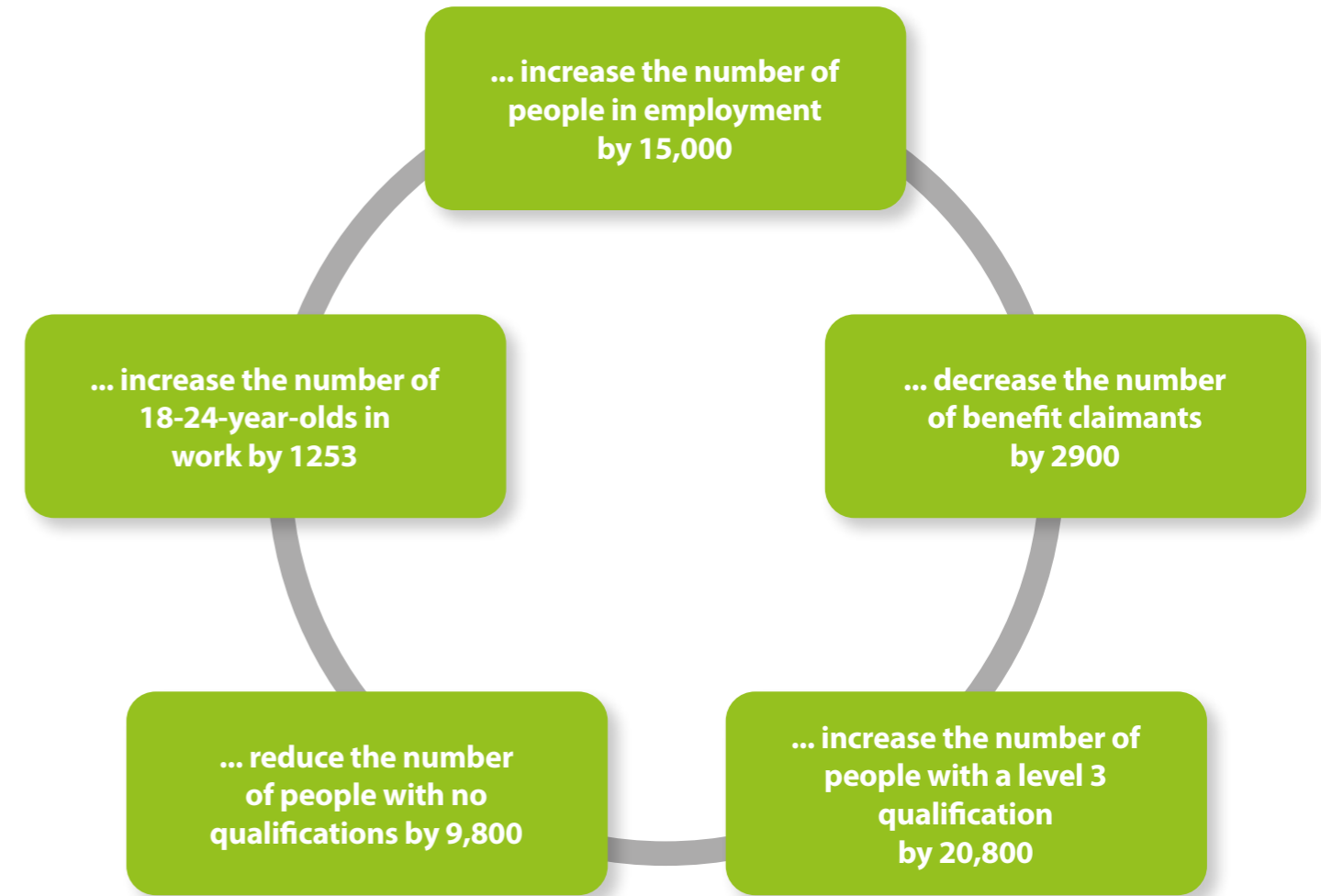
In March 2020 the country was hit by a pandemic of unprecedented scale. It affected not only the lives of our residents but also our local businesses.

The employment and skills gaps that emerged from this pandemic will need continued focus for us to achieve our long-term vision. Additional areas for focus include:

- An increased need for digital skills and access to equipment
- Young people facing the more competition for opportunities
- Mental Health, wellbeing, and resilience support



By 2030 we aim to...



Introduction

In Sandwell, we care about each other, and it is our community that makes us proud to call this place our home. We're down to earth and proud of our heritage as a powerhouse of the industrial revolution, and this history is still evident today in the unique and distinct character of our towns and neighbourhoods.

Sandwell is at the heart of the West Midlands, and we have a young and rapidly growing population. We're proud of the diverse communities that bring so much to our borough. We're the green gateway to the Black Country from Birmingham and have great connections to the rest of the country.

We already have an outstanding track record in bringing funding into our borough and are passionate about supporting businesses to grow in a way that ensures people and communities benefit too. We know that we face some big challenges here. But we also know our community is amazing when we come together, and there is so much potential to unlock.

We want Sandwell to be an inviting place to live, with thriving communities, ambitious and skilled residents, and strong, competitive, and innovative businesses, who are all vital to the regional economy.

We want Sandwell to be a great place for children to grow up and to ensure a brighter future for young people. Where our very youngest children are ready for school and young people have access to excellent learning opportunities, which support them to achieve

and equips them with the necessary skills and advice to become active, participatory young adults.

We want to ensure skills and employment access for all, providing meaningful pathways into good employment, competitive wages and with continuous development and career progression.

We want Sandwell to stand as a beacon of progress in the West Midlands, for Sandwell to have a thriving economy and a sustainable future. We want businesses to have a skilled workforce that can support them to grow and invest in skills for the future.

This strategy will support partners to drive the ambitions for the borough and support the wider strategies for the West Midlands Region. The Single Settlement and alignment of local and regional plans will provide enhanced opportunities for the benefit of local people and businesses, ensuring sustained prosperity for all.

Sandwell Council is actively engaging in place-based leadership, focusing on co-production and collaboration with key stakeholders to define a shared story and ambitions for the borough. This work sits alongside work that has already been done to develop our emerging Place Based Strategy.

The draft Sandwell Place Based Strategy is the first phase in defining the needs of the borough in relation to the key themes outlined as part of the WMCA Single Settlement. The PBS sets out the challenges for the borough, the opportunities for growth and the strategic

case for investment asks. Skills is recognised as integral to economic success of the borough and the long-term vision for the future.

The Skills and Employment Strategy plays a key role in this and is referenced within the PBS as the driver to enable residents to access skills, obtain qualifications and maintain employment with clear pathways to growth sector opportunities. Key priorities for Skills and Employment are aligned in both documents to ensure that future funding can support our wider ambitions.

- An increased need for digital skills and access to equipment
- Young people facing the more competition for opportunities
- Mental Health, wellbeing, and resilience support



Opportunities

Sandwell has a wide range of opportunities to support the increase of skills and employment in the borough including a strong business sector within growth sectors, a pipeline of regeneration projects with embedded social value clauses, a wider range of education and training providers and a commitment from key stakeholders to support the skills and employment agenda.

Sandwell has strengthened the educational infrastructure, investing across education & skills provision. This includes Sandwell College and the new STEM Centre in West Bromwich, the new Midlands Metropolitan University Hospital Learning campus in Smethwick, and a programme for delivering several new schools across the borough. Action has been taken to reverse systemic deprivation and create a new generation with improved skill levels, including innovative approaches like Shireland CBSO Academy, the first school in the UK to be partnered with a professional orchestra.

Investment in skills infrastructure creates progression pathways for future generations, with technical skills provision linked to our strengths in Engineering, Manufacturing, and Health, and the broader skills pipeline required for future business growth around sectors and clusters. We expect our improved skills provision will create growth in our health sector, centred around the adoption of research, innovation, and technology at the MMUH's learning centre.



Child Friendly Sandwell

Sandwell Council has been accepted onto UNICEF UK's Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme and over the coming years will be developing and delivering an action plan to ensure that Children and Young people are at the centre of all we do.

Developing a Child Friendly Community involves engaging with children and young people as active citizens, ensuring their safety and well-being, and creating inclusive and accessible spaces and services for them.

This programme is a commitment to Sandwell's children and young people that we will ensure the whole council and the whole borough focuses on their rights and welfare.

West Midlands Mayor's Youth Plan

The West Midlands Mayor has launched a Youth Plan to support the increased number of young people that are unemployed. The plan includes a commitment to guarantee meaningful advice and guidance, pathways to support services and delivery of 20,000 work experience placements across the region.

Growth Sectors

To strive for a stable and growing economy, it is important to work with our business community. Growth sectors for the borough and the wider region will be central to planning and ensuring that we are giving our residents the skills and experience needed to access these future opportunities.

The key sectors identified by the Midlands Engine and the WM Economic Intelligence Unit February 2024) for Sandwell are:

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Transport and Logistics
- Healthcare and Life Sciences
- Retail and Wholesale
- Business Services

These sectors have seen growth in terms of employment; currently providing 67% of the boroughs jobs. Other significant sectors for Sandwell in terms of employment and potential growth are:

- Construction Sector and retrofit
- Net Zero Technologies

Skills for the future

There is a need for Sandwell to plan and look towards the skills that will be needed for the future. These skills will enable our businesses to compete for opportunities as they arise.

- Digital skills – Black Country Digital Skills Report 2021 outlines the need to upskill the workforce to be digitally led. Looking to the future it is anticipated that automation and artificial intelligence will become more significant to business development, as well as the growth of areas such as coding and programming. All business sectors will require an increased level of digital skills within their workforce.
- Green Skills – Green Skills can be defined as “the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society” (Cedefop, 2012). Green skills will be needed by all sectors and at all levels in the workforce. Some specific Green Jobs of the future include Water conservation, Biofuels, environmental remediation, Sustainability, Energy auditors, Recycling, Electric Vehicles, Solar power, and Wind energy.
- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) – These programmes aim to promote innovation and critical thinking. It uses engineering or technology as a basis to develop creativity and problem solving. These skills will support a better transition to work and real-world experiences.

Sandwell recognises that these skills are essential for all industries and understands the importance of ensuring our residents have the knowledge and ability to lead local business to continued growth and sustained success.



Context

There are wider factors that support and shape Sandwell’s Skills and Employment Strategy. Policy, Funding Strategies and Plans that need to be considered when looking at the key Opportunities and Priorities for Skills and Employment in the borough. These documents have been used to help understand and shape the areas of focus for Sandwell.

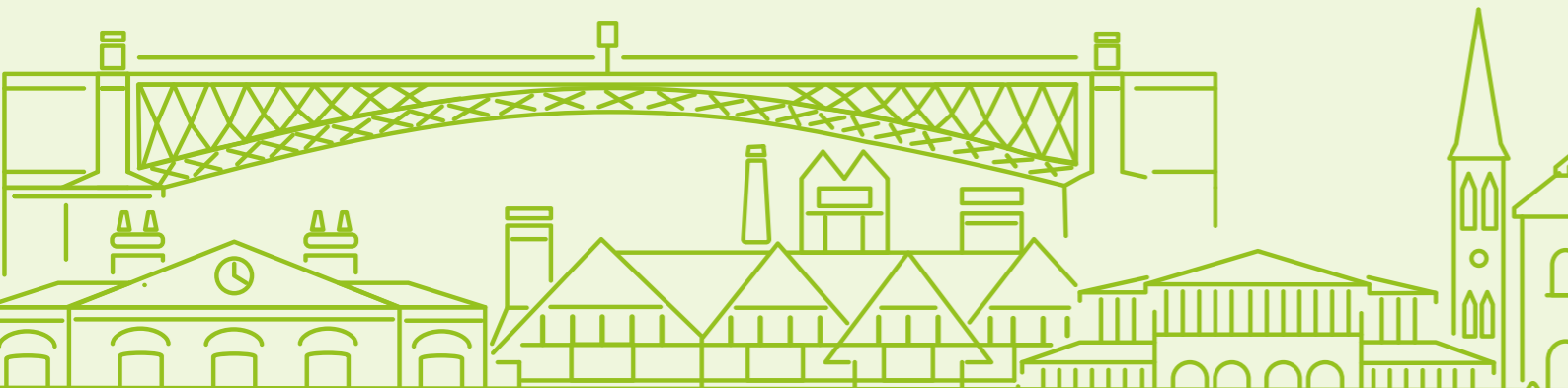
Policy landscape

Skills	Employment	Sandwell Policy
WM Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) Sandwell Placed Based Strategy (Draft) BC Digital Report 2022 and Sandwell Digital Strategy (Draft)	WMCA Regional Employment and Skills Strategy 2024 West Midlands Mayor’s Youth Plan Sandwell Inclusive Growth Deal 2020 and Social Value	Sandwell Council Plan 2024 Sandwell Children in Care/Care Experienced NEET Strategy 2022

The Sandwell Skills and Employment Plan pulls on the core values of the WMCA Employment and Skills Strategy 2024 and aims to support the wider Regional priorities alongside the needs of Sandwell. It recognises the need to work with businesses to prepare residents for the local workplace needs and is aligned to the WM Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP).

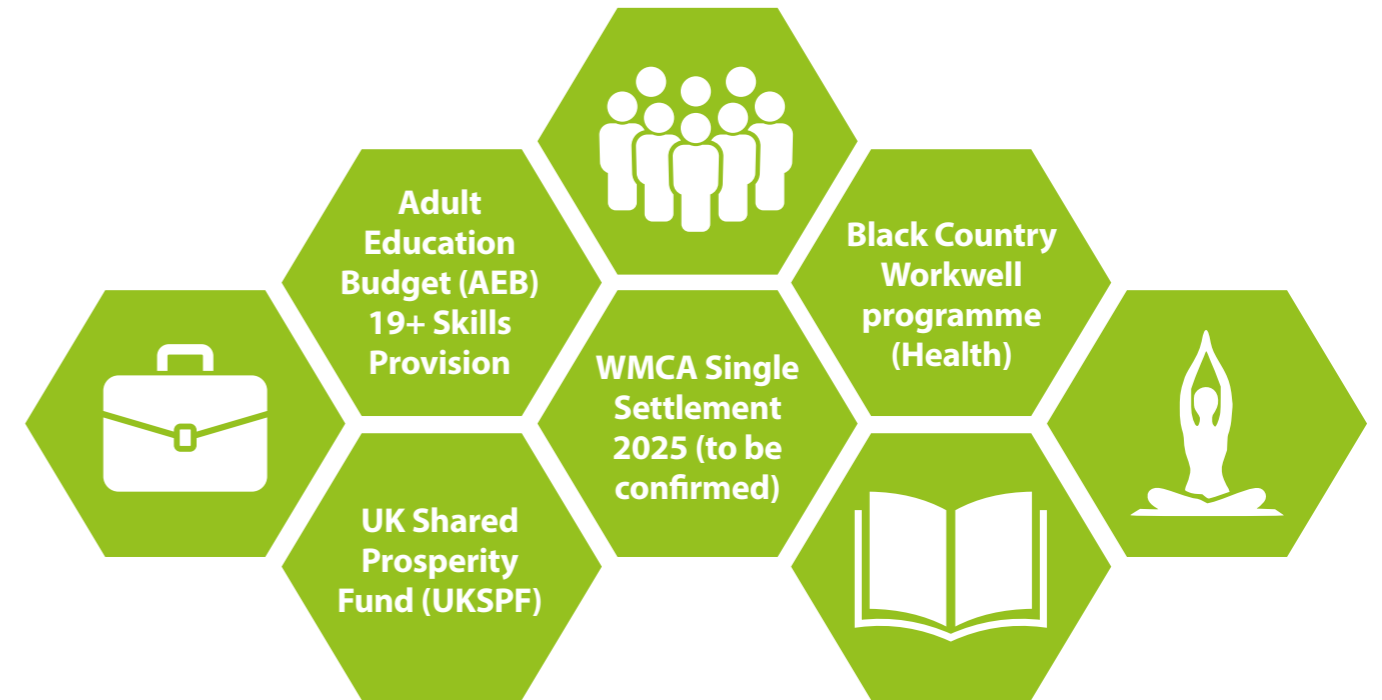
At a local level the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy aligns with the objectives of The Sandwell Council Plan, recognising that the journey from childhood to adulthood is critical. By encouraging growth and maximising investment, the Plan aims to generate a wealth of job opportunities for the residents of Sandwell. This holistic approach ensures that economic development is not just about infrastructure, but about people and their quality of life.

The Skills and Employment Strategy plays a key role in the Place Based Strategy and supports a long-term ambition to increase adult skills within the borough.



Employment and Skills Funding

There are several funding streams that support the Employment and Skills agenda within Sandwell. The programmes associated enable residents to gain the skills and experience needed to progress onto Education and Employment, or within employment into higher positions. The most significant funding streams are detailed below.



Partnerships

Partnership working is central to the achievement of our ambitions, with all stakeholders taking full accountability for their part in moving forward towards positive change. Effective communication, sharing of resources, linking up provision and developing progression pathways will be key to achieving success for our residents and businesses.

- SHAPE Forum – listening to the voice of Children and Young people to lead the agenda for staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing
- Corporate Parenting Board – Corporate Parenting Board Members actively engaging with young people through two forums; Voices of Sandwell (VOS 10–18-year-olds) and Forum for Independent young adults (FIYA 18–25-year-olds). Aligning the support available for the children we care for, and care experienced to give them the best start in life
- The Employment and Skills Group – Bringing together key strategic partners within the employment and skills sector to have an oversight of the Sandwell challenge, the provision available in the local area and provide a platform for more collaborative working. The group facilitates information sharing and updates from West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to the members. Findings from the local perspective will be shared with the WMCA for future shaping of policy and provision.
- The Employment and Skills Network – This group is made up of Community and Voluntary sector partners that provide employment and skills support to Sandwell residents. They provide an up-to-date account of the changing needs of the borough, the challenges faced by residents and the support that is required.

- Sandwell Anchor network - Sandwell has an established 'anchor network' in which anchor institutions use their collective assets and strengths to retain wealth in Sandwell, bringing economic, social, environmental and health benefits to people, communities, and businesses in the borough. Collectively, these institutions have a budget of more than £1.5bn and a workforce of over 15,000 people. By working collaboratively on procurement, employment, and economic recovery, they can play a powerful role in 'community wealth building'; shaping Sandwell's economy to ensure local people and communities' benefit from investments made here.
- Social Value Partnership – All established partnership which ensures that the Clauses that are included in major contracts are fulfilled and ensure that the community benefit from opportunities available as part of regeneration works. The partnership enables alignment of businesses/opportunities and residents.



Sandwell benefits from a diverse range of Skills and Employment organisations and institutions delivering provision and services across the borough.

Colleges and training providers

Sandwell is served by a wealth of colleges in the local area, including Sandwell College, Dudley College, Walsall College, and Halesowen Colleges all based in the Black Country. Colleges within Birmingham and the surrounding areas are also accessible on public transport routes.

There are many providers in the locality delivering provision through AEB funding which also supports sector specific qualifications and bootcamps.

Local Authority Services

Careers Advice – Sandwell MBC's Connexions service provides IAG and Career pathways for young people. This is supported by the Regional Careers and Enterprise Company.

Employment Support – Sandwell MBC's Employment and Skills Service provides dedicated support for residents to move closer to the labour market as well as supporting local businesses to recruit to vacancies. Services include support to apply for apprenticeships and specialist support for people with disabilities and health conditions.

Adult Education – Sandwell MBC's Sandwell Adult and Family learning Service specialises in adult skills including provision in English, Maths, ICT, and a comprehensive community learning offer.

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations play a key role in the delivery of Skills and Employment in the borough including engagement at the heart of our neighbourhoods and communities. With aligned services which support residents in areas most needed including benefits advice, emotional health and wellbeing and cost of living support.

National and regional

The National Careers service offers an all-age provision to support adults and young people with their career, learning and training choices.

The Department for work and pensions (DWP)/Jobcentre Plus leads on the provision for Universal Credit claimants and large-scale recruitment in the borough. Current provision includes Restart and the Work and Health Programme.

The Careers Hub for the Black Country is funded by the Careers and Enterprise Company. The hub works with secondary schools and local employers to provide students and careers leaders the resources they need to succeed. The Hub aims to develop a strong community of practice that delivers the Gatsby Benchmarks, which are endorsed in the Careers Strategy by the Department for Education. The Benchmarks provide a framework for schools and Colleges to improve their careers guidance and support.

Key Challenges

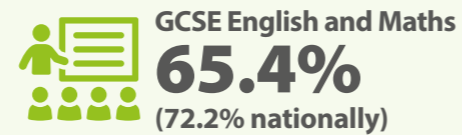
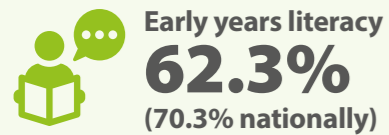
Labour Market Context

Sandwell is a growing borough with clear economic advantages and a wide range of regeneration opportunities are planned for its future development. Despite this it faces several key labour market challenges, notably that our residents are not benefitting equally from economic growth and need additional support to compete with regional and national peers.

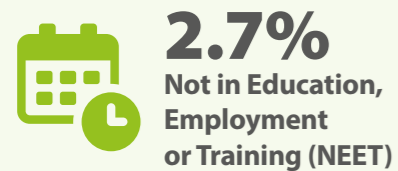
Sandwell Population



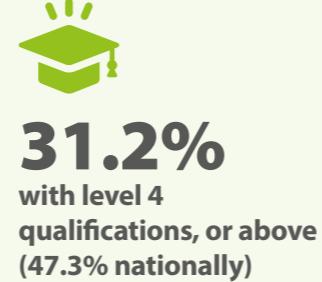
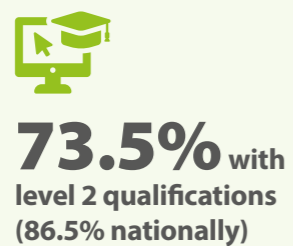
Children and Young People Attainment



Not in Education, Employment or Training



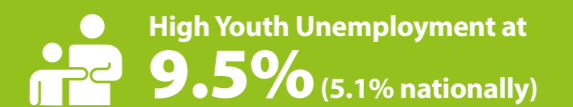
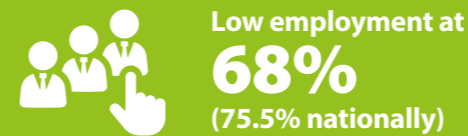
Low levels of qualifications held by residents



Apprenticeship starts



Low Employment/High Unemployment



High numbers of economically Inactive



High numbers of jobs available but low earnings



Sandwell's six towns

Although Sandwell is one borough it has very distinct towns that can often operate as different communities, with different strengths and weaknesses that need to be recognised to develop and grow.

<p>Oldbury:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highest job growth • high business growth • low skills profile. 	<p>Rowley Regis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • growing slowly with an older age profile • modest job growth • low aspirations. 	<p>Smethwick</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • most densely populated and youngest town • lower than average job growth • high proportion of residents with no/low skills • young urban renters
<p>Tipton</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high skills levels but lower than average job growth. • Smallest town • young, relatively fast-growing population 	<p>Wednesbury</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • growing slower than average • higher levels of mid-level skills. 	<p>West Bromwich</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • largest town • older age profile • high employment and skills levels.

Inclusive Growth Plan 2020

Skills Strategy 2020 Progress

Following the launch of our original Skills Strategy in 2020 we have seen a positive movement towards our skills and employment aspirations.



A Local Perspective

To ensure that the Skills and Employment Strategy best meets the needs of our residents, a wide range of consultation has taken place. This has enabled a better understanding of the challenges that are being faced by our communities and the support that is required.

Partner feedback



High need for ESOL provision - oversubscribed



Improving access to training and skills for carers



Emotional, health and wellbeing support alongside Employment and Skills interventions



Generational worklessness/low aspiration



Prescriptive funding for particular groups



Access to funding

Residents Perspective



Barriers to provision



Bespoke provision tailored to individual needs



Work experience opportunities that lead to jobs



Health and wellbeing - anxiety and mental health



Building trust before engagement in employment activities



A fair wage to support themselves and their family



in work progression opportunities

Children and Young People's perspective



Different learning styles



Smaller groups for English and Maths



Financial literacy



Health and Wellbeing



School transition focussed on social skills and confidence



Independent 'help' such as YouTube

Business Perspective



Recruitment and retention difficulties



Struggling to find individuals with the right skills for their businesses to thrive and grow



Technical, Basic and Essential Skills



Advancement in technologies - skills becoming dated



Upskilling the workforce



Employer led training design

Inclusivity

To ensure that the Skills and Employability Strategy meets the needs of our borough, it is important to recognise the make-up of the population and the differing needs and support that is required by all groups and communities.

The strategy acknowledges that there are key groups that may need additional support or flexible access to provision. These groups include:

Age – children, young people, 50 plus

Disability and health conditions, mental health

Race – BAME, marginalised communities, new arrivals/migrants, ESOL

Sex/Sexual Orientation – Females, non-binary, LGBTQ+

Disadvantaged Communities – deprived wards, generational worklessness, carers, lone parents, young people who offend

This strategy aims to recognise all members of our society and ensure that there is support and progression pathways that meet their needs.



Outcomes

To have the greatest impact on employment and skills within the Sandwell Borough and to maintain a clear focus, there is a need for a shared ambition across key partners to realise change.

In response to the challenges and feedback from young people, residents and partners, a set of key priority outcomes have been developed. These include those to tackle the biggest challenges for Sandwell and those that will support the skills development of the wider region.

The key priorities that have been identified are:

1. Improve the future prospects of our Children and Young People
2. Prepare our young people for future life, work, and careers with specific support for disadvantaged groups including Care Experienced
3. Increased 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. Removing Barriers to Employment
5. Increase the number of accessible jobs and apprenticeships 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



Targets

To deliver the best possible outcomes for our residents we will regularly monitor and review progress through our Key Performance Indicators which are detailed below.

Target by 2030	Where are we now	What do we need to do to get there
Increased attainment of 60% at the expected level or above in reading, writing and maths at KS2	56%	193 more pupils per year
Increased attainment of 45% in English and Maths at Grade 5 or above at KS4	35%	427 more pupils per year
Maintain the NEET and not known figure of 2.7%	2.7%	n/a
Increase of Apprenticeship starts to 2870 per annum, recovering to pre pandemic levels in line with 2018/19 data	2110 Starts 2022	760 additional starts
Employment rate of 75% to close the gap with regional and national data	68% (146,500 people)	15,080 more people into work
A reduction of Unemployment benefit claimants (aged 16+) to 4.5% to close the gap with regional data	5.6% (14,500 people)	2900 more people into work
A reduction of Youth Unemployment benefit claimants (aged 18-24) to 5.1% to close the gap with the national average	9.5% (2705 people)	1253 more young people in work
Decrease the percentage of residents with no qualifications to 7% to close the gap with the West Midlands	11.8% (24,300 people)	9,800 more people with a qualification
Increase the percentage of resident with level 3 qualifications to 58% to close the gap with the West Midlands	47.9% (98,800 people)	20,800 more people with a level 3 qualification
Increase the percentage of resident with level 4 qualifications to 38% to close the gap with the West Midlands	31.2% (64,300 people)	14,000 more people with a level 4 qualification

These indicators are aligned to each of our Key Priority outcomes and will be reported on a quarterly basis to the Sandwell Council's Leadership Team, Leaders Meeting, Quarterly Performance Board and Sandwell's Employment and Skills Partnership, along with updates on key projects and target groups. Further details on performance can also be provided as required from Key Partners supporting the delivery.

This process will provide a comprehensive view of how the priorities are being met, giving a clear oversight of the effectiveness of the strategy as well as transparency and accountability of the wider activities.

Action Plans

Action plans have been developed to outline the key activities of our partners and support the achievement of the Key Priorities outcomes. All actions will be reviewed annually to reflect any changes within the policy context, funding available and the needs of our communities. Annual conversations with residents, children and young people and partners will take place to ensure that our activities are aligned to the evolving challenges.

Governance

The Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy will be overseen by the Sandwell Employment and Skills Partnership which brings together a range of key stakeholders that are responsible for the learning, skills and employment support that is available in the borough. The strategy has been developed and adopted by these partners in a joint commitment to improve the outcomes for our area; regularly reviewing the key actions and progress against our ambitions.

All reports will be fed into the West Midlands Combined Authority Employment and Skills Officers Group to support the achievement of the wider West Midlands Employment and Skills Strategy.

At a strategic level the plan will be owned and monitored by the SMBC Employment and Skills Service. All reports on progress and the review of actions will be conducted centrally, gathering key data and achievements from outlined partners. Progress will also be reported through the SMBC Scrutiny Panels and Cabinet.

This strategy is a 'living' document and will be reviewed annually to ensure that it reflects the changing policy context and continues to meet the needs of the borough and makes an impact on residents. All new funding and programmes will be aligned to the strategy to gain the maximum benefits for our residents.



Launched October 2024

www.sandwell.gov.uk