

Report to Council

29 October 2024

Subject:	West Midlands Combined Authority - Update
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That Council notes the update report and is asked to consider any other opportunities for the Borough arising in connection with the West Midlands Combined Authority.

2. Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 This is a follow up report to the previous report submitted to Council on 19 March 2024, giving an update on key developments.
- 2.2 Being a constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority offers Sandwell Council access to funding and initiatives that positively impact the borough and the people of Sandwell.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	Participation as a constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority offers opportunity to contribute positively to the objectives of the Council Plan
Living in Sandwell	Participation as a constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority offers opportunity to contribute positively to the objectives of the Council Plan
Thriving Economy in Sandwell	Participation as a constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority offers opportunity to contribute positively to the objectives of the Council Plan
Healthy in Sandwell	Participation as a constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority offers opportunity to contribute positively to the objectives of the Council Plan

4. Context and Key Issues

Deeper Devolution Deal

- 4.1 The Deeper Devolution Deal (DDD - formerly referred to as the Trailblazer Devolution Deal) provides additional funding to the West Midlands Region and some additional powers to make local rather than national decisions.
- 4.2 The detail of the DDD was subject of a report to Cabinet on 13th September 2023, whereby Cabinet authorised the Leader to vote in favour of the DDD when considered by the WMCA Board. The Cabinet report can be accessed via the following link:
<https://sandwell.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=143&MId=6576&Ver=4>
- 4.3 That report noted that further decision points would be required as the process for implementation of the DDD is developed.

At the meeting of Cabinet on 13th March 2024 authority was given for the Leader of the Council to endorse Sandwell Council’s entry into the



Single Settlement Memorandum of Understanding when the matter is determined at West Midlands Combined Authority Board.

The single settlement will provide the region with multi-year certainty over a consolidated funding allocation. This will enable a long-term, joined-up approach to funding delivery, which will, in turn, support the development and delivery of locally led place-based strategies.

Place Based Strategy (PBS)

- 4.4 The single settlement represents a significant change to how the region will receive funding from HMG for the relevant functions.
- As part of the Deeper Devolution Trailblazer Deal, each constituent Local Authority in the WMCA area was asked to develop a Place Based Strategy which sets out their key priorities and Place based vision, over a 20-year period aligned to five functional pillars. These five pillars are: Local Growth, Housing and Regeneration, Skills, Transport, and Net Zero (Net Zero is a pilot programme).
 - Officers developed and submitted Sandwell's draft PBS to meet the initial 5th July deadline which outlined a range of key interventions and asks on a Sandwell wide basis, identified key geographic zones, and gave an overview of a reset with WMCA on a partnership level.
 - The draft PBS will continue to be shaped over the Autumn, alongside the development of a new Place focused approach to working in the region and further discussions will be taking place with the WMCA, external partners and HMG, with a view to finalising the PBS for formal Cabinet approval in early 2025.

City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS)

- 4.5 The City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) is a five-year capital settlement to enable the city regions to achieve their ambitions in terms of transport investment. The fund is overseen by the Department for Transport (DfT) and in the West Midlands it aligns with emerging Local Transport Plan 5 (LTP5). CRSTS commenced in 2022-23 with £8.9m previously allocated to the West Midlands in 2021-22 to assist with preparation and delivery of the settlement.



- 4.6 CRSTS is the main source of transport capital funding for local transport schemes with a scheme cost of £50m or less. CRSTS draws under one heading, a number of transport funding streams including the final year of the (already allocated) Transforming Cities Fund (TCF), as well as the Integrated Transport Block (ITB) and Highways Maintenance Block (HMB). For the time being, the Active Travel Fund (ATF), which covers walking and cycling investment, remains separate.
- 4.7 The projects included in the programme bid were developed and set out against Government priority outcomes of.
- Growth and Productivity
 - Levelling up
 - Decarbonisation

In addition, Government requires that projects should, wherever feasible, deliver clear benefits for cycling, walking and public transport, prioritising these modes over the private car.

- 4.8 The approved CRSTS programme includes the following projects which are, either wholly or partially, located in Sandwell:

Project	Allocation
A34/A45 SPRINT Corridor (Phase 2)	£56.60m
A4123 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor	£29.00m
A461 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor, Sandwell	£12.00m
Black Country ULEV Charging Scheme	£ 7.00m
Dudley Port Integrated Transport Hub (Phase 1 & 2)	£ 2.40m
Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (Black Country Package)	£ 8.00m
Smethwick to Birmingham Inclusive Growth Corridor Transport Package	£19.00m
Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro Extension (Sustainable Access Measures)	£16.00m
West Midlands Metro Line 1 Upgrades	£30.00m
West Midlands Metro Wednesbury Depot Expansion	£37.90m
West Midlands Metro Traction Power (Phase 2)	£12.60m
Total	£230.50m

The projects support not only the WMCA objectives, but also the regeneration priorities of the emerging Sandwell Local Plan and Sandwell's Regeneration Strategy and approved pipeline. In total, these projects represent over £230m of investment in the transport network with impacts in Sandwell over the five years of the CRSTS programme. Where



schemes cross boundaries, it is difficult to quantify the level of investment directly on the network within Sandwell, but it is estimated that this will be in the region of £130m.

4.9 Progress on these projects as a programme was reported to Cabinet on 7th February 2024. However, the following projects have now received 'in principle' scheme approval following reports to Cabinet and are now proceeding through the WMCA assurance process.

- Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro Extension (Sustainable Access Measures) - Cabinet approval on 6th December 2023
- A461 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor, Sandwell - Cabinet approval on 6th December 2023
- Smethwick to Birmingham Inclusive Growth Corridor Transport Package - Cabinet approval on 17th January 2024
- A4123 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor – Cabinet approval on 7th February 2024

4.10 These four projects will be moving to their delivery stage over the next 12-18 months, whilst all CRSTS projects are anticipated to be delivered by March 2027.

4.11 It should be noted that the new West Midlands Mayor has recently commissioned an independent review of the entire WMCA transport Infrastructure programme. It is not yet known what implications this may have, if any, for CRSTS-funded projects in Sandwell.

4.12 As part of the 2023 Spring Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that a further £8.8bn would be available nationally for a second round of funding (CRSTS2) covering five years from April 2027. The allocation for the WMCA is yet to be announced but is anticipated to be of a similar order to the original CRSTS allocation. As part of the 'trailblazer' deeper devolution deal between the Government and the West Midlands Combined Authority announced in March 2023, future CRSTS funding will form part of a single settlement agreement.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

4.13 The WMCA are the lead authority and accountable body for the programme which covers three investment priorities around 'Community



and Place’, ‘Supporting Local Business’, and People and Skills’. Sandwell Council have £6.99m of funding, eligible for spend up to March 2025.

4.14 The update position for Sandwell is as follows:

- The UKSPF programme for Business Support is fully embedded within the Sandwell Business Growth Plan, approved By Cabinet in November 2023 and is being updated for financial year 24/25. Since the funding was approved last year the Sandwell Business Growth Team have invested the funding to improve the customer experience for businesses, increased the capacity of the team through recruiting new officers, administered £1,182,143.76 grants to businesses, and supported 200 businesses through access to targeted support programmes. The grant programmes include growth grants to SME’s, grants to start-up businesses, and grants to support businesses to decarbonise. In addition, through launching the Sandwell Start Up Hub which provides free office space for eligible start-up businesses in Sandwell, we have supported 63 entrepreneurs.
- A ringfenced Voluntary sector allocation was commissioned for year 2 UKSPF Communities and Place with four successful providers which included 3 consortia. These programmes aim to increase the community engagement in local activities to provide peer support to individuals and enable them to take part in wider provision such as social action projects and volunteering. The programme has been highly successful, attracting approx. 40,000 people, generating 450 volunteering opportunities and supporting 200 people to undertake a volunteering placement. An extension was given by WMCA to enable partners time to spend their allocation and ensure funding remained within Sandwell.
- The People and Skills programme will begin in April 2024 and aims to support residents to engage in developing skills to progress them towards progression into employment and education. The programme focuses on Economically Inactive clients who may not have had employment before to give them the knowledge needed to find, gain, and maintain work in the future. An allocation of £500,000 was ringfenced to Sandwell Voluntary Sector organisations; with 5 successful organisations providing support within deprived communities. Additional funding has been used to target key groups including care experienced, young people who offend, those with disabilities and mental health conditions.
- Within this programme £1.48m Sandwell Valley – education and community engagement outreach programme. Providing education and classroom facilities at Sandwell Valley and Forge Mill Farm to deliver an



education and outreach programme that develops knowledge and community building capacity around green space development and ownership, animal welfare and conservation, and horticulture and land-based education.

- Also, within the Communities and Place programme, a £400k project to improve the Railer / Cracker green corridor, Tipton to:
 - Develop this important green corridor to improve walking, running, and cycling.
 - Develop community spaces.
 - Develop community based built facilities for the development of a green careers programme.
 - Deliver a Green Careers Programme and Community Place Capacity Building programme.

Commonwealth Games Legacy Funding

- 4.16 Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has secured up to £1.39m from the Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund to support the increased energy costs for Sandwell Aquatics Centre to 31 March 2025.
- 4.17 The Skills and Employability Service are delivering a programme utilising this funding at a value of £801,714.23 for jobs and skills provision, paid work placements and NEET prevention work in schools. The funding was split into 30% in 2024/25 and 70% of funding due to be spent in 2024/5.
- 4.18 **Targeted Job Support** is being delivered across a number of community venues and supporting residents to gain the knowledge and skills to perform individualised job search across a range of websites. The sessions enable participants to customise their search based on their personal circumstances and fully understand the role, duties, and skill requirements before being supported to complete the application. To date we have supported 400 residents through the programme. Marketing and engagement activities are ongoing to increase awareness of the support.
- 4.19 **Regional Career Support** is aimed at year 11 students who need additional support to identify the best careers options for them following school. It is targeted at schools and pupils where there is a risk of NEET. The programme has worked with 200 young people to date and is actively supporting them to gain employment, apprenticeships or enter further education.



4.20 **Paid Work Placements** are aimed at providing meaningful employment experience to residents to progress them into paid employment. The programme was delayed due to the procurement of Vouchers in the first year. To date we have supported 35 people to undertake paid work placements and 5 of these have gained permanent employment.

Employment and Skills

- 4.21 Sandwell MBC continues to play an active role in the WMCA Employment and Skills officers group; the meeting includes representatives from all constituent member local authorities. This group also considers regional approaches and best practise sharing across the local area, with each local authority having their own Employment and Skills partnership to feed information to and from. WMCA were consulted on the development of the Sandwell Skill and Employment strategy to ensure plans are aligned such as the Economic Growth Plan and wider priorities for the region.
- 4.22 Strategic meetings are being held in Sandwell with Sandwell College, DWP and WMCA to discuss place-based issues and solutions. Meetings to date have focussed on the skills mismatch to vacancies and meeting employer demands for Sector based work academy provision.
- 4.23 Sandwell MBC is successfully delivering a strand of the Multiply contract supporting financial literacy in the borough. This is the third year of delivery and will end March 2025. Our Welfare Rights team are working alongside the Citizens Advice Bureau and Sandwell Consortium to build numeracy skills and financial resilience, targeting employed residents.
- 4.24 Multiply is aimed at supporting employed residents to gain maths skills by undertaking a financial literacy course within the community. Topics covered include understanding payslips, energy bills, savvy shopping, price comparison sites and support with household budgeting. Additional information has been requested by residents including better off calculations for those receiving benefits, planning for retirement and the threat of redundancy. The project has supported 350 residents to complete training to date across over 60 employers.



NEET reduction

- 4.25 The Council is delivering the Careers and Enterprise contract which provides additional careers support to schools including engagement of enterprise co-ordinators and advisors. WMCA are the accountable body for the Careers and Enterprise contract.
- 4.26 This includes two-part funded secondments from the Connexions service with additional funding for Careers education activities.

Employment and Skills Strategy

- 4.27 WMCA have developed an Employment and Skills Strategy 2024-2027 which sets out their ambition for a more integrated employment and skills ecosystem for the region which can stimulate growth, deliver better outcomes for residents and businesses, and create healthier thriving communities. Employment and Skills officers have been involved in the consultation for the strategy, feeding in local priorities for our residents.

Adult Education Budget 2022-2025 Strategy

- 4.28 WMCA continue to deliver against its Adult Education Budget 2022-2025 Strategy. Their vision is for a skills offer which supports a people-centred approach to ensure that the skills needs of businesses are met and that everybody can benefit from economic growth.
- 4.29 WMCA key priorities are:
1. Getting residents into employment
 2. Upskilling and reskilling to respond to the regional economy and net zero.
 3. Providing a good basic education up to Level 2 for those who need it and increasing higher-level provision in all local authority areas to ensure a good balanced offer is in place.
 4. Supporting our communities to be stronger and benefit from inclusive growth
 5. Ensuring there is a strong Community Learning offer in place, which addresses digital inclusion, family learning, sustainability, and health & wellbeing.
- 4.30 WMCA are continuing to conduct place-based reviews to analyse the effectiveness of Adult education budget funded courses against the current labour market vacancies and employer demands. This



information is being shared with stakeholders to inform future delivery and will be fed into the Local Skills improvement plans.

Digital Exclusion

- 4.31 The WMCA 'Connected Digital Services' project concluded in March 2024, this has seen over 2,000 devices distributed across the local voluntary sector and donated directly to Sandwell Residents. Ongoing work with the Authority includes implementing the regions new Digital Roadmap this will look to ensure all residents benefit from digital access skills and jobs. In addition, Sandwell is working to access 'Digital Divide' funding that, it is planned, will become available from April 2024 – this resource will support the digital learning journey in Sandwell focusing on an increase in digital qualifications and employment opportunities.

Wednesbury to Dudley (Phase 1) (Brierley Hill- Phase 2) Metro Extension

- 4.32 The 11km extension will branch off the current West Midlands Metro line just east of the Wednesbury Great Western Street Metro stop, before heading through Tipton and Dudley on its way to Brierley Hill. The extension will be delivered in two phases with the first to Dudley town centre expected to open for passenger services in 2024. The second phase will see the route further extended to Brierley Hill at the earliest opportunity. This phased approach is due to a combination of factors including a rise in construction and energy costs, at the same time as a reduction in the farebox income because of the Covid pandemic. This is the largest transport investment in the Black Country with a scheme value of circa £450m.
- 4.33 There are plans for up to 14 trams stops along the route:
- Phase one will see up to nine new stops from Wednesbury to Flood Street, Dudley
 - Phase two will include the addition of five stops between Flood Street and Brierley Hill, with provision for one additional stop.
- 4.34 Phase One of the project has experienced significant cost pressures which have resulted in the anticipated completion date and opening for passenger services being delayed until late 2025. Phase Two from



Dudley to Brierley Hill remains unfunded but a Business Case is currently being considered by the Department for Transport.

4.35 The headline benefits of this route are...

- Attracting investment and regeneration to Sandwell and Dudley, and in phase two, to Brierley Hill
- An important driver for this route is the creation of a link from this part of the Black Country to HS2 and everywhere in-between supporting economic growth by linking jobs and people.
- The Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Extension will enhance public transport accessibility across the Black Country as a whole and reduce journey times as well as improve air quality and reduce noise.

4.36 Main construction for the first phase of the scheme to Dudley town centre commenced in March 2020. Since then, much activity has taken place, including laying of track in Castle Hill, Dudley, utility upgrades and diversions, removal of the existing road surface, creation of concrete track beds elsewhere in Dudley town centre, and more recently preparation of the route through Tipton. Work is now underway to construct the 'Y' junction at Wednesbury which connects the extension to the existing Birmingham to Wolverhampton line.

4.37 Meanwhile, a number of aged railway bridges along the route were replaced in 2021 to make way for new purpose-built structures which are fit for a modern tramway. Further bridge replacement works have also taken place.

4.38 The metro extension from Wednesbury through Tipton also represents a 'growth corridor' for Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and is the geography upon which our proposal for a Levelling Up Zone is based.

Friar Park Housing Development

4.39 The Council and WMCA are working together in a legally binding Joint Venture Agreement to develop a challenging brownfield site in the Borough (Friar Park) that could deliver 630 new homes including 25% affordable homes.

4.40 A Masterplan for the site was approved by Cabinet in March 2023 following a 6-week consultation period.



4.41 At that meeting Cabinet also approved the procurement strategy for developer selection and Sandwell and WMCA officers are in the process of developing necessary tender documentation. The Expression of Interest phase as part of the developer selection process has been completed, closing on 26th January 2024.

4.42 The challenging factor in bringing the project forward is scheme viability due to the requirement for extensive remediation. However, funding has been secured via the Levelling Up Partnership to address the viability gap.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 Become a non-constituent member of WMCA - Participation as a constituent member of the WMCA enables Sandwell to deliver improvements to the locality that would otherwise be more difficult to achieve. In addition, through WMCA activity, we can ensure that Sandwell residents have the skills to access new employment opportunities both here in Sandwell and across the region, with excellent public transport available connecting the whole of the West Midlands. These benefits would be lost if Sandwell became a non-constituent member.

6 Implications

Resources:	The contribution to the Combined Authority from Sandwell Council for 2024/25 is £0.618 million.
Legal and Governance:	Part 6 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 (“the 2009 Act”) provides for the establishment of combined authorities for the areas of two or more local authorities in England. Combined authorities are bodies corporate which may be given power to exercise specified functions of a local authority under sections 104 and 105 of the 2009 Act, and power to exercise specified functions of any other public authority under section 105A of the 2009 Act.
Risk:	Section 21 of the West Midlands Combined Authority (Functions and Amendments) Order 2017 has the



	effect that where costs are incurred by the Combined Authority and are not met from other sources of income, then they fall to be met by the seven constituent councils, including Sandwell.
Equality:	The priorities of the West Midlands Combined Authority reflect the equality and diversity of the West Midlands, including striving to create prosperity through a strong and collective economic strategy and the policy aspiration to champion all that makes the West Midlands a Great Place to Live. The equality impact of any specific proposals will need to be addressed in reports to the WMCA Board or the appropriate decision-making body.
Health and Wellbeing:	All constituent members of the WMCA are better placed to contribute and influence the Health and Social Care offer for local residents and create: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more sustainable local health and care economy. • Improved quality and experience of care. • Improved population health.
Social Value	There is potential in all schemes and initiatives, particularly those delivered directly in Sandwell, to have a positive impact on Social Value.
Corporate Parenting	There is potential in all schemes and initiatives, particularly those delivered directly in Sandwell, to have a positive impact on Corporate Parenting.

7. Appendices

None

8. Background Papers

Report to Cabinet on West Midlands Deeper Devolution Deal 13 September 2023

