

# Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Thursday 3 October 2024 at 6.pm**  
**In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Fenton (Chair);  
Councillors Dhatt, Fitzgerald, E M Giles, Hinchliff, Lewis,  
Rahman and Williams.

**Observing:** Councillor J Giles.

**In attendance:** Alan Lunt (Executive Director of Place), Alex Thompson (Executive Director of Finance and Transformation), Mike Jones (Monitoring Officer and Assistant Director – Legal and Assurance), Helen Green (Strategic Improvement Manager – Corporate Customer), Colette Knight (Customer Feedback Coordinator), Sean Russell (Customer Feedback Coordinator), Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead Officer – Corporate Performance Management), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic & Member Services Manager) and Alexander Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

52/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Davies.

53/24 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made.

54/24 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2024 are approved as a correct record.

55/24 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

56/24 **Performance Management Framework – 2024/25 Quarter 1 Monitoring**

It was reported that the Performance Management Framework had been realigned to the new Council Plan for this and future reports.

Members noted that the majority of Assistant Director Business Plan actions were on or better than target, but 28 remained worse than target as well as being outside the target tolerance range.

The Scrutiny Management Board noted key achievements that had been made in Quarter 1. These included:-

- Provision of Healthy Start vitamins for free to young children and expectant mothers.
- The establishment of the Sandwell Business Support offer.
- A project to help Sandwell residents become confident online through Chromebook and laptop provision and training has won the Adult Learner Award for Digital Inclusion at the West Midlands Combined Authority Adult Learner Awards.
- Three raids launched across the borough as part of Operation CeCe, resulting in the confiscation of over £120,000 worth of illegal goods.
- The Department for Education confirmed that Sandwell was the only local authority to have a Family Hub mobile spoke.

Performance Indicators that remained below target and outside the target tolerance range were reported to the meeting across the objectives of the Council Plan.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- The two NO<sub>2</sub> hotspot areas (Birmingham Road, Oldbury and Grafton Road, West Bromwich) had bucked the overall downward trend in NO<sub>2</sub> emissions across Sandwell. It was anticipated that the levels in these areas would reduce over the next few years as fewer vehicles used diesel. This would be monitored and if levels remain high then further action would be considered.

- Care experienced young people encountered a number of barriers to taking up work experience or apprenticeship opportunities. These included mental health, employment skills needs and the need to manage their own homes on wages lower than the minimum wage. The Commonwealth Games Legacy Fund had helped support through paid work experience placements, and there was a bursary for care experienced young people undertaking apprenticeships, but this did not bring up pay to the minimum wage. Details of any policies or opportunities to assist those care experienced young people from accessing opportunities due to their financial situation were requested.
- The Council had 39 apprentices, two of which were care experienced. In Sandwell Schools, 2 of the 24 apprentices were care experienced. Further details on what was offered across the Council were requested.
- There was no clear policy for emergency repairs, instead tenants were asked to confirm if their request was urgent or not. This led to delays due to non-urgent requests being logged as urgent. Other landlords set clear parameters around the urgency of repairs, and Housing were discussing this with the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group. This was anticipated to be subject to consultation in 2025-26.
- 140,000 housing repairs were carried out annually, with 1 in 200 being the subject of complaints. It was acknowledged that there were opportunities to improve the experience of our tenants, and as part of a service review aspects such as reporting, making appointments, getting things right first time and checking satisfaction would be looked at. The outcomes of these reviews would be subject to Scrutiny by the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group and the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board in due course.
- Members requested further information on the longest waits for repairs, as well as data on repairs that had to be redone.
- Sickness absence rates remained high. This was due to various factors but was mostly focussed on long-term sickness rather than short-term absences.

- Places Leisure and Sandwell Leisure Trust had different models so could not be directly compared. Further detail on costs and benefits would be provided to the Scrutiny Management Board.
- Fleet Management was being reviewed and would be the subject of further scrutiny in due course.
- Response rates to consultation through CitizenSpace were quite low. It was reported that consultation opportunities were advertised via the Council's Communications Team, through social media and where necessary specific approaches depending on the topic of consultation. Members highlighted that in their experience facilities such as Community Centre were underutilised in promoting consultation opportunities.

**Resolved** that a report on CitizenSpace and the promotion of consultation opportunities be included on the work programme of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

Councillor Williams left the meeting during consideration of this item and did not return.

57/24

### **Customer Feedback Annual Report 2023/24**

The Scrutiny Management Board considered a report setting out the data, trends, issues and lessons learnt arising from the Compliments, Complaints, Members' Enquiries and Ombudsman Enquiries from across Sandwell Council for the period 1 April 2023 to the 31 March 2024.

The Customer Feedback Team managed the MP enquiries process for the Council, ensuring all enquiries were properly logged, directed, and addressed within a 10-working day timeframe. The Team also assists with the Councillor enquiries process by triaging queries through the Portal when the appropriate service area was unclear.

The report detailed the key priorities and targets for the upcoming year, with recommendations to take forward based on the findings presented.

Members noted that there had been 3730 complaints received during 2023/24. Although this represented an increase of 14% over the previous year, it represented less than 1% of the total number of customer interactions with the Council in 2023/24 (1,515,355).

Compliments had remained static over 2023/24 and 2022/23 at 383, but it was believed that there were more compliments that had been received but not recorded through official channels.

There were only 117 enquiries made to the Ombudsman in 2023/24, this was a 12% decrease from the previous year.

It was reported that the Chief Executive had directed a focus on lessons learnt from complaints to drive improvement. This was also an expectation from the Ombudsman.

Members noted that there had been a consistent improvement in responding to councillor and MP enquiries within 10 days since 2021/22. The Customer Feedback Team worked to train service areas on this, which continued to help improve response rates.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- It was important to communicate the positive and upwards trends; one of the recommendations was around recognition.
- A new telephony system will automate surveys and QR codes would be made available to surveys in One Stop Shops. This would help build insight around the experiences of our residents and tenants. The implementation of this system was being worked through, with appropriate stages signed off by a Project Group.
- The new telephony system would allow improved menus for routing calls, the use of WhatsApp messaging, and the potential of automation for parts of the process.
- The new Neighbourhoods Model of working had been very well received by councillors and it was highlighted that a potential temporary increase in councillor enquiries as a result of this new way of working should be seen as a positive thing.

- The Portal remained the process through which casework should be submitted so that it could be tracked and audited, but it was recognised that not every query from councillors would be casework and could instead be resolved through conversations.
- Members highlighted the good management of the Neighbourhood Teams.
- Although overall responses were improving, some directorates were not as effective as others. Whilst this could often be attributed to the complexities of, for example, social care issues, this was taken seriously by the Customer Feedback Team, and all overdue responses were reviewed weekly with expedition requested to provide, at a minimum, an interim response.
- From a complaints perspective, the customer always had the final say, if they were not satisfied with the handling of a complaint they could escalate it to a second stage, and ultimately on to the Ombudsman if they remained dissatisfied.
- The category 'resolved outside of complaints process' was due to way the system worked; this category covered instances where people withdrew complaints for example. This was being addressed and would be removed.
- Random dip samples were conducted of all complaint responses to look at lessons learned – challenge was made where no lessons had been identified.
- Compliments were as important as complaints and needed to be centrally recorded, and recognised.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Assistant Chief Executive ensures that as part of the Neighbourhood Working Review that will be reported to the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board:-
  - (a) any ward based work that is managed by the Neighbourhoods Team is recorded for data and statistical purposes which are measurable;

- (b) a clear framework is developed for what is councillor casework and what is strategic work and what timescales apply to the different types of enquiry raised by councillors.
- (2) that the Assistant Chief Executive reviews the function and use of the Member Portal alongside the related training offer for all councillors.

58/24 **Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

59/24 **Cabinet Forward Plan and Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme 2024/25**

The Board received and noted the Cabinet Forward Plan and the Board's work programme. It was confirmed that a report on the Medium Term Financial Strategy would be brought to the November meeting.

Meeting ended at 8.18pm.  
(following an adjournment between 7.55pm-8.13pm)

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