

# Minutes of Cabinet

**Wednesday 16 October 2024 at 3.30 pm  
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

- Present:** Councillor Carmichael (Leader of the Council and Chair);  
Councillor S Gill, Hartwell, Moore, Smith, Taylor and Uddin.
- In attendance:** Councillors Fenton, Davies, Bhamra, Jeffcoat and Randhawa.
- Officers:** Shokat Lal (Chief Executive); James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive); Alex Thompson (Executive Director - Finance and Transformation); Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place); Mike Jones (Assistant Director – Legal and Assurance); Liann Brookes Smith (Interim Director of Public Health); Claire Spencer (Acting Assistant Director – Finance); Mandip Chahal (Interim Assistant Director Commissioning); Ben Percival (Assistant Director – Contracts, Projects, Strategy and Policy); Craig Pugh (Interim Finance Strategy Manager); Partnerships and Improvement); Matthew More (Communications and Corporate Affairs Manager); Kelly Harris (Skills and Employability Service Manager); Owen Roberts (Graduate); Karina Kumari (Graduate); Sundeep Kalian (Graduate); Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager) and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

100/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Allcock, Hughes and E M Giles.

101/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

102/24 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2024 are approved as a correct record.

103/24 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

104/24 **Performance Management Framework 2024/25 Quarter 1 Monitoring**

Cabinet received the performance management framework 2024/25 quarter 1 monitoring and approval was sought for the corporate performance indicators. The refreshed Council Plan had been structured simply, focusing on evidence, outcomes and measures that would enable clear monitoring and tracking of progress. Performance measures had been aligned against the outcomes under each strategic theme, which, along with the updated business plan actions, would allow the Council to understand if it was delivering against the Council Plan.

**Reason for Decision**

The Council approved a Corporate Performance Management Framework (PMF) on 12 April 2022, to address the recommendations of the Governance Value for Money Review by Grant Thornton and as a key element of the Council's Improvement Plan. The corporate PMF had been further refined and built into business processes and in March 2024, the Council was given notice by the former Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities that the period of statutory intervention would end on 22 March 2024. The sustained improvements led to the development of a new Council Plan that would take the organisation forward from being brilliant at the basics to being an outstanding Council. The new Council Plan was approved by Council on 23 July 2024.

**Alternative Options Considered**

No alternative options were presented.

## **Resolved:-**

- (1) that the progress on the further development of the Corporate Performance Management Framework and approve the 2024/25 Quarter 1 monitoring reports is received;
- (2) that approval is given to the targets for all Corporate Performance Indicators;
- (3) that approval is given to the changes to the event related Performance Indicators.

105/24

## **Levelling Up Partnership Programme Update**

Cabinet received a progress update on the Levelling Up Partnership Programme. In March 2023, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that Sandwell was one of 20 places to be invited to form a Levelling Up Partnership. Levelling Up Partnerships were targeted interventions designed to identify practical, tangible actions to support priority places to 'level up' and to help government develop a more holistic understanding of place. Sandwell and Hull were the first of 20 areas selected to form a Levelling Up Partnership.

### **Reason for Decision**

In September, the details of the Levelling Up Partnership were formally announced by Government. This followed a set of Cabinet approvals in September to establish governance arrangements, approve the target geography as Wednesbury, and to agree the set of projects across Wednesbury.

Key programme achievements since the March report to Cabinet were:

- approval of Wednesbury Town Centre Masterplan;
- public realm works commenced in Wednesbury Town Centre;
- installation of new and upgraded CCTV cameras in Wednesbury Town Centre and Friar Park;
- installation of first phase of nuisance bike measures in Friar Park;
- procurement process commenced for Delivery Partner for Friar Park Urban Village land remediation;
- main work completed at Wyntor Lane Open Space.

Cabinet had requested to receive a report on the performance of the Levelling Up Partnership Programme every 6 months.

### **Alternative Options Considered**

The alternative option would be for Cabinet to receive progress reporting through the Council's performance management framework rather than a bespoke report.

#### **Resolved:-**

- (1) that the progress update on the delivery of the Levelling Up Partnership is received;
- (2) that approval is given to the updated Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board Membership and Terms of Reference;
- (3) that a further progress report on the Levelling Up Partnership be submitted to the Cabinet in 6 months.

106/24

### **Medium Term Financial Strategy Update**

Cabinet received the Medium Term Financial Strategy update and approval was sought to commence consultation on a range of potential efficiency options. The February 2024 Medium Term Financial Strategy identified an estimated budget shortfall of £18.5m in 2025/26. Indicative efficiency proposals and financial estimates had been included in the report but there was still an underlying deficit of £12.5m.

Since February, the Medium Term Financial Strategy had been regularly reviewed and the deficit figure had changed during the financial year 2024/25. This reflected ongoing refinement and testing of initial planning assumptions. The figures had been changed based on the financial position of the local government sector in general and to take into account the latest economic and budget forecast calculations.

In a response to a question from the Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources stated that the council was legally required to set a balanced budget, however, in recent years this had become more difficult. There were national challenges which the Local Government Association had calculated as a £4bn gap between the amount of money available for local councils in England and the

amount that would be needed to maintain services at their current level. In the West Midlands that shortfall was £200m across seven local councils, with every part of the region seeing increased pressure on budgets to support vulnerable adults and children. Sandwell was not yet facing the extreme financial difficulties that some other local authorities were already facing because of the way Sandwell had managed its finances. However, with the rising demand for services the Council know that it must continue to manage its finances responsibly to avoid falling into these difficulties, it had been calculated that 51% of our total expenditure budget was spent on Adult Social Care and Children's Services. – about £250million on adult social care, and £138million on Children's Services. When setting the budget, the Council would seek to allocate funding to services in a sustainable way to meet the ambitions set out in our Council Plan, including the Growing Up in Sandwell and Healthy Sandwell ambitions.

In a response to another question from the Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources advised that the Council's current recycling performance was poor; it had been measured that just 29% of waste in Sandwell was recycled compared to a national average of 41%. During 2022/23, Sandwell ranked 309 out of 343 councils across England for recycling. Not recycling waste that can be recycled meant this material was forever lost and it ended up being incinerated. Not only that, disposing of waste was much more expensive than recycling it. The model proposed had been proven to increase recycling rates in other parts of the country. The proposed changes to bin collections would save money by reducing the cost of collecting waste, and also reduce the amount the Council had to spend to dispose of waste. The Council was required to comply with new and emerging legislation. If the Council did not make the necessary changes the Council could be liable for significantly increased costs when new legislation was introduced. Given that the Council must set a balanced budget it was worth bearing in mind that if the Council did not go ahead with making changes to the waste collection services it would have to find different ways to balance the books, both for the next year and in future years. If the Council did go ahead with this proposal, then a comprehensive plan would be developed to engage and support residents with this change.

In a response to her final question from the Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development noted that the increase in the use of temporary accommodation is the tip of a broader housing

crisis across the country with demand for social housing far exceeding supply. In the last financial year in Sandwell 176 homes had been sold under the statutory Right to Buy, whilst 15 new properties had been delivered, at the same time Sandwell's waiting list for social housing had exceeded 17,000 households. The Council had a range of actions in place to mitigate the increasing costs of Temporary Accommodation. It was not currently proposed to use Alfred Gunn house for temporary accommodation, but it may be suitable for permanent move-on accommodation for households either in temporary accommodation or to prevent homelessness.

### **Reason for Decision**

The Local Government Finance Act 1992 required the Council to set a balanced, risk assessed budget each year and approve a Council Tax precept by 11 March.

The Council had a duty to consult with those who were liable to pay council tax or non-domestic rates, as well as those who used or were likely to use services provided by the Council. A public engagement exercise on the Council's budget for 2024/25 was conducted during Autumn 2023, seeking residents' views on how the Council could reduce expenditure and/or generate additional income to deliver a balanced budget. To enable a balanced budget to be set for 2025/26, the Council had developed a list of efficiency options which, if adopted, would impact residents and businesses in the borough, and therefore a similar consultation exercise needed to be carried out in relation to the 2025/26 budget.

### **Alternative Options Considered**

The Council was legally required to set a balanced budget by March each year. There were no legal alternative options other than to consult on a range of expenditure reductions and/or income generation measures that achieve a balanced budget for the General Fund.

### **Resolved:-**

- (1) that Cabinet endorse the Draft Medium-Term Financial Strategy;
- (2) that the financial strategy is received and is accurate as at October 2024;
- (3) that the Executive Director for Finance and Transformation is authorised to commence a period of appropriate consultation on the budget efficiencies proposals;

(4) that approval is given to the budget timetable.

107/24

### **Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-30**

Approval was sought for the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-30. The Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy was an overarching document which set out Sandwell's skills challenges and key priorities. The Strategy was aligned to the West Midlands Combined Authority Employment and Skills Strategy which similarly set out the region's skills challenges and key priorities.

The Strategy brought localised challenges and aspirations for the future to the forefront and was a collaborative approach delivered by key stakeholders from the Employment and Skills sector.

#### **Reason for Decision**

The Skills and Employment Strategy would commence in October 2024 and replace the previous Skills Strategy 2020-2023 approved by Cabinet in September 2020.

The Strategy responded to the current Skills and Employment challenges in the borough including youth unemployment and low skills levels and set out the Council's ambitions and key actions and priorities to respond to the challenge.

#### **Alternative Options Considered**

There were no alternative options, the Strategy had been carefully considered with no other feasible alternative options.

**Resolved** that approval is given to the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-30.

108/24

### **Community Asset Transfer Update**

Approval was sought for the Community Asset Transfer Update. The Corporate Asset Management Strategy had been approved by Cabinet in 2022 where it acknowledged that the Council was committed to maintaining an effective and efficient property portfolio which supported the delivery of services to residents, provided value for money, reduced environmental impact and maximised opportunities to generate value.

The strategy consisted of seven strategic objectives, for which one of the workstreams was the holistic review of Community Centres. The Sandwell based Community and Voluntary sector operated services from a network of Council owned Assets. Over time various agreements had been put in place concerning building use, conditions of use and length of agreement. This situation brought uncertainty to the community sector and was a non-efficient use of Council resources.

A working group had been established which encompassed multiple Council services including Assets, Community Partnerships, Housing and Legal to holistically review and present decisions around the community centre portfolio.

### **Reason for Decision**

The updated Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Strategy provided a robust, clear and fair approach in line with current legislation and policies to ensure that the Council were allowing community organisations to excel, whilst ensuring that the Council's interests were sufficiently safeguarded.

The Community Asset Transfer Strategy would also support the efficient management and use of Council assets through a Corporate Landlord operating model.

### **Alternative Options Considered**

The new CAT Strategy may not be adopted; however, this would not be conducive to offering a flexible approach to management of the Council's asset portfolio and delivery of the Council Plan 2024-27, Sandwell Vision 2030 and the Corporate Asset Management Strategy.

**Resolved** that approval is given to the updated Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Strategy.

109/24

### **Variation of the Collaboration Agreement with Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust**

Approval was sought for the Variation of the Collaboration Agreement with Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust. The first Collaborative working agreement between Sandwell Council and Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Hospitals Trust commenced 1 October 2016. The current agreement had started in February 2022 and following an enactment of extension was due to end 30 September 2026.



### **Reason for Decision**

The Collaborative Working Agreement was a way to work with a provider jointly to achieve the best service for Sandwell residents.

The Collaborative working agreement allowed local partners to utilise the benefits of collaborative working which positively impacted delivery for Sandwell residents. As such the Council wished to benefit further and ensure good quality outcomes from the agreement by procuring services aligned with current need and priority areas.

The Collaborative Working Agreement was due a review of provision and costs, this agreement had not been updated since its inception almost 8 years ago in 2016. Following staffing increases in the NHS nationally, an increase in cost was necessary as the Council operated transparently regarding expenses and understood the outlay for the service was going beyond its budget.

### **Alternative Options Considered**

Addition of the Children vision screening to the agreement would be beneficial rather than retendering the child vision screening programme, as with all previous commissioning cycles this had been awarded to and provided by SWBHT.

Retender all elements separately, which would not be able to be completed immediately and could take as long as 18 months to complete. However, the provider market was not strong currently for NHS organisation to provide outside of their own area currently.

Do nothing. This would result in Sandwell Local Authority not meeting its statutory requirements to provide prescribed children's 0-5 services and sexual health services, contraception and Sexually Transmitted Infection testing and treatment. This would result in a loss of grant funding and negatively affect the health and wellbeing of Sandwell residents.

### **Resolved:-**

- (1) that approval is given to the proposal to vary the Collaboration Agreement with Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust;
- (2) that authority is given to the Interim Director of Public Health to:

- Increase the budget for existing services specified within the Collaboration Agreement as detailed in the report;
- Vary the services specified within the Collaboration Agreement to include the Child Vision Screening service, additional Early Help administrative support, breastfeeding enhanced support and remove the infection control doctor contribution;
- Increase the Council's financial contribution under the Agreement in line with current inflation to a maximum of 10% of the contract value;
- Extend the Agreement for an additional 6 month period – beyond the current term, from October 2026 until March 31st, 2027.

110/24

## **Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review 2023-24**

Cabinet received the Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review 2023-24. The Service Delivery Contract between the Council and Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) required that an annual review of services be completed and presented to the Council. At the Cabinet meeting on 22 March 2017, it was agreed that the Cabinet, in its executive role, would perform this function on behalf of the Council and agreed certain 'reserved matters' that were set out in the Contract.

### **Reason for Decision**

The report presented SCT's Annual Review for 2023/24. Consideration of the Annual Review by the Cabinet formed an important part of the governance of SCT; providing assurance to the Council in its capacity as the body that was responsible and accountable for the discharge of the relevant children's social care services functions.

### **Alternative Options Considered**

At its meeting on 19 October 2016, Cabinet was advised of the Government's Statutory Direction (under Section 479A of the Education Act 1996) to set up a new arrangement in the form of a children's trust to deliver children's social care services. As a result, Sandwell Children's Trust started operating on 1 April 2018. Any alternative to the current arrangement must be agreed by the Secretary of State for Education.

**Resolved** that in its capacity as the body responsible and accountable for the discharge of the relevant children's social care services functions Cabinet:

- a) formally receives the Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review 2023/24;
- b) receive the progress made to date by Sandwell Children's Trust in delivering services as set out in the contract between the Council and the Sandwell Children's Trust, as set out in the Annual Review 2023/24; and
- c) receive the feedback from the Department for Education (DfE) following its recent 6-month review of Sandwell Children's Trust.

Meeting ended at 4.04pm

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