

Minutes of Council

**Tuesday 10 December 2024 at 6.01pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Her Worshipful The Mayor, Councillor Khatun (Chair);

Councillors M Allcock, Ashraf, Bhamra, Bhullar, Carmichael, Chidley, Cotterill, Crompton, Davies, Dhatt, Fenton, Fitzgerald, Gavan, E A Giles, L Giles, S Gill, W Gill, Hackett, Haq, Hartwell, Hemingway, Horton, Hughes, Iqbal, Jalil, Jeffcoat, Johnston, Kalebi-Nyamongo, Kaur, Khan, Lewis, Loan, Maycock, Millar, Moore, Muflihi, Kaur, Piper, Preece, Rahman, Randhawa, Shaeen, A Singh, J Singh, N D Singh, Smith, Taylor, Tipper, Tromans, Trumpeter, Uddin, Uppal, Webb, Wilkes, Williams and Younis.

Officers: Shokat Lal – Chief Executive; Mike Jones – Assistant Director Legal and Assurance and Monitoring Officer; Stephnie Hancock – Deputy Democratic Services Manager; Anthony Lloyd – Democratic Services Officer and Kennedy Brown – Sergeant at Arms.

86/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K Allcock, Choudhry, Dhariwal, Dunn, J Giles, E M Giles, Hinchliff, Hussain, Kordala, Mayo, Melia, Millard and Weston.

87/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no interests declared at the meeting.

88/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the ordinary and extraordinary meetings of Council, held on 29 October 2024, are approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

89/24 **Announcements**

Council received announcements in relation to the Mayor's recent engagements.

The Chief Executive was invited to address Council before announcing that Sandwell Council had been named as Planning Authority of the Year at the Royal Town Planning Institute Awards for Planning Excellence 2024, an established and respected award in the UK planning industry which showcased and celebrated the best plans, people and projects across all councils in the country.

The Planning team had levered in an impressive amount of grant funding into Sandwell including over £180m of Levelling Up Funding, which helped deliver a number of regeneration projects in 2024 such as improvements to West Bromwich Town Hall and the provision of a new STEM college.

The Council's Development Management function had continued to excel and deliver outstanding performance, with one of the best records nationally in dealing with major and minor planning applications swiftly.

Meanwhile, the policy team had driven forward the Draft Sandwell Local Plan writing planning policies to shape Sandwell's future.

The performance was a testament to the team's collective efforts, attracting investment which provided a catalyst for regeneration and economic growth and had resulted in new jobs and more prosperity for Sandwell.

90/24 **Written Questions**

Questions received under Standing Order No. 9. were asked of the relevant members and responses were received.

91/24 **Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025-2026**

Council Tax Reduction (CTR) was introduced by the Local Government Finance Act 2012 which placed a duty on all billing authorities to create a local scheme for all working age applicants. Pension age applicants were covered by a scheme prescribed by Central Government and were not affected.

Each year, the Council was required to review its Council Tax Reduction Scheme in accordance with the requirements of schedule 1A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to either maintain the scheme or replace it.

To support the Council's duty to provide a balanced budget, the Council proposed to make changes to its working age Council Tax Reduction scheme for the financial year 2025/26 which would reduce the overall cost of the working age scheme at a total of £1.76m per annum.

Members highlighted that Sandwell Council still had a generous scheme compared to the majority of other local authorities.

The Council Tax Reduction scheme for 2025/26 provided over £17m to support working age households in Sandwell with Council Tax payments; the total council tax costs per household in Sandwell remained as one of the lowest nationally.

In response to questions from members, it was noted that although the consultation responses were low in relation to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, each response was considered and, as a result, two of the initial proposals had been withdrawn. It was also highlighted that the wider budget consultation had received a significant number of responses.

The predicted savings had been calculated via a robust process and had included a degree of error in collection rates. Measures were in place to assist members of the public who struggled to make payments.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2025-26, as seen at Appendix 1, be approved;
- (2) that, from 1 April 2025, subject to income, the maximum council tax reduction of 100% be maintained for working age applicants who have a dependent child aged 5 years or under who resides with them;
- (3) that, from 1 April 2025, subject to income, in connection with Resolution (2) above, the maximum council tax reduction of 85% be introduced for all other working age applicants;
- (4) that the maximum Council Tax band to calculate Local Council Tax Reduction be reduced to Band B for all applicants.

Council Tax Base 2025-2026

The Council Tax Base was an assessment required by each billing authority to determine the number of chargeable dwellings, converted to Band D equivalents (the average band), allowing for discounts, exemptions, non-collection and new properties. This information would later be used when setting the Council's budget.

The Council Tax Base was calculated in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012 and was used to determine the annual amount of collectable Council Tax.

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, and Standing Order 14 (4), the decision relating to the Council Tax Base was put to a named vote as follows:-

For

Councillors M Allcock, Ashraf, Bhamra, Bhullar, Carmichael, Chidley, Cotterill, Crompton, Davies, Dhatt, Fenton, Fitzgerald, Gavan, Elizabeth Giles, L Giles, S Gill, W Gill, Hackett, Haq, Hartwell, Hemingway, Horton, Hughes, Iqbal, Jalil, Jeffcoat, Johnston, Kalebe-Nyamongo, Kaur, Khan, Khatun, Lewis, Loan, Maycock, Millar, Moore, Muflihi, Pall, Piper, Preece, Rahman, Randhawa, Shaeen, A Singh, J Singh, N Singh, Smith, Taylor, Tipper, Tromans, Trumpeter, Uddin, Uppal, Webb, Wilkes, Williams and Younis.

Against

None

Abstentions

None

On being put to the vote, the motion was carried and it was

Resolved:-

- (1) that a Council Tax Base for 2025-2026 of 80,364.3 is approved;
- (2) that the Section 151 Officer is authorised to adjust the Council Tax Base if required following decision on the 2025/2026 Council Tax Reduction Scheme by Council on 10 December 2024.

93/24

The Review of Council Housing Rents and Housing Related Property Charges

The Council was required to achieve the right balance between supporting tenants to mitigate the continued cost of living pressures and protecting the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to ensure that the Council could continue to provide affordable social housing for residents.

It was noted that on 30 October 2024, the Government announced their commitment of at least a 5-year rent settlement from April 2026, following consultation with housing providers.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) opened the 'Future social housing rent policy' consultation on 30 October 2024. The consultation was seeking views on alternative lengths of settlement, including a longer 7 or 10 year rent settlement, or a rolling 5 year settlement. The consultation would close on 23 December 2024.

There was a regulatory requirement for the council to maintain housing stock to a good standard, cover operational costs and to achieve the right balance between protecting tenants, taxpayers (by limiting the welfare costs associated with housing rents) and ensuring the council could deliver on its commitments to build new social homes, as well as ensuring that all homes achieved the 'Decent Homes' standard.

For 2025/26, the government had confirmed that social landlords were permitted to increase rents by CPI+1% in line with the Rent Standard and Policy Statement on Rents for Social Housing issued annually in April.

It was highlighted that measures were in place to ensure that the impact on residents was limited and that sufficient resources were in place to help residents maximise benefit entitlement.

Resolved that the Executive Director of Place be authorised to adjust council rents and housing related charges with effect from 7 April 2025 as follows:-

- (1) that the housing rental charges is increased by 2.7% which is the consumer price index 1.7% (September 2024) plus 1%, which is equivalent to a 2.7% increase;
- (2) that the housing service charges increase by the consumer price index (CPI)+ 1%, equivalent to a 2.7% increase;
- (3) that a weekly service charge of £2.26 is implemented from April 2025 in blocks that have retained provision of laundry facilities for temporary accommodation, supported housing and extra care facilities;

- (4) that the weekly heating charge is increased by 20% from April 2025 to properties that received heating and hot water through a shared scheme;
- (5) that subject to consultation with the residents of the site, to increase fees at the traveller's pitch in Hills View, Tipton at CPI (announced in month proceeding variation notices being issued), in line with Legislation on Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees Act 2023);
- (6) that rental charges for garage sites be increased in line with other council fees and charges agreed by Cabinet and Council;
- (7) that properties managed by Riverside under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) agreement receive a 2.7% rental increase and a 2.7% increase in service charges to match the council's rent and service charge increase;
- (8) that properties that sit outside the Housing Revenue Account (including service tenants for Parks, Sandwell Valley, and Caretaking) receive a 5% increase on rent and 2.7% for service charges;
- (9) that the leaseholder annual management fee be increased in 2025/26 from £124.57 to £167.13;

- (10) that rent and housing related service charges in subsequent years be set in line with the Rent Standard and Policy Statement on Rents for Social Housing as published by the Regulator of Social Housing. for at least five years from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2031.

94/24 **Proposed departure from the development plan at Merridale Polishing and Plating Company Limited, Unit 2, Friar Street, Wednesbury**

It was reported that the Planning Committee, at its meeting held on 27 November 2024, granted conditional approval to planning application DC/24/69314 for a proposed subdivision of an existing industrial unit to create 4 separate industrial units with external alterations.

The proposal was on land allocated for housing within the adopted development plan and, therefore, it was necessary for the Council to consider whether or not to grant an exception to adopted policy to allow the application to proceed.

Resolved that approval is given to make an exception to the Development Plan in respect of planning application DC/24/69314 at Merridale Polishing and Plating Company Limited, Unit 2, Friar Street, Wednesbury.

95/24 **Notices of Motions**

The Council considered the following motions received under Standing Order No. 12:-

95/24(a) **Fireworks in the Public Realm – by the Leader of the Council**

It was moved by Councillor Carmichael and seconded by Councillor L Giles:-

“Council believes that everyone has the right to enjoy fireworks and that displays are commonplace throughout Sandwell (and UK) and are a focal point for celebrations traditionally and culturally, however not everyone enjoys the noise of fireworks. Council welcomes feedback received on the decision to arrange an alternative event of the Fire Garden in Sandwell Valley rather than a traditional fireworks display.

Council note that fireworks can be distressing to people who are elderly, frail or neurodivergent as well as being terrifying for pets, wildlife, and birds. Debris can also be a potential problem for all wildlife including horses.

Council further notes that there is an availability of quieter or noiseless fireworks which creates a more peaceful environment that can be enjoyed by all.

Council resolves to:

1. Call on the Leader and Cabinet to further prohibit firework displays on land in the public realm within the boundaries of the local authority.
2. Call on all Councillors to work collectively to raise public awareness about the impact of fireworks on vulnerable people and animal welfare through social media channels.
3. Call on the Leader and Cabinet to investigate how the council can work with and offer guidance to the public who hold private displays on using low noise fireworks or other alternatives.

4. Call on the Leader and Cabinet to explore options to encourage local suppliers of fireworks to stock quieter fireworks for members of the public to purchase and display.
5. Call on the Leader and Cabinet to write to Government setting out the terms of this Motion and asking them to review legislation relating to the sale of fireworks with a view to bringing forward proposals as a minimum to limit noise from fireworks to a maximum noise level of 90 decibels.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

95/24(b) **Sandwell Council affirming commitments to ending violence against women and girls**

It was moved by Councillor Pall and seconded by Councillor Hemingway:-

“Council recognises the International Day of Ending Violence against Women and Girls is a key annual event. Ending all forms of violence and abuse of women and children is crucial for society - across Sandwell, the UK and beyond especially for marginalised and oppressed communities across the world, most particularly women.

Council acknowledges that the International Day of Ending Violence against Women and Girls comes as a direct result of the women’s rights movement that has stood for the rights of women for centuries.

Council welcomes the numerous achievements over many years that have significantly impacted society, legislation, and culture in

the cause of securing equal rights and ending violence against women and girls, including:

- Fighting for and securing women's suffrage, granting women the right to vote and participate in political processes. This led to increased representation of women in government and decision-making bodies worldwide. In the UK only around 20% of council leaders are female and we can be proud of having one of those minority women leaders right here in this authority.
- Challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, fostering cultural shifts towards greater gender equality and inclusivity. This includes promoting positive representations of women in media, challenging sexist attitudes, behaviours, and language, and advocating for diverse and inclusive spaces for women in society.

Council recognises there remains more work ahead to achieve true equality and to eliminate all forms of abuse. The Sandwell Domestic Abuse Strategy reports that there were 10,008 incidents of domestic abuse reported to West Midlands Police in 2020/21 This represents an increase of 27.3% compared with the 7,860 incidents reported in 2019/20. It is important to also remember that only a small proportion of abuse is actually reported to the Police – it's essential that the Council and its partners continues to focus on tackling this key issue.

Council therefore resolves to:

1. Call on all Councillors to wear their white ribbon to show their commitment in ending violence against women and girls.
2. Incorporate domestic abuse or gender-based abuse training into the Member Development Programme offered to all members to help them to deal with any cases that they may

come across and also understand and identify red flags in families that approach them for help.

3. Reaffirm its commitment to lead by example in fostering a culture of respect, equality, and zero tolerance towards gender-based violence, with clear behavioural expectations across the organisation, amongst its staff, officers, members and our partnerships.
4. Reaffirm its commitment to ending gender-based violence and creating a safer, more inclusive community for all residents, particularly women who have been disproportionately affected by such violence, and to continuing to work closely with partners to achieve this.
5. Review and strengthen existing policies and procedures to effectively prevent, and respond to, and address gender-based violence within the council which also looks to support members should they report concerns.
6. Assign responsibility to the Council's Equality and Diversity Group to oversee the implementation and monitoring of these actions, ensuring accountability and progress towards the elimination of gender-based violence.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

95/24(c) **Supporting sustainable local bus services – by Councillor William Gill**

It was moved by Councillor William Gill and seconded by Councillor Trumpeter:-

“Council notes with concern that several scheduled changes to bus routes will take place in January 2025 with a risk of losing

some of our key local services across Sandwell, including the Number 30 and the Number 74a bus routes amongst others and will further impact bus passenger numbers.

Council recognises the importance of bus routes and services for local communities across our borough which provide essential connections for our residents and businesses.

Council further recognises the potential benefits of bus franchising for our communities along with the recent £2 bus fare cap which applied across the region.

Council therefore calls on the Leader and Cabinet to write to the Mayor of the West Midlands setting out the terms of this Motion and calling for the £2 bus fare cap to be retained across all West Midlands bus services.”

In accordance with Standing Order No. 13, Councillor Carmichael moved an amendment, which was duly seconded by Councillor Hartwell:-

“Council notes with concern that several scheduled changes to bus routes will take place in January 2025 with a risk of losing some of our key local services across Sandwell due to lack of patronage. Council should note the Number 30 and the Number 74a will undergo some changes that will make them more reliable.

Council recognises the importance of bus routes and services for local communities across our borough which provide essential connections for our residents and businesses.

Council further recognises the potential benefits of bus franchising for our communities along with the recent £2 bus fare cap which applied across the region.

Council acknowledges that there are other available concessions that are cheaper for travellers to get to work - a bus pass is £18.00 per week. Other initiatives are 1,000 free four-week bus tickets and free bus travel from 7pm on the 9th – 13th December 2024.

Council therefore calls on the Leader and Cabinet to write to the Mayor of the West Midlands setting out the terms of this Motion recognising the benefits of bus franchising and concessions making bus travel more accessible to communities across all West Midlands bus services”

On being put to the vote, the amendment was carried, and Council moved to consider the substantial motion. The substantial motion was put to the vote and carried.

95/24(d) **Towns First for Social Value in Procurement Policy – by Councillor Jeffcoat**

It was moved by Councillor Jeffcoat and seconded by Councillor Tipper:-

“Council welcomes ambitions within Sandwell Vision 2030 that draw on the distinctiveness of the six towns which make up our borough, with clear aims to make our towns more vibrant, focussing on their individual strengths, heritage and communities and making our borough an attractive place with successful centres of community life, leisure, and entertainment where people increasingly choose to bring up their families.

Council further welcomes progress towards the development and implementation of new neighbourhood arrangements across Sandwell and endorses the approach of exploring opportunities for further decisions to be made at a local level across our towns.

Council notes that our procurement policy already considers the social value of a project, as required by law, by considering how the services we commission and procure can improve the economic, social, and environmental wellbeing of an area.

Council believes that implementation of new neighbourhood arrangements offers opportunity to our communities through all we do, including how social value benefits generated through our procurement are felt across our towns.

Council therefore calls on the Leader and Cabinet to explore opportunities, where practicable and in accordance with legislative requirements subject to meeting statutory best value obligations, to ensure that social value benefits are applied both at town as well as borough-wide level.

The motion was put to the vote and lost.

Meeting ended at 7.49pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk