

# Report to Cabinet

**12 March 2025**

<b>Subject:</b>	Levelling up Partnership Quarterly Update
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Kerrie Carmichael Leader of the Council
<b>Director:</b>	Executive Director - Place Alan Lunt
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Assistant Director – Spatial Planning and Growth Tammy Stokes <a href="mailto:Tammy_stokes@sandwell.gov.uk">Tammy_stokes@sandwell.gov.uk</a>  Levelling Up Partnership Programme Manager Rebecca Jenkins <a href="mailto:rebecca_jenkins@sandwell.gov.uk">rebecca_jenkins@sandwell.gov.uk</a>

## 1 Recommendations

For the reasons set out in the report, it is recommended that Cabinet:-

- 1.1 receive the progress update on the delivery of the Levelling Up Partnership
- 1.2 receive a further progress update in 6 months.

## 2 Reasons for Recommendations

2.1 In September 2023, details of the Levelling Up Partnership (£20.4m) 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 as follows:

- Friar Park Urban Village
- Wednesbury Community Safety Scheme
- Wednesbury Town Centre Improvements
- Wednesbury Greenspaces Improvements
- Friar Park Millennium Centre expansion

2.2 Cabinet requested to receive a report on the performance of the Levelling Up Partnership Programme every 6 months. This report provides the third 6-monthly overview of performance

## 3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

3.1 The formation of a Levelling Up Partnership and delivery of the interventions within the LUP will contribute to all objectives of the corporate plan.

Growing Up in Sandwell	Opportunities for children and young people will be strengthened through an extended offer at the Friar Park Millennium Centre, a significant number of new homes, and improved quality and safety of public spaces and greenspaces in Wednesbury.
Living in Sandwell	<p>The interventions within the LUP (Levelling Up Partnership) will strengthen the quality and safety of greenspaces and public spaces in Wednesbury. The interventions will enable a significant number of new quality homes.</p> <p>The interventions within the LUP will strengthen the deterrents for crime and ASB in Wednesbury.</p>

Thriving Economy in Sandwell	The interventions within the LUP will enable a significant number of new homes to be delivered and will improve the quality of neighbourhoods through improvements and enhanced safety measures in green spaces and public spaces.
Healthy in Sandwell	The interventions within the LUP will strengthen the quality and safety of greenspaces and public spaces in Wednesbury, encouraging physical activity.  Reporting to the Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership (WLUP) Board includes updates on Public Health programme delivery in Wednesbury due to the interaction with the levelling up outcomes.
One Council One Team	The delivery of the LUP requires cross-Council working including input from key enabling services including finance, legal and procurement.

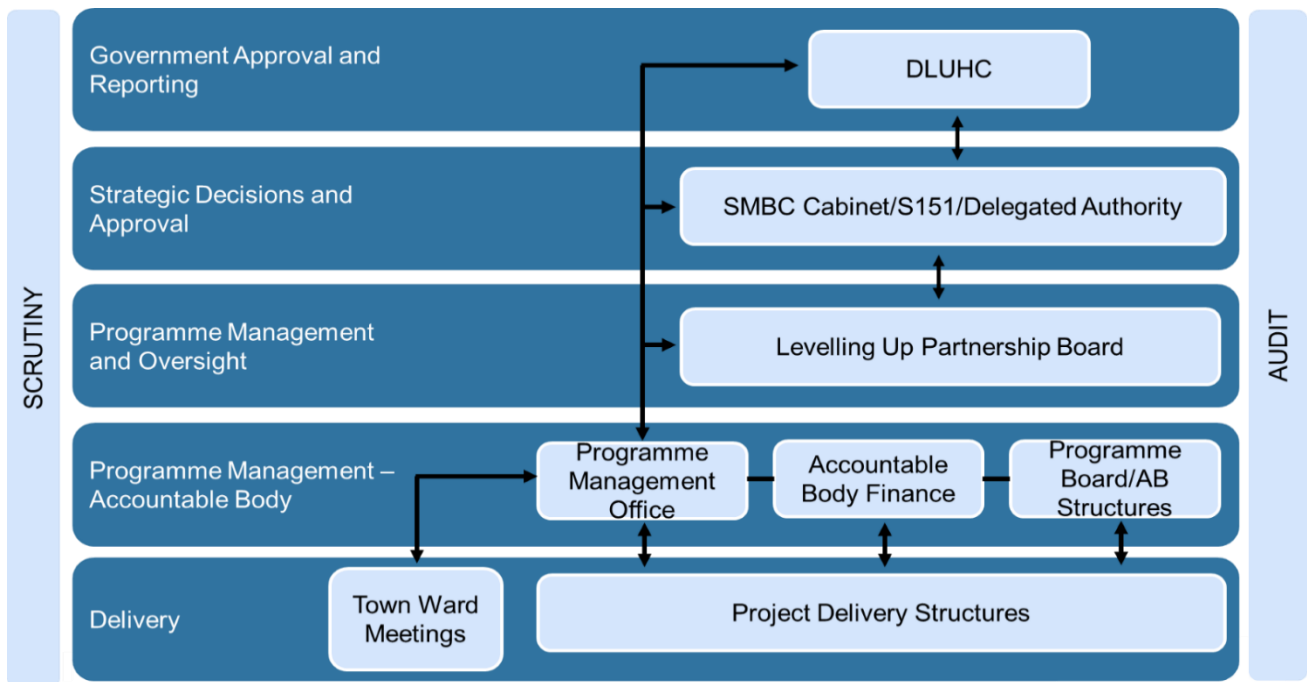
## 4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 Levelling Up Partnerships are 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. It is a programme within the previous Government’s overall Levelling Up agenda which includes the Towns Fund Programme (£67.5m investment in Sandwell), the Levelling Up Fund (£58m investment in Sandwell), and Long-Term Plan for Towns (£20m for Smethwick).
- 4.2 In September 2023, details of the Levelling Up Partnership (£20.4m) 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 as follows:
- Friar Park Urban Village
  - Wednesbury Community Safety Scheme
  - Wednesbury Town Centre Improvements (Masterplan and Public Realm)
  - Wednesbury Greenspaces Improvements
  - Friar Park Millennium Centre expansion

- 4.3 In February 2024, The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) gave agreement for the council to manage the capital grant flexibly within the council's overall capital programme. This was to acknowledge that project delivery would need to exceed the initial programme end date of March 2025.
- 4.4 To monitor the impact of the LUP programme, a set of outcome measures has been identified together with individual project outputs and outcomes. These were received by the WLUP Board at the meeting held in February 2024. In addition, the WLUP Board received information on the early impact of the community safety project at its meeting in July 2024. Work is taking place to further develop the evaluation framework for the LUP working with the council's Health Determinants Research Council programme.
- 4.5 The remainder of this report sets out a progress update on:
- Governance Arrangements
  - LUP Project Delivery Update
  - Risk Management Summary
  - Financial Summary
  - Public Health programmes contributing to levelling up
  - Communication and Engagement

### **Governance Arrangements**

- 4.5 The governance model and scheme of delegation for the programme was agreed by Cabinet in September 2023. It is modelled on the Towns Fund governance model and is set out below:



- 4.6 The Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board has been in place since December 2023 and was established to oversee the programme. It brings together Councillors, MPs, representatives of the voluntary sector, the business community, faith group representatives, and partners. The Board has met every other month with sub-group, working group meetings, and site visits as required.
- 4.7 As set out in the Board Terms of Reference, an annual review of Membership was undertaken in August 2024 and Cabinet agreed minor updates to Board Membership and the Board Terms of reference in October 2024
- 4.8 Monthly monitoring conversations are in place with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
- 4.9 Internal governance consists of a LUP Project Group and progress reporting to the council’s Leadership Team. Cabinet requested to receive 6-monthly progress updates. This report is the third 6-monthly programme update to Cabinet (reporting programme delivery as at end January 2025).

## 4.10 Project Delivery Update

4.11 Across the LUP Programme, key achievements since the last report to Cabinet in October 2024 have been:

### Green Spaces

- Construction commenced at Balls Hill
- WLUP Board approval to proceed with Hydes Road pavilion demolish and new build option
- Hydes Road Pavilion submission for planning approval

### Community Safety

- Businesses identified for radio scheme
- CCTV cameras assist in arrests linked to Town Centre thefts and burglaries in Friar Park
- First business forum meeting held
- Proposals for community safety underspend developed and agreed

### Public Realm & Masterplan

- Launch of Wednesbury Town Centre Masterplan
- Public Realm works continue in Wednesbury Town Centre
- Priority buildings identified for building improvement scheme and liaison with building owners

### Friar Park Urban Village Land Remediation

- Continuation of Procurement process for Friar Park Urban Village Development Partner
- Engagement period completed for Friar Park Urban Village
- Pre-application response from Environment Agency received

### Millenium Centre

- Public information events held
- Design freeze reached & submission for planning approval

4.12 Details of project delivery progress, risks and issues are contained in Appendix 1 (project summary) and Appendix 2 (milestone report). Over this period, projects to raise with a significant level of risk, slippage, and/or issues are:

- Friar Park Urban Village Land Remediation Project

Likelihood of issues around Environment Agency permitting process following assessment of pre-application response. This is also raised as a programme level risk.

- Public Realm Project

- i) Increased likelihood of site acquisition not proceeding. This is due to commercial negotiations. Should the acquisition not proceed, this will not impact on grant conditions and required outputs.
- ii) Re-profiled project plan for delivery of phase 1 of site improvement locations due to an additional round of site investigations (due to an unrecorded mineshaft), delays in responses from the Coal Authority and a longer timescale than anticipated for the procurement phase of the schemes.

### **Risk Management Summary**

4.14 A programme level risk register and individual project risk registers are in place as part of risk management arrangements. Project red risks are reported through the project delivery summary in Appendix 1. The programme risk register is provided at Appendix 3.

There is 1 programme red risk as follows:

<p>Risk Title and Description</p>	<p><b>Delivery of Friar Park Urban Village Project – Time and Cost</b>  Risk relates to delays in delivery of the project related to obtaining EA licenses and/or delays to developer partner procurement process and/or planning permissions and/or project cost increases</p>
<p>Controls</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early engagement with EA has been undertaken and consultants (technical experts) procured to support the engagement process</li> <li>• Legal review of proposed approach has been undertaken</li> <li>• Full risk assessment conducted</li> <li>• Arrangements in place to manage capital spend beyond Mar 25</li> <li>• Ongoing joint work with WMCA through Joint Venture Agreement</li> <li>• Revised cost estimates received and a further phase of ground investigations will be commissioned</li> <li>• Capital appraisal review complete</li> <li>• Procurement of developer partner underway</li> <li>• Consultant in place to assist with sports pitch mitigation strategy</li> <li>• Escalation of matters concerning EA permit through MHCLG</li> </ul>
<p>Risk expected to reduce</p>	<p>When EA permitting process concluded, delivery partner procured, and planning permission granted.</p>

4.15 Since the last report to Cabinet, all risks have retained their previous scores. At programme level, there is 1 red risk, 4 amber risks, and 5 green risks.



## Financial Summary

4.16 £2.34m capital and £272K revenue has been spent to date. All projects are forecasting spend within the LUP budget.

Programme Forecast at Jan 2025					
	Spend to Date	Target Spend 24/25	Spend to Date as % of target by Mar 25	Forecast Spend 25/26	Forecast Spend 26/27
<b>Capital</b>	<b>£2.34m</b>	£4.73m	56%	£10.3m	£5m
<b>Revenue</b>	<b>£272.4K</b>	£0.307m	89%	£0.042m	nil

4.17 The full LUP grant of £20.05m capital and £0.35m revenue has been received by the Council.

4.18 Agreement is in place with MHCLG (formerly DLUHC) for the council to manage the grant within the council's overall capital programme to acknowledge that spend will be required beyond the initial March 2025 grant deadline. Any project spend beyond March 2025 is considered and authorised by the council as the Accountable Body.

4.19 In line with the flexibility promoted by MHCLG, and based on changes agreed to date, approval has been given to £15.3m capital expenditure beyond March 2025. Based on current project delivery and financial forecasts, an additional £842K is likely to be required beyond March 2025. The availability of capital swaps has been reviewed at Q3 and the likely ask of an additional £842K has been included within the council's capital forecasts.

## Public Health Programmes

4.21 Programme overview reports to WLUP Board meetings have included a breakdown of Public Health programmes that contribute to levelling up around obesity, life expectancy, infant mortality, economic wellbeing and the mental wellbeing of children.

4.22 £3.7m has been obtained via a joint public health / NHS bid to employ 20 WorkWell Co-ordinators across the Black Country. Friar Park has been identified as a priority ward as it has the largest proportion of residents in

Sandwell with no qualification levels at 33.3%. The WorkWell programme is in its setting up phase. Updates will continue to be provided to the WLUP Board to assist joint working.

## **5 Communication and Engagement**

- 5.1 A programme level communication and engagement strategy was agreed by the WLUP Board in February 2024, and individual project communication and engagement plans received.
- 5.2 The WLUP Board have established a Communication and Engagement Sub-Group to provide regular input to communication and engagement activities across the programme.
- 5.3 Programme updates are provided to Wednesbury Elected Members through the Ward Member participation in the WLUP Board, through updates at each of the quarterly Wednesbury Members' meetings, and circulation of key information.
- 5.4 Since the October update report to Cabinet, key communication and engagement activity across the programme has included:
  - Wednesbury Town Centre Masterplan Launch
  - Launch of CCTV scheme
  - Social media updates on public realm work in Wednesbury Town Centre
  - Friar Park Urban Village Land Remediation Information Sharing
  - Millennium Centre Project Information Sharing
  - Quarterly LUP update to Wednesbury Elected Members
  - Autumn Sandwell Herald publication with LUP updates
  - WLUP Board 1 year anniversary video
  - Programme Overview press release
- 5.5 Over the next quarter, communication and engagement activity includes:
  - Spring Sandwell Herald publication with LUP updates
  - Social media updates on public realm work in Wednesbury Town Centre
  - Launch of Business Scheme
  - Launch of phase 1 green spaces schemes

## 6 Alternative Options

- 6.1 This report provides an overview of progress of the Levelling Up Partnership Programme. It was requested by Cabinet to provide assurance on delivery progress. Alternative options would be for Cabinet to receive progress reporting through the council's performance management framework rather than a bespoke report.

## 7 Implications

<b>Resources:</b>	<p>The LUP presents a £20.4m opportunity for Sandwell.</p> <p>All LUP projects have undergone a capital appraisal as part of the council's assurance process and have been approved subject to recommendations. Fulfilment of the capital appraisal recommendations will be reviewed in early 2025.</p> <p>The council has received the full LUP grant of £20.4m. The grant deadline set out that spend must be made by March 2025, however, agreement is in place with MHCLG to manage the allocation within the council's overall capital programme to acknowledge that delivery will be required beyond March 2025.</p> <p>Spend beyond March 2025 is being signed off by the council as the Accountable Body on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the LUP programme scheme of delegation.</p> <p>Spend is monitored through the council's Corporate Asset Management Board.</p> <p>All LUP projects are forecasting to deliver within budget.</p>
<b>Legal and Governance:</b>	<p>The council is the lead delivery organisation for all LUP projects. A LUP programme manager has been appointed to oversee the programme.</p> <p>In September 2023, Cabinet agreed governance arrangements for the programme including the establishment of the Wednesbury Levelling Up</p>

	<p>Partnership Board to oversee the programme. Terms of reference for the Board were reviewed in August 2024.</p> <p>Legal advice has been commissioned for the Friar Park Urban Village project.</p> <p>All LUP projects have undergone a subsidy control screening, and this will be kept under review in the event of scheme changes. Subsidy advice has been used to inform the remediation strategy for the Friar Park Urban Village project.</p>
<b>Risk:</b>	<p>A programme level risk register is in place, and this is reviewed monthly by the LUP Project Group.</p> <p>Project level risk registers are in place and will be maintained throughout the project lifecycle. The project risk registers were reviewed as part of the capital appraisal for each project.</p> <p>Project level red risks have been identified and are reported to the LUP Project Group.</p> <p>Red risks are reported to Leadership Team as part of regular reporting.</p> <p>There is currently 1 red programme risk relating to the delivery of the Friar Park Urban Village project.</p>
<b>Equality:</b>	<p>Through the project development process, consideration has been given to the impact on and improvements that can be made for residents with protected characteristics.</p> <p>Equality Impact screenings and assessments have been conducted, as appropriate. Equality implications are included in reporting to the WLUP Board.</p>
<b>Health and Wellbeing:</b>	<p>The underpinning objective of the LUP is to 'level up' and reduce inequalities. The LUP interventions focus on tackling health inequalities in a multi-faceted way and compliment public health programmes.</p>
<b>Social Value:</b>	<p>The projects are being delivered in accordance with the council's Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules</p>

	<p>and will deliver social value in line with the council's requirements.</p> <p>Social Value achievements to date have included: A works experience placement with nuisance bike installer, improvements to fencing at a community venue, a community clean up event, career talks, and contractor contributions to funding for Wednesbury Christmas Lights switch on.</p> <p>WLUP Board Members have helped to facilitate conversations between local businesses and the council's Social Value team to help form connections. The WLUP Board have also conducted a community group mapping activity to support community capacity building.</p> <p>Social value is included in reporting to the WLUP Board.</p>
<p><b>Climate Change:</b></p>	<p>The LUP interventions include a range of improvements to the quality of green spaces and public spaces in Wednesbury, contributing to biodiversity.</p> <p>Proposals will also enable the delivery of a significant number of new homes and a range of construction work. Options for energy efficiency measures and reducing carbon through the construction process are being considered as part of the detailed design phase and procurement.</p>
<p><b>Corporate Parenting:</b></p>	<p>The voice of the child is incorporated within the LUP governance arrangements through the inclusion of young people's representatives on the WLUP Board. Where consultation has been undertaken as part of the LUP Programme, young people's views and opinions have been sought.</p> <p>The intervention focusing on the extension of the Friar Park Millennium Centre has included consideration of youth opportunities.</p>

## **8 Appendices**

1. Summary of Levelling Up Partnership Project Delivery January 2025
2. Levelling Up Partnership Milestone Report January 2025

## **9 Background papers**

[Background to Levelling Up Partnership - Report to Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board 18 December 2023](#)

[Sandwell Council Cabinet Report – Levelling Up Partnership 16 October 2024](#)