

Minutes of Council

**Tuesday 25 February at 6.01pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

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

Councillors K Allcock, M Allcock, Bhamra, Bhullar, Carmichael, Chambers, Chidley, Choudhry, Cotterill, Crompton, Davies, Dhariwal, Dhatt, Fenton, Fitzgerald, Gavan, E Giles, E M Giles, J Giles, L Giles, Hackett, Haq, Hartwell, Hemingway, Hinchliff, Horton, Hughes, Hussain, Iqbal, Jalil, Jeffcoat, Johnston, Kalebe-Nyamongo, Kaur, Khan, Khatun, Kordala, Lewis, Maycock, Mayo, Millar, Millard, Moore, Muflihi, Owen, Pall, Piper, Preece, Rahman, Randhawa, Shaeen, A Singh, J Singh, N Singh, Smith, Taylor, Tipper, Tromans, Trumpeter, Uddin, Webb, Weston, Wilkes and Williams.

Officers: Shokat Lal – Chief Executive; Mike Jones – Assistant Director Legal and Assurance and Monitoring Officer; Suky Suthi-Nagra - Democratic and Member Services Manager; Anthony Lloyd – Democratic Services Officer and Kennedy Brown – Sergeant at Arms.

1/25 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashraf, Dunn, S Gill, W Gill, Melia and Younis.

2/25 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no interests declared at the meeting.

3/25 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting of Council, held on 10 December 2024, are approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4/25 **Announcements**

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

The Mayor extended sincere thanks to everyone who had supported her efforts throughout the municipal year and thanked the Member Services team for their continued hard work and support.

The Chief Executive was invited to address Council to announce that Sandwell Council was a finalist in the prestigious Local Government Chronicle awards in the 'Most Improved Council' category.

The Council had been shortlisted following the rapid progress it had made in resetting organisational culture as well as for the improvements it had made in the way it worked to deliver the best services and outcomes for residents.

The Council's values: Customer Focused, Ambitious, Accountable, One Team and Inclusive underpinned everything the Council did to help towards the ambition to become an outstanding council.

5/25

Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Budget 2025/26 and Council Tax Resolution 2025/26

Council considered the Council Finances and Council Tax Resolution for the period 2025/26.

The Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2025/26 was issued on 18 December 2024, with the Final Settlement issued on 3 February 2025.

The key outcomes of the Settlement were:

- a. New Homes Bonus - Government had been considering reform or phasing out of New Homes Bonus for some years but it remained in 2025/26. But there was now a clear indication that the system would be reformed for 2026/27. The amount due to be received in 2025/26 was £0.379m, a reduction of £0.398m from the previous year.
- b. Services Grant – No grant would be received for 2025/26. This was in line with the assumptions in the October Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and was a reduction of £0.710m when compared with 2024/25.
- c. Council Tax Referendum Principles – It was confirmed that for councils with adult social care responsibility, increases in council tax could be up to 5% (being 3% core increase and additional 2% due to adult social care responsibilities). The 2025/26 budget proposals included an increase of 4.99%. As there was no commitment for the additional 2% allowance for

future years, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy did not include the uplift and remained with the 2.99% core increases for 2026/27 onwards.

- d. The Business Rates Retention Arrangements – there were no changes to the existing arrangements. The Council therefore remained an authority with increased business rates retention arrangements (thereby forgoing Revenue Support Grant).
- e. Social Care Grant – In 2025/26, there were increases locally and nationally with the Social Care Grant increasing to £55.391m for Sandwell MBC; an increase of £8.779m (18.8%). Nationally, an increased allocation of £5.924bn was provided, which represented an increase of 17.5%.
- f. The Adult Social Care Discharge Fund remained cash flat nationally and for Sandwell. Sandwell's allocation of £5.379m had been rolled into the Local Authority Better Care Grant (previously improved Better Care Fund).
- g. The Adult Social Care Market Sustainability Improvement Fund also remained cash flat with the allocation being £8.085m.
- h. Local Authority Better Care Grant (previously known as the improved Better Care Fund - iBCF) – this grant included the Adult Social Care Discharge Fund which had been rolled in for 2025/26. The local and national allocation of the Better Care Grant was equal to the combined funding allocations for iBCF and Adult Social Care Discharge Fund for the previous year and therefore, no new funding had been allocated within the Settlement. Sandwell's allocation stood at £28.401m, which included the rolled in grant of £5.379m Adult Social Care Discharge Fund.

- i. Children's Social Care Prevention Grant – The Government's intention for this new grant (£270m nationally with £3.555m allocated to this Council) was for investment in children's social care prevention. Conditions associated with the use of this grant had been released with the Final Settlement announcement. The MTFS had assumed that there would be new cost burdens matched to the amount of funding allocated.
- j. Recovery Grant – The Government had introduced a new grant worth £600m nationally. The indication was that this grant was to be distributed to council areas with greater need and demand for public services based on the indices of multiple deprivation. Sandwell had been allocated £11.784m in recognition of the challenges faced locally in respect of deprivation. A small element of the grant funding was required to fund additional costs that would be incurred by the Council due to the increase to employer's national insurance costs from 2025/26, however, most of the new funding (£11.500m) was available to develop and coordinate initiatives designed to address deprivation in the borough.

Fees and Charges

The Council's portfolio of fees and charges had been updated using a figure of 2%, unless charges were specified by Government or there were other relevant constraints. In several cases, charges were proposed to increase beyond a 2% adjustment factor to ensure that there was full cost recovery for delivery of the service.

Reserves Position

The Council had two types of revenue reserves:-

- General Reserves which represented the non-ring-fenced balance of Council funds. There were two main purposes of

general reserves: firstly, it operated as a working balance to help manage the impact of uneven cash flows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing; and secondly, it provided a contingency to cushion the impact of emerging events or genuine emergencies

- Earmarked reserves which provided a means of building up funds, for use in a later financial year, to meet known or predicted policy initiatives or manage specific risks

The level of general reserves as at 1 April 2024 was £19.046m.

Council Tax Proposals

The Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2025/26, set the referendum threshold for Council Tax increases to an overall total of 2.99% and an additional amount for Adult Social Care of 2% for upper tier councils such as Sandwell MBC.

Annual increases at this level were also included within the Council's Core Spending Power assumptions.

The Council Tax income included within the MTFP for 2025/26 allowed for an increase of 4.99% including the additional 2% increase for adult social care. Future years of the MTFP reflected a 2.99% increase only due to the uncertainty of the adult social care allowance.

A change to the requirements for information displayed on Council Tax bills for 2025/26 was that councils should no longer separately identify the increase for Adult Social Care as a separate amount. Therefore, for 2025/26 onwards, bills would show a single line for Sandwell MBC for both percentage increases.

It was noted that the Council should not have taken an alternative approach to that of maximising potential increases. Any lower assumptions could have damaged the Council's ability to sustain statutory services at a reasonable level.

The Council had a large proportion of properties falling within the Band A or Band B Council Tax Brackets, with 76% of chargeable properties falling within the two lowest bands.

Housing Revenue Account

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was a ring-fenced account for the Council's housing stock and was shown separately to the General Fund. Income came from rent and service charges and expenditure related to the management and maintenance of the stock.

Capital Programme

As of February 2025, the Capital Programme was considered to cost £152.8m in 2025/26, based on profiling of expenditure against the approved programme.

The annual cost of servicing new and existing debt was assumed to be £22.1m in 2025/26. Any proposed changes to capital programme would be subject to due diligence, including identification of new funding streams, to ensure that the programme remained affordable.

The Council's General Fund debt service costs reflected interest payments on the debt portfolio but also the amounts set aside for repayment of principal amounts of historic borrowing. In 2024/25, the forecast figure of £20m was about 6% of the Council's net budget. The percentage was relatively modest compared with similar authorities which was a significant factor in the budget

shortfall for the Council being lower compared to some authorities.

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, and Standing Order 13 (4), the decision relating to Council Finances 2025-26 was put to a named vote as follows:-

For

Councillors K Allcock, M Allcock, Bhamra, Bhullar, Carmichael, Chambers, Chidley, Choudhry, Cotterill, Crompton, Davies, Dhariwal, Dhatt, Fenton, Fitzgerald, Gavan, E A Giles, E M Giles, J Giles, L Giles, Hackett, Haq, Hartwell, Hemingway, Hinchliff, Horton, Hughes, Hussain, Iqbal, Jalil, Jeffcoat, Johnston, Kalebe-Nyamongo, Kaur, Khan, Khatun, Lewis, Maycock, Mayo, Millar, Millard, Moore, Muflihi, Owen, Pall, Piper, Preece, Rahman, Randhawa, Shaeen, A Singh, J Singh, N Singh, Smith, Taylor, Tipper, Tromans, Uddin, Webb, Wilkes and Williams

Against

None

Abstentions

Councillors Kordala, Trumpeter and Weston.

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

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Draft Budget 2025/26 is approved:-
 - a. that having due regard to the report of the Section 151 Officer, included at paragraphs 13 to 33 of Appendix A, and as required under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 to report on the

robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the budget calculations and adequacy of proposed financial reserves, approval is given to the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Draft Budget 2025/26 Report, including the appendix and annexes;

- b. that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and all annexes set out in Appendix A, be approved, incorporating the following recommendations:
 - i. the results of the consultation exercise at Annex 1 be noted
 - ii. the change-log of financial movements in the MTFP at Annex 2 be noted;
 - iii. the efficiency savings detailed in Annex 3 of the MTFS be approved for inclusion in the General Fund base budget for 2025/26 and the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for the financial years 2025/26 to 2029/30:
 - iv. the risks associated with the MTFP as detailed at Annex 4 be noted:
 - v. the strategy on Flexible Use of Capital Receipts at Annex 5 to the report be approved, and delegated authority given to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources and Executive Director for Finance and Transformation to make any submissions to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for application:
 - vi. the Fees and Charges for 2025/26 be approved, as set out within Annex 6:

- c. that the analysis of Council Tax amounts by Band at Annex 8 be noted;

- d. that the application of the Dedicated Schools Grant as set out at Annex 9 be approved, including the following recommendations to:
- i. adopt the grant allocation by block per Table 1:
 - ii. agree the amount of funding available for distribution from the Schools Block at £373.004m as set out at Table 2 including:
 - set aside of £1.000m as Pupil Growth contingency:
 - set aside of £0.840m as Falling Rolls Funding contingency:
 - transfer of £0.522m to Central Schools Services Block to fund attendance service:
- e. in relation to the General Fund Capital Programme:
- i. the budget allocation of £102.432m for 2025/26, and of £343.120m for the programme to 2029/30, as set out at Annex 10, be approved;
 - ii. it be noted that it is assumed that the 'pipeline' projects, as detailed in Annex 10, will be brought forward for appraisal in due course and will be added into the programme following the completion of due process as prescribed by the Council's Financial Regulations;
- f. that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and associated Capital Programme as set out at Annex 11 be approved, including:
- i. the HRA Revenue Budget for 2025/26 as set out in Table 2 of the report, including the draw of £3.336m from HRA balances;

- ii. the HRA Capital Programme budget of £78.401m for 2025/26 as set out in Table 3 of the report submitted;
 - iii. the 30 Year HRA Business Plan as set out in sub-annex 1;
- g. that the Reserves Strategy at Annex 12 to the MTFS is approved, and delegated authority be given to the Section 151 Officer to make transfers to or from reserves during the financial year to ensure that adequate reserves are maintained and adjusted when spend from earmarked reserves is required;
- h. that the Capital Strategy and Capital Financing Strategy at Annex 13 and 14 is approved:
- i. that the Investment Strategy at Annex 15 be approved:
- j. that the Treasury Management Strategy at Annex 16 be approved, including:
 - I. The Borrowing and Investment Strategies (para 75 and 105):
 - II. The Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement (para 49):
 - III. The Treasury and Prudential Indicators as set out within the report and summarised at sub-annex 6:
 - IV. Forecast new borrowing requirement of £118m:
- k. That the Revenues and Benefits Policy Framework at Annex 17 be endorsed;

- I. that the Section 151 Officer be authorised to make any in-year financial corrections, technical adjustments or virements in the event of variations in indicated funding allocations made by Government, subject to these being allocated in accordance with the principles set out in this report: and
 - M. authorise the Section 151 Officer to adjust the funding sources applied to the Capital Programmes during the year to maximise flexibility in use of capital resources and minimise borrowing costs where possible;
- 1.1 that that Council approves the revised General Fund net budget of £365.783m for 2025/26 and as detailed at Annex 7 of the MTFS, including the financial implications of:
- i. minor revisions to the General Fund net budget originally presented to Cabinet on 5th February 2025;
 - ii. a proposed Council Tax increase of 4.99% for the Sandwell MBC Council Tax element, resulting in a Band D charge of £1,823.76, comprising 2.99% for the core amount and 2% in relation to adult social care;
 - iii. revised Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme Policy as approved by Full Council on 10 December 2024:
 - iv. increased Council Taxbase of 80,364.3 as approved by Full Council on 10 December 2024;
- 1.2 that subject to confirmation of approved final precept amounts from West Midlands Fire Service, the Council Tax Resolution included at Appendix B be approved,

including:

- i. the Council Tax Requirement for the Council's own purposes (excluding precepts) for 2025/26 as £146,565,196 at Section 2(c);
- ii. the calculation of the aggregated amounts for the year 2025/26 in accordance with sections 31 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as set out in Section 2;
- iii. the Council Tax amounts by Council Tax Band from Major Preceptors as set out in Section 3;
- iv. the Aggregated Council Tax amounts by Council Tax Band set out in Section 4.

6/25 **Written Questions**

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

7/25 **Revisions to Committees, Boards and Other Bodies**

Council considered revisions to appointments to committees, boards and other bodies.

Resolved that the revisions to appointments to committees, boards and other bodies, as set out in Appendix C, is approved with immediate effect.

8/25 **Notices of Motions**

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

8/25(a) **Motion - Adopt the All Parliamentary Party Group on British Muslims working definition of Islamophobia**

It was moved by Councillor Carmichael and seconded by Councillor Muflihi:-

“Sandwell Council is committed to fighting hate crime. A hate crime is defined as –

'Any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a person's race or perceived race; religion or perceived religion; sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation; disability or perceived disability and any crime motivated by hostility or prejudice against a person who is transgender or perceived to be transgender.' (Police bulletin).

Council recognised the concerns raised by the local Inclusive Muslim Action Network (I.M.A.N) regarding the national rise of Islamophobia in recent years across the UK and worldwide.

Council further notes and welcomes Sandwell’s proud and diverse communities, that include a substantial proportion of its residents are Muslim, who are an integral to the diversity, vibrancy and cohesion of our borough.

Council therefore resolves to:

1. Adopt the working APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group) definition of Islamophobia, including all its examples in full:

"ISLAMOPHOBIA IS ROOTED IN RACISM AND IS A TYPE OF RACISM THAT TARGETS EXPRESSIONS OF MUSLIMNESS OR PERCEIVED MUSLIMNESS."

Contemporary examples of Islamophobia in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in encounters between religions and non-religions in the public sphere could, considering the overall context, include, but are not limited to:

- Calling for, aiding, instigating or justifying the killing or harming of Muslims in the name of a racist/fascist ideology, or an extremist view of religion.
- Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Muslims as such, or of Muslims as a collective group, such as, especially but not exclusively, conspiracies about Muslim entryism in politics, government or other societal institutions; the myth of Muslim identity having a unique propensity for terrorism and claims of a demographic 'threat' posed by Muslims or of a 'Muslim takeover'.
- Accusing Muslims as a group of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Muslim person or group of Muslim individuals, or even for acts committed by non-Muslims.
- Accusing Muslims as a group, or Muslim majority states, of inventing or exaggerating Islamophobia, ethnic cleansing or genocide perpetrated against Muslims.
- Accusing Muslim citizens of being more loyal to the 'Ummah' (transnational Muslim community) or to their countries of origin, or to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- Denying Muslim populations, the right to self-determination e.g., by claiming that the existence of an independent Palestine or Kashmir is a terrorist endeavour.
- Applying double standards by requiring of Muslims behaviours that are not expected or demanded of any other groups in society, eg loyalty tests.

- Using the symbols and images associated with classic Islamophobia.
 - Holding Muslims collectively responsible for the actions of any Muslim majority state, whether secular or constitutionally Islamic.
2. Continue to prioritise tackling hate crime and Islamophobia in partnership by holding Interfaith events and taking opportunity of national awareness months to engage wider across the borough.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

8/25(b) **Motion - Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee**

It was moved by Councillor Piper and seconded by Councillor Taylor:-

“Council notes that the national system of police funding has long been acknowledged to be outdated and unfair. There is a widespread disparity in the funding and allocation of resources between police forces across the country. Whilst rural areas with older populations have tended to receive higher shares of funding than they were estimated to need, the West Midlands is estimated to be 19% below estimated needs. Funding should be distributed so it goes to where it is needed most. But currently that is not the case. More deprived, higher population densities with higher crime rates are disadvantaged and underfunded compared to their needs.

Council further notes that is particularly noticeable in the West Midlands. West Midlands Police receives £40m a year less than the formula says it should. In order to prevent and tackle crime, keep people safe and secure and deliver access to justice, West Midlands Police is further from receiving the funding it needs than any other police force.

Council places on record its concerns that whilst some police force areas have seen a growth in police numbers and now have more police officers than they have ever had in their force histories, West Midlands Police has 800 fewer police officers than in 2010 and 500 fewer PCSOs.

Council therefore calls on the Leader and Cabinet to write to the Home Secretary, calling for:

1. The return of 800 police officers, to return officer numbers to 2010 levels.
2. The national Police Funding Formula to be reviewed urgently and replaced as soon as possible.
3. Assurances that the increase in resources promised by the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee should prioritise those areas that are still smaller than they were in 2010.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

8/25(c) **Motion - Balloons and Sky Lanterns on Council Land & Properties**

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

“Council notes that whilst balloons and sky lanterns look effective when let loose into the sky and are used for a number of celebrations or commemorations, there are alternative more sustainable options. Options like planting a tree or a flower provides a place to reflect but also helps wildlife and the environment.

Council further notes that:

1. Helium balloons are single use plastic and sky lanterns pose a risk to buildings, dry standing areas including wildlife habitats.
2. It is impossible to predict and control where balloons or sky lanterns will land after release and the effects on animals, wildlife, marine, pondlife and the environment.
3. Balloon litter can be harmful to all wildlife and birds which includes, ducks, geese and swans, sometimes resulting in death by strangulation or choking.
4. Sky lanterns, made from paper covered wire or a bamboo frame with a candle inside can blow for miles, causing fire hazards to properties, grassy areas, parks and gardens but potentially causing harm to wildlife and habitats.

Council therefore calls on the Leader and Cabinet to:

1. Request the Public Protection Team to explore options to ban the release of all types of helium filled ballons and those that are biodegradable* and sky lanterns on property and land owned by the council.
2. Request the Communications Team to produce a leaflet that can be posted onto social media and displayed in public places where necessary.

4. Engage with communities, the voluntary sector and schools and other sectors encouraging them to sign up to this initiative.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

8/25(d) **Motion - Prohibition of Off-Road Bike Storage and Illegal Use in Council Tenancies - withdrawn**

The motion was withdrawn at the request of the proposer. The motion in its original or revised form would be submitted to a future meeting of Full Council.

8/25(e) **Motion - Divestment of West Midlands Pension Fund investment from companies that supply armaments that enable conflict and terror**

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

“Council notes with concern the ongoing tragedy of global conflicts and terrorist attacks that often directly impact Sandwell given our diverse and tolerant residents and communities.

Full Council resolved at its meeting on 23 July 2024 to reiterate commitments to peace and endorsed international calls led by the United Nations to end the conflict in Gaza and to ensure immediate humanitarian aid to civilians and the unconditional release of all hostages.

Council further notes that nationally the Local Government Pension Scheme manages extensive investments from participating employers to support pension saving and provide benefits for millions of members working in public service. The regional West Midlands Pension Fund is administered by the City of Wolverhampton Council: Sandwell Council along with peer authorities has representation on the regional Pension Committee.

Council believes that public pension funds must not be used—directly or indirectly—to facilitate the harm of civilians or to enable violations of international law, and that the investment of public pension funds should not undermine a safe climate or human rights; instead, public pension funds should be invested to ensure both financial stability and respect for international law.

Council further believes that properly planned ethical investment will ensure that public pension funds remain healthy, sustainable and able to meet current and financial obligations to support its members. Government guidance indicates that whilst pension schemes should make the financial return their predominant concern, they may also take purely non-financial considerations into account provided that doing so would not involve significant risk of financial detriment to the scheme and where they had good reason to think that scheme members would support their decision.

Council therefore calls on the Leader and Cabinet to write to the West Midlands Pension Fund and the City of Wolverhampton Council as administering authority calling for the Fund to

1. Develop a clear plan to divest from companies involved either directly or indirectly in arms production and the supply weapons to regimes, terrorist or extremist organisations engaged in breaches of international law and human rights abuses.

2. Implement robust and transparent reporting mechanisms, including annual updates on investments in armaments, companies operating in occupied territories as defined in international law, and updates on progress towards divestment and outcomes of company engagements.
3. Explore alternative reinvestment in industries aligned with ethical and environmental priorities, such as renewable energy, social housing, and sustainable infrastructure.
4. Council further calls on the Leader and Cabinet to write to the Leaders of other Councils who are members of the West Midlands Pension fund setting out the terms of this Motion and encouraging them to debate and adopt this approach.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

Meeting ended at 8.05pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk