

# Minutes of Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

**19 March 2025 at 6.00pm**  
**in the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Davies (Chair);  
Councillors Rahman (Vice-Chair), Hackett,  
Hemmingway, Jeffcoat, A Singh and Weston.

**Officers:** Barry Ridgway (Group Manager Assets and  
Maintenance), Rina Rahim (Towns Fund Programme  
Manager) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services  
Officer).

**In attendance:** Councillor Lewis.  
Steve Potter and Ryan Sunar (Severn Trent Water) and  
Louise Bickley (South Staffs Water).

## 9/25 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors  
Johnston and Kaur.

## 10/25 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

## 11/25 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 13  
February 2025 are confirmed as a correct record.

12/25      **Additional Item of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

13/25      **Severn Trent and South Staffs Water Investment Plans for 2025-2030**

The Board heard that in December 2024 Ofwat had approved the five-year investment plans put forward by South Severn Trent Water and South Staffs Water.

Representatives from Severn Trent Water provided an overview of its investment plans for 2025-30:-

- predominantly provided wastewater management and drainage services in Sandwell, but also responsible for providing drinking water to a small proportion of Sandwell's population;
- rated 4 Star for environmental and Process Water Standards by the Environment Agency;
- was making a record £15bn in the next 5 years to address key challenges such as climate change, population growth and river/water course health;
- was creating new jobs, including increasing the size of the team responsible for dangerous and defective assets to address backlogs and increasing the number of inspectors;
- looking at innovative approaches to reduce the frequency and length of time that combined sewer overflows occurred;
- there were 11 interventions in Sandwell to improve river health;
- expanding its schools education programme to communities and offering incentives such as discounted bills and free water butts to slow the flow of rainwater into the sewerage system;
- Severn Trent Community Fund worked with charities providing £2m a year to various projects to improve community wellbeing;
- Societal Strategy provided special tariffs to support customers in financial hardship and support with skills and training to help people into employment, including partnerships with local authorities to ensure that care leavers were registered for affordability schemes;

A representative from South Staffs Water provided an overview of its investment plans for 2025-30:-

- Part of South Staffordshire Plc group, which also included Cambridge Water provided the majority of Sandwell's drinking water supply;
- worked closely with Severn Trent, collecting wastewater charges on its behalf to provide customers with just one bill;
- investing £926m across the region, which was its largest investment settlement ever received and one of only two water companies to get more funds than requested;
- one of the lowest bill rises in the sector;
- was increasing support for special tariff customers, providing flexible payment plans and payments breaks and additional tariffs;
- £53m of the investment for the provision of smart meters, with an ambition to have 100% of customers on smart meters by 2035, increased from the current 43%;
- was working closely with communities to educate them on the benefits of smart meters, which included reduced bills;
- spending £6m on water saving initiatives and £9m on leak reduction;
- spending £30m to improve the quality of drinking water;
- focusing on drought resilience and flood resilience;
- working with Natural England to protect Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs);
- replacing key infrastructure across the region, including up to 10km of works in Sandwell;

In response to members comments and questions, the following key points were highlighted:-

- the introduction of smart meters across South Staffs Water's region would provide data to support the development of new tariffs;
- the provision of clean water was the lowest element of a customer's bill,
- Water UK website provided information to customers on how their water bills were broken down;

- South Staffs Water was working with a third party on a communication and engagement plan to address customer misconceptions about smart meters and highlight the benefits, which included reduced bills;
- it was possible that larger households would incur higher bills using a smart meter and tariffs were being considered to address this;
- South Staffs Water provided information on its website, via social media campaigns and from its Community Hub in Wednesbury about how to access special tariffs as well as working with Citizens' Advice Bureau and foodbanks;
- the opening hours of the Community Hub were increasing following a reduction due to covid-19;
- Customers were advised to contact South Staffs Water's customer contact centre if they were concerned about paying their bill;
- South Staffs Water had a rolling programme of asset replacement, but two major schemes would focus on replacing assets that were around 100 years old;
- South Staffs Water would inform customers of planned interruptions to services, ensuring that vulnerable customers were not affected;
- forensic investigations were taking place by South Staffs Water to establish the cause of the burst pipe that had occurred in Wednesbury in November 2024;
- planned works that could cause disruption were discussed at quarterly stakeholder meetings;
- Ofwat had allowed South Staffs Water to spend some of its funding on initiatives for non-residential customers to reduce water consumption;
- there were specific performance targets on the quality of drinking water;
- water pressure was not measured but there were minimum requirements;
- there was often an assumption from the public that incidents (such as supply interruptions, reduced pressure, burst pipes) had already been reported which sometimes meant that they were not reported at all, thus delaying the response;
- data from reported incidents also provided evidence to inform future investment plans and the preference was for incidents to be reported multiple times as opposed to not at all;

- councillors could help spread key messages to the public and the water companies were happy to engage with the Council's communications team.

The Board thank the representatives for their attendance, noting that they were not required to attend and any they were not under any obligation to respond to any recommendations made.

### **Resolved**

- 1) that the Statutory Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, and the Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways, are recommended to work with South Staffs Water and Severn Trent Water to develop a collaborative approach to communicating with residents to disseminate key messages in relation to:-
  - reporting incidents (e.g. leaks, floods, reduction in water quality, supply disruptions);
  - the benefits of moving to a smart water meter;
  - ways to reduce water consumption;
  - major programmes of works
- 2) that the Statutory Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance is recommended to explore the possibility of including contact information for South Staffs Water and Severn Trent Water on the MyCouncillor Portal and the MySandwell Portal;
- 3) that South Staffs Water is requested to provide further information on:-
  - communications and engagement strategies to target hard to reach communities and those for whom English is not their first language;
  - campaigns to reduce water consumption targeted at non-household customers;
  - the outcome of its analyses into the impact of its 2024 water reduction campaigns;
  - the outcome of forensic investigations into the flooding caused by a burst water main in

Leabrook Road, Wednesbury in November 2024;

- the age profile of the current infrastructure and what percentage is cast iron;
- the materials used for replacement of cast iron trunk mains.

14/25

## **Towns Fund Programme Update**

The Board noted an update on the Towns Fund Programme to provide assurance that the programme was proceeding in line with Government requirements and the agreed local assurance process.

Members noted detailed updates on projects as follows:-

- works had commenced on the new West Bromwich Indoor Market with a planned public opening of August 2025;
- the acquisition of Kings Square Cinema had been completed.
- restoration works at West Bromwich Town Hall and Central Library had been completed;
- the Midland Met Learning Campus construction had progressed well with an anticipated completion date of November 2025;
- the Blackheath Bus Interchange and Public Realm projects works were anticipated to be completed by November 2025;
- three elements of the Rowley Regis Parks Improvements had been completed;
- works had commenced on-site to replace the deck of Wrights Bridge;
- the Rowley Regis Connected Project had successfully delivered phase 1 of the Moor Lane Pedestrian Improvement scheme and phase 2 of the Oldbury Ringway Scheme; and
- the Cradley Heath Skills Campus Topping Out Ceremony had been held on 25 February 2025 and the building was expected to be operational by January 2026.

Financial spending forecasts were in line with previous returns submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in November 2024 with less than 10% slippage across all three towns (West Bromwich, Smethwick and Rowley Regis). Projects were at various stages of delivery and cost pressures continued due to inflation.

MHCLG had been made aware of cost pressures. No additional funding had been offered but, project adjustment requests had been made to enable some flexibility to reduce outputs.

Further information was presented concerning project risks. The Digital Den, Central St Michaels Sandwell Engineering, Science and Manufacturing Centre, Urban Greening, Town Hall Quarter, Canal Network Connectivity and Ron Davis Centre Expansion projects were deemed as low risk and were either completed or nearing completion ahead of schedule.

It was highlighted that the West Bromwich Connected, Rolfe Street Canalside Regeneration, Grove Lane Regeneration, Cradley Heath Skills Campus, Blackheath Bus Interchange and Rowley Regis connected projects had been rated as high risk due to delays, funding forecasts being more than 50% between January 2025 and March 2026, and no spend taking place on specific projects. Slippage was monitored on an ongoing basis.

In response to members questions and comments, the following was noted:-

- in respect of Smethwick projects, key milestones and actions had been set out up to January 2027 and the need to report slippage had been emphasised. It was anticipated that the Compulsory Purchase Order process could take until January 2027;
- an extension had not been requested in relation to the Blackheath Bus Interchange project but would be considered should any issues arise once construction started;
- bookings for West Bromwich Town Hall had not proactively been sought pending the completion of

internal refurbishments, however, a government visit in January had gone well and MCLG was considering holding an event there;

- additional funding was being sought to ensure that West Bromwich Town Hall could be brought back into use;
- social value was a key output of all projects and this had been achieved by ensuring that local contractors were used wherever possible (dependent upon the size of the project);
- there would be a full evaluation of social value outputs upon the completion of the whole programme.

## **15/25      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.

## **16/25      Cabinet Forward Plan and Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Work Programme**

The Board received the Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme.

Meeting ended at 8.30pm.

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