

Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

29 April 2025

Subject:	Interim Report of the Scrutiny Review into Communities
Director:	James McLaughlin Assistant Chief Executive
Contact Officer:	John Swann Democratic Services Officer

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 To note progress and comment in relation to the Interim Report of the Scrutiny Review into Communities.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 At its Board meeting in September 2024, the Board agreed to conduct a scrutiny review into Communities, including setting out the proposed lines of enquiry.
- 2.2 In December 2024 a working group was formed to conduct the review, consisting of Councillors A Singh (Lead Member), Jeffcoat (Deputy-Lead Member), Cotterill, Dhatt, Davies, W Gill, Lewis and Ms Brown (Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Living in Sandwell	Increased community participation, engagement and the fostering of an improved sense promotes this objective.
Thriving in Sandwell	Improved outcomes for local people on localised issues promotes this objective. Examining what contributes to improved social cohesion by studying national best

	practice and the current service offer, can identify gaps for improvement.
One Council One Team	The scrutiny function supports all of the objectives of the Corporate Plan by seeking to improve services for the people of Sandwell. It does this by influencing the policies and decisions made by the Council and other organisations involved in delivering public services.
Healthy in Sandwell	
Growing Up in Sandwell	

4 Context and Key Issues

Background

- 4.1 During work programming the most suggested topic from Members of the public and council was in relation to improved community relations, including community cohesion and culture sharing.
- 4.2 The Summer 2024 riots across the United Kingdom, linked to far- right and anti- immigration sentiments, reaffirmed the need to ensure communities across Sandwell felt- safe and felt a connection to their local area.
- 4.3 Research clearly demonstrates that those with increased deprivation or from underrepresented and hard- to- reach communities are less likely to actively participate within their communities and civic life.

Activity

- 4.4 The key lines of enquiry originally identified as of 2024 were as follows:
 - a) What contributes to improved social cohesion?
 - b) How can we foster an improved sense of community?
 - c) What motivates people to be active and give back within their community?
- 4.5 The working group initially met with officers to design the programme of work which was to consisted of:
 - a) Meetings of the working group to consider evidence.
 - b) A literature review and desktop analysis.
 - c) Speaking to frontline staff.

- 4.6 Members sought to learn from national best practice and identified suitable charities to approach and engage with. A benchmarking exercise was conducted to determine which of our statistic local authority neighbours were most analogous to Sandwell in this instance. The selected charities and councils were contacted, however most were not responsive or declined to participate. The reasons for this are unclear, however may have been influenced by the sensitive nature of community cohesion discourse.

Identified Themes

4.7 Intersectionality

The understanding that Sandwell is a diverse Borough and residents may have multiple identities that span across multiple demographics and communities.

4.8 Borough Structure

Towns across Sandwell have unique identities and are made up of different communities with local laced based identities.

4.9 National Best Practice

Looking external to the Borough may provide the best opportunities for understanding what works well, and how this can be adapted for use in Sandwell. By approaching national organisations rather than local organisations which already operate within the Borough we can explore alternatives to the current arrangements.

Examination of case studies of communities which are analogous and statistical neighbours to Sandwell, (have similar levels of deprivation, are ethnically diverse and are close to cities but have their own distinct identities) can provide learning opportunities.

4.10 Community Participation

Those from hard- to- reach communities are less likely to respond to consultations conducted by the Council and are less likely to vote in local and national elections. Consultation response levels were identified as a key and measurable factor in monitoring levels of engagement.

4.11 Tailored approach to communities

Research indicates that professionals are likely to encounter increased barriers and resistance from a community group when they are perceived to be an outsider.

The champions programme within the Directorate of Public Health demonstrated that those from hard- to- reach communities are more likely to respond to key messaging and reported higher levels of engagement when messaging came from those within their communities and trusted local leaders rather than an external body.

Next Steps

- 4.8 Members have identified that possible next steps include:
- a) Engagement with [Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Centre](#) (STEPS), including a visit to see the service in action.
 - b) Engagement with the [centre for Intensive Engagement](#), including regard to the Diagnostic Tool and the Eight Step process.
- 4.7 Board to determine which actions to proceed with in the new year, having regard to the Interim Findings at Appendix 1.

5 Implications

Resources:	The Scrutiny function is directly supported by the Council's Statutory Scrutiny Officer and Democratic Services Officers within the Council's Law and Governance directorate.
Legal and Governance:	Local Government Act 2000 states that Councils operating executive arrangements must also make provision for the appointment of overview and scrutiny committees. Further powers relating to overview and scrutiny are set out in the Police and Justice Act 2006, the Localism Act 2011, the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 and the Health and Social Care Acts 2012 and 2022.
Risk:	There are no specific Risk implications arising from this report.
Equality:	The survey has been conducted in a manner to ensure that it is representative of the diversity of our customers so we can understand if there are any perceptions of inequality in our service delivery.

Health and Wellbeing:	Perceptions of safety and community may impact negatively or positively on a person's health and wellbeing.
Social Value:	An increased community offer can improve the social value levels within the Borough.
Climate Change:	There are no specific Climate Change implications arising from this report
Corporate Parenting:	There are no specific Corporate Parenting implications arising from this report

6 Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1 – Interim Report Appendix.

7 Background Papers

7.1 None.