

**Discovery Phase Report and Priority Theme Rationale – this should be read in conjunction with the Child Friendly Discovery Phase and recommended Priority themes Report.**

The Discovery Phase in Sandwell marked a significant milestone towards ensuring that children and young people's rights are central to the development of policies and services that affect their lives and is a critical initial step in our Child Friendly journey. It involved an exploration of the current state of growing up in Sandwell, through surveys, policy and strategy reviews, training and conversation. Each planned activity sought to identify

- Existing assets in relation to communication, co-operation, leadership and culture and other key areas, i.e. what is currently in place in Sandwell to promote child-friendliness, and what is working well.
- Current challenges and gaps, i.e. what is needed or what could be improved.
- Share ideas on how to address some of these challenges and
- Share thoughts on which priority themes to focus on through the initiative.

A key element of the Discovery Phase was the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, primarily our children and young people, parents, community groups and local authority officers and partner organisations. This inclusive approach aimed to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of all community members are considered. As well as analysing evidence and information we already had access to, a programme of activities was also planned across the 6 months which began with a Partners Discovery Day held on 18 October 2024 bringing together over 40 representatives from across the borough to discuss their priority areas of focus for the programme.

(Priorities themes identified **Safe & Secure, Education & Learning, Healthy with Equal and Included** as the golden thread)

Sandwell hosted a UK Parliament Week in November attended by 63 Children and young people from schools across the borough with the intention to; strengthen the relationship with schools, school councils and student voice participation programmes; open up a dialogue with children and young people helping them to understand children's rights and democracy, through meaningful debates and ongoing conversations and supporting young people to be more politically involved by introducing them to partners, elected members and MP's. The events were facilitated by over 20 senior leaders and elected members from across the organisation and attendance included statutory partners, external organisations and our local Members of Parliament. Activities throughout the week included:

- Budget consultation and Getting to Know your Council
- Democracy Summit
- An Audience with the Mayor
- Leadership Team Takeover Challenge
- Presentation at the Business Growth and Employment Summit
- World Children's Day – Sandwell Goes UNICEF UK Blue

(priority themes **Communication, Culture, Co-operation & Leadership**)

A number of activities have taken place to socialise the Child Friendly Sandwell programme with schools and education providers including attendance at school council meetings, presentations to both the primary, secondary and SEND headteachers partnerships and representation on the Learning Community meetings to ensure our education leads are kept updated on direction of travel and

working with our Rights Respecting Schools to identify how we can support other schools and share good practice.

Specific programmes of work have been focused on supporting the views of our most underrepresented communities including.

- Work with the Urban Rooms Project supporting our early years voices to be heard.

(priorities themes identified **Family & Belonging, Place, Equal and Included**)

- Presenting at the Corporate Parenting Week events and attending the Voices Heard events supporting our care experienced children and young people.

(priorities themes identified **Family & Belonging, Safe and Secure, Equal and Included**)

- Work with Sandwell Cultural Education Partnership and the My Place Project in Primary schools across Sandwell which explored place making and the hyper local environment through the lens of storytelling.

(priorities themes identified **Family & Belonging, Place, Equal and Included**)

- Work with our SEND Specialist Holiday Activities and Food providers to capture the voices and experiences of our children and young people who require different types of support to engage.

(priorities themes identified **Family & Belonging, Safe and Secure, Equal and Included**)

The Discovery Phase culminated in our Children's Discovery Day on March 30 attended by over 66 children and young people from across Sandwell, council officers, partners, senior leaders and our elected members. It was a day packed full of conversation, discussion and challenge and it presented us with an opportunity to reflect with the children and young people present in the space on the previous 6 months findings and sense check as to whether this was a good indicator of the emerging themes which included contributions from participants who worked with our remote packs and fed back their insights relating to priority theme choices.

(priorities themes identified **Family & Belonging, Safe & Secure, Equal and Included**)

Through the Discovery Phase we actively worked face to face with 2650 children and young people and talked to over 80 partners organisations and upskilled approx. 117 people in a child's rights-based approach and introductions to child friendly practices.

The Discovery Phase also involved a thorough assessment of how well children's rights are currently being respected and promoted within Sandwell. This included evaluating areas such as education, health, safety, and participation and identifying gaps and areas for improvement.

Improving opportunities and outcomes for children and young people, including those with SEND and those cared for by the local authority, is a key priority in the Council Plan 2024-2027. Support to children and young people was identified as the most important area of the Council's Corporate Plan in the 2023 Budget Consultation, and this is reflected in the updated Council Plan and related programmes of work.

The Sandwell JSNA focuses on **child protection** and **safety, health and wellbeing**, and **education and learning** as priority outcome areas for children and young people; this is consistent with the priority themes identified by partners as focus areas. However, a limitation of some of the activities was that there was some uncertainty around where people felt certain themes belonged within specific categories, as there is considerable overlap and some flexibility in interpretation with regards to the specific areas of focus.

Considering the types of evidence and indicators that could be included against each of the priority themes, and the overlap between them, it was clear that some areas aligned more with priority outcomes identified through the JSNA and departmental business planning, and others with processes or the mechanisms by which the outcomes could be achieved. The three identified priority themes linked to the JSNA and our strategic priorities (**Safe & Secure, Education & Learning and Healthy**) all have very clear outcomes associated with them, e.g. reduced infant mortality and improved educational attainment, and improving these outcomes is the longer-term aim of the programme.

The three core priority themes (**Culture, Communication and Co-operation & Leadership**) are more aligned with the mechanisms of action, e.g. increasing youth participation in decision-making processes. **Equal & Included** has been identified by professionals as the 'golden thread' that runs throughout the programme, as it should be embedded at all stages from action planning to delivery and should also be demonstrated in the outcomes. However, children and young people have very different opinions and feel strongly that **Equal & Included** has significant importance and should remain a priority theme maintaining its own identity.

The main strength of this baselining report is the comprehensiveness of quantitative and qualitative data on issues affecting children, drawing on a range of sources including the JSNA, SHAPE Survey, Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) and Poverty Proofing report. The child voice is integral to the SHAPE, PSA and Poverty Proofing work and has therefore informed its conclusions and recommendations. In addition, the internal Child Rights Workforce Survey and Discovery Phase activity have enabled us to gauge understanding of child rights and key priorities across the system, building consensus based on local intelligence and experience.

Existing systems and partnerships for engagement and participation provide a range of opportunities for children and young people to have a voice in decisions that affect them, including through our SHAPE programme. However, there is still work to be done to widen participation and inclusion across our six towns, particularly among underrepresented groups.

The Child Rights Workforce Survey showed that professionals across Council directorates and partner services generally value and understand the importance of children's rights, even where they do not routinely work with children. Despite relatively few survey respondents having received training on children's rights or the UNCRC, the majority felt that children should be heard and included in decisions that affect them, and that this leads to better outcomes. There was less clarity in how this translated to practice, with fewer people seeing the relevance to their own work or feeling that this was reflected in organisational culture and decision-making. This may be due to people not having direct involvement with children or child-specific issues in their roles, particularly in areas with a more corporate or environmental focus. However, there may also be barriers to implementing a child-rights based approach which need to be explored further, particularly in relation to strategy development and decision-making processes.

Strengthening understanding of children's rights across the organisation and wider system and raising the profile of our Child Friendly Borough programme through our senior leaders, elected members and anchor institutions, may help to integrate consideration of child rights across a wide range of workstreams and partnerships.

Strengthening our child friendly approach requires working across the whole organisation and wider system to ensure all our residents have the best possible start in life, opportunities to reach their full potential, and support to live safe, healthy and fulfilled lives. This is reflected in our Council Plan 2024-2027 and shows how a Child Friendly Sandwell builds the foundations for lasting benefits across the life course, not just in childhood.

The areas identified as priority themes through the Discovery Phase are aligned but not consistent with the key areas of focus in the Sandwell JSNA. Feedback from direct engagement with children and young people, including the SHAPE survey and Play Sufficiency Assessment, and the wider Discovery Phase activity provides further insight into wider issues and how existing provision and support can be improved.

In reviewing the supporting evidence, through conversations held with partners, and children, young people families and communities it is recognised that there is considerable overlap both in terms of outcomes that cut across areas, and activities reflecting different stages of a process.

Based on the evidence reviewed, it is recommended that:

- **Safe & Secure, Equal and Included** and **Family and Belonging** are the priority themes we focus on in terms of programme outcomes.
- **Education and Learning** and **Healthy** should be considered when determining the outcomes framework that runs throughout the Child Friendly Sandwell Programme.
- The three core priority themes (**Culture, Communication** and **Co-Operation & Leadership**) focus on the mechanisms by which the outcomes are achieved.
- Links and overlaps with other themes are acknowledged, particularly where those elements facilitate the outcomes we are aiming to achieve.
- The Action Plan is accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation framework based on a logic model, which shows clearly how the programme inputs (actions) lead to improved outcomes over the short-, medium- and long-term.
- Further stakeholder engagement is carried out to develop a shared understanding of programme parameters and key terms to inform the Action Plan – including ensuring that co-production, engagement and participation are clearly defined and appropriately applied.
- Existing structures for co-production, engagement and participation are widened to increase reach and representation across our diverse communities, linking with NIHR HDRC Sandwell's Community Participation workstream.
- Strengthening links and partnership working across agencies and pathways, including supporting young people through education and into employment.

- Improving collection and reporting of data and intelligence to identify needs and outcomes for underrepresented groups, e.g. those who are neurodivergent.
- Ensuring that child rights and child friendly outcomes are embedded into strategies, business plans and wider service delivery.

Sandwell boasts a number of strengths that can be leveraged to strengthen our child-friendly approach, including a strong sense of community spirit, a commitment from the local authority and leaders, an enthusiasm from our children and young people to be involved and a network of trusted organisations working towards improving the wellbeing of children and it has also identified numerous opportunities for improvement. These include the potential to enhance collaboration between different stakeholders, the implementation of child-rights-based approaches in local policies, and the creation of more inclusive and participatory spaces for children and young people.

The success of the Child Friendly Sandwell programme depends heavily on the continued involvement and support of the community. Ongoing engagement with stakeholders will be essential to ensure that the initiatives and interventions are relevant, effective, and sustainable.

Following the Discovery Phase, Sandwell's Child Friendly programme will move into the planning and implementation stages. This involves developing a detailed action plan based on the findings from the Discovery Phase. The action plan will outline specific steps and strategies to address the identified challenges and capitalise on the opportunities for improvement. There is an expectation that we develop our action plan across all domains but importantly children, young people, families and communities should be integral to developing an agreed set of outcomes which we work towards throughout the delivery phase.

This report has been informed and supported by the Discovery Phase – Baseline Review of Supporting Evidence undertaken in collaboration with Research Sandwell, the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Sandwell and service areas from across the council.

Thank you to all involved in supporting our Child Friendly journey to date:

## Appendix 1 - Engagement

### Partners Discovery Event - Representation

Cabinet Member for Children and Education – Cllr Jalal Uddin

Deputy Leader of the Council – Cllr Suzanne Hartwell

Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care- Cllr Jackie Taylor

Cllr Gill

Integrated Care Board NHS

Grove Vale Primary School

West Midlands Police

Sandwell Asian Family Support Service

Riverside Housing

Kaleidoscope Plus

Black Country Women's Aid

Health Watch Sandwell

Barnardo's

Sandwell Parents Voices United

North Smethwick Development Trust

Kids West Midlands

UNICEF UK CFCC

Murray Hall Community Trust

Senior Council Officers

SIPs

Black Country YMCA

Sporting Your Futures CiC

Department for Works and Pensions

Powered by CAN

Brushstrokes Sandwell

Papyrus

Sandwell Council for Voluntary Orgs

Sandwell Children's Trust

Ideal for All

Sandwell College

Sandwell Leisure Trust

The Albion Foundation

### UK Parliament Week - Representation

Leader of Sandwell Council – Cllr Kerrie Carmichael

Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources – Cllr Paul Moore

Cabinet Member for Children and Education – Cllr Jalal Uddin  
 The worshipful Mayor of Sandwell Council – Cllr Saeeda Khatun MBE  
 MP for West Bromwich – Sarah Coombes  
 UK Youth Parliament Members  
 The Sergeant at Arms  
 West Midlands Police  
 SHAPE Youth Forum  
 Perryfields Academy  
 Sandwell Transition Education Partnership (STEPS)  
 Burntree Primary School  
 King George V Primary School

Sandwell Youth Crime Commissioner  
 Sandwell Council Senior Leadership Team  
 Wood Green Academy  
 Shireland Biomedical UTC  
 Sandwell Community School  
 Holy Trinity CofE Primary School  
 Ormiston Forge Academy  
 Hanbury Primary School

#### **My Place Project – Representation**

Steven Camden aka Polarbear  
 Brickhouse Primary School  
 Highfields Primary School  
 Redall Hill Primary School  
 Sandwell Cultural Education Partnership

Zakariya Abdillahi  
 Causeway Green Primary School  
 Galton Valley Primary School  
 Blackheath Primary School

#### **Urban Rooms Collaboration – Representation**

Local families and community members  
 Barnardo's  
 University of Aston

Bearwood Community Hub  
 Sandwell Library Service  
 West Midlands Combined Authority

#### **Introduction to Children's Rights - Representation**

Sandwell Children's Trust  
 West Bromwich Basketball  
 Black Country YMCA  
 Sandwell Council for voluntary Orgs  
 Barnardo's  
 Powered by CAN  
 Papyrus  
 Shireland Academy

Sandwell Council Officers  
 Sporting Your Futures  
 Kaleidoscope Plus  
 The Albion Foundation  
 Sandwell Leisure Trust  
 Health Watch  
 Ormiston Forge Academy

#### **Children's Discovery Day – Representation**

Leader of Sandwell Council – Cllr Kerrie Carmichael  
 Deputy Leader of the Council – Cllr Suzanne Hartwell  
 Cabinet Member for Children and Education – Cllr Jalal Uddin  
 The worshipful Mayor – Cllr Saeeda Khatun  
 Cllr Vicki Smith  
 Director of Children and Education Services – Sally Giles  
 Assistant Chief Executive Officer- James McLaughlin  
 Al Kahir Primary School  
 Elm Tree Academy  
 Springfield Primary School  
 Grove Vale Primary School  
 Senior Council Officers  
 Barnardo's  
 Sandwell Parents of Disabled Children

STEPS Centre  
 Meadows School  
 Albright Education Centre  
 Joseph Turner Primary School  
 SIPS Education  
 Powered by CAN  
 West Midlands Police

#### **Remote Participation Packs**

Wood Green Academy  
 Ormiston Forge Academy  
 Harvills Hawthorn Primary School  
 The Westminster School  
 Ground Works West Midlands

Holy Trinity Primary School  
 Rood End Primary School  
 Lyng Primary School  
 Powered by CAN  
 Voice of Sandwell

#### **Baseline Evidence Analysis Sources**

SHAPE Survey 2024  
 Play Sufficiency Research Assessment 2025  
 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment CYP  
 SHAPE Primary and Secondary Conferences  
 21<sup>st</sup> Paving the Way Briefing

Make Your Mark Survey 2024  
 Holiday Activity and Food Impact Report  
 School Health Nursing Service Consultation  
 Poverty Proofing Evaluation

## Appendix 2 - Local strategic context

Our ambition to achieve UNICEF UK recognised Child Friendly Status within three Years is integral to the [Sandwell Council Plan 2024-2027](#). *Growing Up in Sandwell* is a key priority that focuses on improving opportunities and outcomes for local children, with the following objectives:

1. Children and young people are given the best start in life and are well prepared for school.
2. Children and young people make good progress at school from preschool to when they leave school age 16 – ambition to reach national standard.
3. Children and young people have good levels of attendance at school.
4. Children and young people in Sandwell are able to grow up in a safe, stable loving home.
5. Children and young people are supported to lead happy and healthy lives with access to a range of opportunities for positive activities, play and having fun.
6. Children, young people and their families receive the right support, in the right place, at the right time.
7. All children and young people have the same opportunities to achieve their full potential and are supported by adults, including parents and carers, to establish high aspirations.
8. Children and young people have the right skills and support to take the next step in their life and are well prepared for adulthood.

### Corporate Parenting

The [Corporate Parenting Strategy 2020-2023](#) (refresh 2025- 2027 pending) outlines how the council and its partners will improve the outcomes for looked after children and care leavers and ensure they have positive experiences across a range of services.

### Other relevant strategies

[Sandwell Local Area Partnership Inclusion \(SEND and Alternative Provision\) Plan 2023-2026](#)

***Children and Families Strategic Plan 2025 – 2028***

Publication pending

[Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-2030](#)

[Sandwell Borough of Sanctuary](#)

[Sandwell Better Mental Health Strategy 2024-2029](#) . It incorporates the [Sandwell Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan](#), which includes actions specific to children and young people.