

Minutes of Cabinet

Wednesday, 10 December 2025 at 3.30 pm at Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Freeth Street, Oldbury, B69 3DB

Present: Councillor Carmichael (Chair)

Councillors: Allcock Bhullar Hartwell Hughes	Councillors: Smith Taylor Uddin
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In attendance: Councillors Jeffcoat and J Singh.

Officers: Shokat Lal (Chief Executive); James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive); Alex Thompson (Executive Director – Finance and Transformation); Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place); Rashpal Bishop (Executive Director Adult Social Care and Health); Mike Jones (Monitoring Officer, Service Director – Governance); Julie Andrews (Assistant Director - Education Services); Andy Thorpe (Healthy Urban Development Officer); Matt More (Head of Communications); Maria Jardine (Policy Adviser); Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager) and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

112/25 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Moore and Khatun.

113/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

114/25 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2025 are approved as a correct record.

115/25 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

Cabinet received the forecast outturn position for the 2025/2026 financial year for both revenue and capital budgets, as of 30 September 2025. Approval was also sought for:-

- the increase to fees and charges relating to discretionary services provided by Registration Services;
- the addition of £1.500m new Pride in Place Impact Fund budget to be added to the General Fund capital programme;
- additional budget of £27.718m for new build schemes to be added into the Housing Revenue Account capital programme.

Section 151 of the 1972 Local Government Act required the Chief Financial Officer to ensure the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs. Budgetary control, which included the regular monitoring and reporting of budgets, was an essential element in discharging this statutory responsibility. The reporting and analysis of financial performance versus budget supported the financial sustainability of the council.

Reason for Decision

The General Fund had a gross budget of £821.682m and a net budget of £365.784m. The overall forecast outturn position for the General Fund, as at Quarter 2, was an underspend of (£0.101m). This was a forecast underspend of 0.01% when compared with net budget. This forecast outturn position excluded ringfenced budgets for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and Housing Revenue Account (HRA), where variations were managed through ringfenced reserves without impacting on the General Fund. The forecast outturn position also excluded the financial position of the Sandwell Children's Trust, which was a separate legal entity, although wholly owned by the Council.

The Council's net budget of £365.784m was split between directorate budgets of £337.951m, that directly delivered Council services, and centrally held corporate budgets of £27.833m, that relate to council-wide matters such as investments and borrowing. In relation to directorate budgets, there was a forecast overspend of £0.590m, following the use of reserves.

Separately from the General Fund, the HRA had a gross budget of £157.023m and a net budget of nil. The position for the HRA was forecast additional net expenditure of £2.317m, which was affordable and which would be offset in full by a contribution from HRA reserves.

The DSG had a gross budget of £290.911m and a net budget of nil. The position for the DSG was a forecast overspend of £6.593m, £2.696m of which would be offset by DSG reserves, which would therefore result in a deficit balance for the DSG and for the High Needs Block specifically.

In order to return Sandwell Children's Trust to a financially stable position without any residual deficit, on 4 November 2025, Full Council approved a revised contract sum to be paid to the Trust within this financial year, resulting in additional payments in comparison with the budget available within the Children and Education directorate.

Alternative Options Considered

There were no alternative options to consider.

Resolved:-

- (1) that ratification is given to the financial monitoring position as at 30 September 2025 (Quarter 2) and refer the report to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board for consideration and comment;
- (2) that approval is given to the increases to fees and charges relating to discretionary services provided by Registration Services, as set out in Appendix 9;
- (3) that approval is given for the addition of £1.500m new Pride in Place Impact Fund budget to be added to the General Fund capital programme, profiled across the 2025/26 and 2026/27 financial years, following notification from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) of corresponding grant funding to be received by the Council;
- (4) that approval is given for additional budget of £27.718m for new build schemes to be added into the Housing Revenue Account capital programme, profiled across the financial years 2025/26 to 2029/30, to be funded from 'right to buy' receipts, following the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) announcement in July 2025 that extended indefinitely the 'right to buy' receipt flexibilities originally announced in July 2024.

117/25 Council Tax Base 2026/2027

Approval was sought for the proposed Council Tax Base increase for 2026/2027. The Council Tax Base was an assessment by each billing authority of the number of chargeable dwellings, converted to Band D equivalents (the average band), allowing for discounts, exemptions, non-collection, and new properties. This information was used when setting the Council's budget.

The Council Tax Base was required to be calculated in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012. It was used to determine the annual amount of collectable Council Tax.

Reason for Decision

The regulations set out the methodology to be used by authorities when calculating their Council Tax Base. They further dictated that the Council Tax Base should be set between 1 December and 31 January prior to the financial year to which it refers.

To calculate the Council Tax Base, it was necessary to take the actual number of properties in each Council Tax band on the valuation list and then adjust the number based on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. In addition, assumptions need to be made for changes in the number of properties in each

band between now and 31 March 2026 because of new builds and demolitions. The adjusted numbers in each band were then converted to the equivalent number of Band D properties.

Sandwell's Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme had no proposed changes for the 2026-2027 financial year. The Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme was amended from 2025-2026 and introduced several changes including:

- a 15% minimum contribution from all working age applicants except for those in a household with a child of 5 years or younger;
- the maximum entitlement was now calculated against the charge for a band B property.

The Council Tax Base for 2026/27 had been calculated as 83,573.4. However, the Council Tax Base must be reduced to reflect any anticipated losses on collection.

Due to the ongoing impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the introduction of a minimum payment for working age residents who received Council Tax Reduction, it was assumed that, as in 2025/26, a collection rate of 97.9% would ultimately be achieved.

For 2025/26, the Council Tax Base was 80,364.3, based on a 97.9% collection rate. The Council Tax Base for 2026/27 had increased by 1.81% and this was due to the additional number of properties from development within the borough but also the increased Council Tax to collect due to the previous change to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Alternative Options Considered

There were no alternative options to consider.

Resolved:-

- (1) that approval is given to the Council Tax Base for 2026/27 be set at 81,818.4 (Band D equivalents);
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director of Finance and Transformation to adjust the Council Tax Base if required following decision on the 2026/27 Council Tax Reduction Scheme by Full Council.

118/25

Review of Council Tenant Rent and Housing Related Property Charges

Approval was sought to implement adjustments to Council rents and housing related charges with effect from 6 April 2026, including implementing rent convergence as set out by Government, following endorsement by Full Council at its meeting on 9 December 2025.

On 30 October 2024, the Government announced their commitment of at least a 5-year rent settlement from April 2026, following consultation with housing providers. At the Cabinet meeting held on 4 December 2024, Cabinet approved that rent and housing related charges in subsequent years would be set in line

with the Rent Standard and Policy Statement on Rents for Social Housing for at least five years from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2026, and rolling five years thereafter.

Reason for Decision

Each year Council tenants, leaseholders and other residents were notified of the rent and other related housing charges to be set from the following April.

The Council must achieve the right balance between supporting tenants to mitigate the continued cost of living pressures and protecting the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to ensure the Council can continue to provide affordable social housing for our residents.

On 30 June 2025, the Government announced a 10-year social housing rent settlement from April 2026 at Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) +1%.

Alongside the 10-year rent settlement, the Government announced consultation would follow on how to implement Rent Convergence to bring all social rents into line with a standard formula rent creating greater fairness for tenants.

The Rent Convergence consultation ended on 27 August 2025. The key choices the Government sought views on was to increase rent each year by £1 or £2 over and above CPI+1% limit and the length of time of convergence.

The outcome of the consultation was expected to be announced on 26 November 2025 in the Government Autumn Budget. Details would be announced by Government in January 2026.

Alternative Options

An alternative would be not to apply or delay implementation of rent convergence in addition to CPI+1%.

Resolved:-

- (1) that following approval by Full Council at its meeting of 9 December 2025, that approval is given to the implementation of the following actions:-
 - (a) authorise the Executive Director - Place to adjust council rents and housing related charges with effect from 6 April 2026;
 - (b) increase housing rents by CPI+1%, equivalent to a 4.8% increase, and in addition, where required, implement the maximum Rent Convergence as set by Government from 6 April 2026 and subsequent years, until formula rent is achieved with details to be announced by Government in January 2026;
 - (c) increase the housing service charges by CPI+1%, equivalent to a 4.8% increase;

- (d) increase fees at CPI (announced in month proceeding variation notice being issued) at the traveller's pitch in Hill View, Tipton, in consultation with residents of the site, in line with Legislation on Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees Act 2023);
- (e) increase rent and service charges on properties that sit outside the Housing Revenue Account (including service tenants for Parks, Sandwell Valley and Caretaking). Rental increase of CPI+1% and service charges by CPI+1%;
- (f) increase the leaseholder annual management fee by CPI+1% from £167.13 to £175.15;
- (g) authorise the Executive Director - Place to implement the maximum rent convergence for the next rent period, and all subsequent years, until formula rent is achieved with an announcement of the decision on Rent Convergence deferred by Government to January 2026.

119/25 **Integrated Housing Management System (IHMS)**

Approval was sought to procure and award a contract for a new integrated Housing Management software solution. The new software solution would allow the Council as a regulated provider of social housing, to satisfy the requirements of Regulator of Social Housing and resolve operational limitations in existing systems.

Reason for Decision

The Building Safety Regulator (BSR) and the Regulator of Social Housing (RSR) had made significant changes to the way landlords were required to build, manage and maintain properties, engage with tenants, maintain digital records, and report compliance and performance.

As a landlord, a failure by the Council to comply with the BSR was a criminal offence and the Council risked enforcement. Non-compliance with these landlord requirements was an offence. Responsibility sat with individual officers and a newly created concept of the 'Accountable Persons' who would assume responsibility for the safety of high-rise buildings.

As a registered provider of social housing, the Council was required to establish the systems, data accuracy, and the effective and efficient processes needed to ensure compliance with these regulatory requirements.

It was not currently possible for the Council to be fully compliant with the regulatory framework, without having comprehensive asset management and compliance management systems, and high-quality up-to-date stock condition data. Procurement of an integrated Housing Management system procurement sought to address system gaps and weaknesses.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 – Continue with existing systems. This was discounted for several reasons, including:

- Legacy Housing Management System (reaching end of life)
- Lack of a Compliance Management System (commitment to RSH to procure and implement)
- Lack of an Asset Management System (commitment to RSH to Procure and implement)
- Legacy Repairs Management System (opportunity to consider as an integrated part of IHMS, rather than a standalone system)

Resolved:-

- (1) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Place, in consultation with the Executive Director - Finance and Transformation, the Service Director – Governance (Monitoring Officer) and the Cabinet Member for Housing, to undertake an appropriate competitive procurement exercise for the provision of an integrated Housing Management System;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Service Director – Governance (Monitoring Officer) in consultation with the Executive Director - Place and the Executive Director - Finance and Transformation to prepare and publish all necessary procurement and tender documentation under the Competitive Flexible Procedure under the Procurement Act 2023;
- (3) that a further report is submitted on conclusion of the procurement exercise for an integrated Housing Management System setting out the evaluation of tenders and making recommendations for the award of contract.

120/25

Award a Contract for Superimposed Road Markings, Specialist Surfacing and Studs

Approval was sought for the award of a contract for superimposed road markings, specialist surfacing and studs following completion of a compliant and competitive tender process. The tender process would be undertaken in collaboration with Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and City of Wolverhampton Council, which would support general maintenance of new and existing road markings around Sandwell, with all authorities benefiting from economies of scale and reduced tendering costs.

Reason for Decision

Road users and the wider community placed a high value on keeping traffic moving safely around Sandwell. Ensuring road markings were visible and understandable was vital for road safety. They communicate important information to road users, help them safely navigate the road network and highlight upcoming hazards. Failure to adequately maintain road markings

could result in accidents, avoidable congestion, consequent adverse economic and social impacts, public dissatisfaction and significant reputational damage.

As the Local Highway Authority, the Council had a statutory duty to ensure the road was maintained in a safe and useable manner. To meet this duty, routine maintenance of road markings was undertaken across Sandwell. This incorporated both general road markings and those road markings which enforced legal restrictions such as double yellow lines and red routes.

The road marking contract was also used for the installation of advisory spaces for disabled badge holders which were vital assistance for some residents.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 – Procure and award a contract solely for Sandwell Council. Each of the three participating authorities had similar requirements and needed in place contractual arrangements for these activities. Procuring and awarding a contract individually would be less efficient and likely lead to less advantageous commercial terms. This option was dismissed.

Resolved:-

- (1) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director – Place to award a four-year contract for the provision of Road Markings, Specialist Surfacing and Studs for general maintenance of new and existing road markings around Sandwell;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Service Director – Governance (Monitoring Officer) to execute any documentation and taken any actions necessary to give effect to delegations granted at Resolution (1) above.

121/25 Black Country Highways Works Framework 2026 - 2030

Approval was sought to participate in the procurement of a new Black Country Highways Works Framework (2026 – 2030) in collaboration with Transport for West Midlands, City of Wolverhampton Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council.

Reason for Decision

The benefits derived from the procurement of this regional Framework Contract would include delivery of projects necessary to improve the highway network and provide road safety measures in a cost effective, timely and efficient manner.

All participants in this framework contract would be able to achieve costs savings and additional benefits through the reduction in tendering costs, reduced contract administration and securing of social value benefits.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 – Not to establish a Highways Works Framework Contract. Without a current Highways Works framework contract to enable quick and efficient use of contractors to undertake programmes of work, each project would require separate costly and timely tendering and individual procurement processes. In

addition, Highway Services would need to utilise elements of other less suited framework contracts for urgent service provision. This would inevitably lead to long delays in delivering safety and infrastructure improvement projects, increased costs and potential reputational harm.

Resolved:-

- (1) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Place to enter a Joining Agreement to use the new Black Country Highways Works Framework (2026 -2030) on completion of the tender evaluations and the awarded contracts on each Lot, for the sum of £12.5m per year for period of up to 4 years from 17 January 2026 to 16 January 2030;
- (2) that the Service Director - Governance (Monitoring Officer) is authorised to execute any documents necessary to give effect to Resolution (1) above.

122/25 A34 Sprint Bus Rapid Transit Phase 2

Approval was sought for the A34 Sprint Bus Rapid Transit Phase 2 works within Sandwell which was conditional on a park and ride site at Great Barr being agreed with Transport for West Midlands and dedicated Sprint buses being ordered by Transport for West Midlands for use on the route.

West Midlands Combined Authority had committed to a fleet of zero emission, articulated vehicles being introduced to the route once Phase 2 was complete. However, it had subsequently agreed between Sandwell and Transport for West Midlands that the park and ride element would not go ahead.

Reason for Decision

On 18 March 2022, West Midlands Combined Authority Board had approved a sum of £30.6m CRSTS allocation for the delivery of Phase 2 of the A34 Walsall to Birmingham Sprint scheme. Phase 2 of the Sprint scheme and associated buses and ticketing was to be funded by West Midlands Combined Authority and would be delivered using Transport for City Regions funding. No capital funding was sought from Sandwell to implement the scheme.

Phase 2 of the Sprint bus rapid transport service on the A34 in Sandwell included the following priority measures:

- Widening/reconstruction of the existing footway into an existing bus layby
- Carriageway reconstruction at bus stops
- Drainage, signing, lining and lighting works
- New bus shelter infrastructure, including real time information (RTI) and CCTV coverage.
- Relocation of Merrion's Close inbound stop
- Relocation of Merrion's Close outbound stop
- Removal of Scott Road outbound stop
- Removal of Cross Lane inbound stop

Approval for phase 2 of the scheme was being coordinated with Transport for West Midlands and Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council to ensure that the information entered the public domain at the same time.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 – Not to proceed with the Phase 2 works. Sprint A34 Phase 1 was completed in June 2022. Delivery of Phase 2 would complete the Sprint project. Whilst the option existed to not proceed with the phase 2 works, this would result in the full benefits of the Sprint project not being realised.

Resolved:-

- (1) that approval is given for elements of the A34 Sprint Bus Rapid Scheme, Phase 2 within Sandwell as detailed in Appendix 2;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Service Director – Governance (Monitoring Officer), in consultation with the Service Director – Economy and Regeneration to enter into the agreement with the West Midlands Combined Authority under Section 8 and 278 of the Highways Act 1980 for the purposes of delivering the A34 Sprint Bus Rapid Transit scheme, Phase 2.

123/25

Regeneration Pipeline Performance

Approval was sought to the Regeneration Project Pipeline. On 23 March 2022, Cabinet approved the Regeneration Strategy, Regeneration Project Pipeline, setting out the corporate regeneration priorities for the period 2022 to 2027.

Reason for Decision

The pipeline was a live document, and Cabinet resolved for it to be monitored every 6 months. The last report was considered on 25 June 2025. In addition, Cabinet had resolved that approval be sought to make additions to the project pipeline.

The regeneration project pipeline, as of December 2025, comprised of 65 live projects, in addition to the 21 projects that were complete, bringing the estimated total investment value to £3bn by 2027 and total number of projects to 86.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 – to seek Cabinet approval for the Local Regeneration Fund Memorandum of Understanding. This approach would lengthen the approval process and delay implementation of the Local Regeneration Fund. Delegating authority to Chief Officers and the Cabinet Member provided a more efficient route and supported timely decision-making. This option was dismissed to enable prompt approval and delivery of the fund arrangements.

Option 2 – to not add the Ocker Hill Academy project to the Regeneration Pipeline. Excluding the project would mean the associated investment in Sandwell would not be formally recorded, monitored, or tracked alongside other strategic regeneration initiatives. This would reduce oversight of delivery and limit the Council's ability to align the project with wider regeneration priorities.

This option was dismissed to ensure the project was effectively monitored and integrated within the Council's broader regeneration programme.

Resolved:-

- (1) that an endorsement is given for the performance of the Regeneration Pipeline Programme;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Place, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Infrastructure, to add the Ocker Hill Academy project onto the Regeneration Pipeline, a scheme within the Department of Education (DfE) Schools Rebuilding Programme;
- (3) that delegated authority is given to the Monitoring Officer, Service Director - Governance in consultation with the Executive Director - Place, the Executive Director - Finance and Transformation (S.151 Officer), and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Infrastructure, to review and formally accept the Local Regeneration Fund Memorandum of Understanding from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

124/25 Devolved Retrofit Pilot

Approval was sought for the Council to secure funding from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) for a devolved retrofit pilot. The scheme provided funding for the implementation of retrofit energy efficiency measures to the Council's housing stock, private homes and to public buildings.

Reason for Decision

This grant-funded opportunity represented a significant step towards improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions across Sandwell's housing stock and public buildings. By strategically selecting eligible properties/households, utilising smart technology, and leveraging WMCA's expertise, the Council could deliver a cost-effective retrofit solution that would benefit both residents and the environment.

WMCA had worked with constituent local authorities and the government's Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to secure a better deal for the West Midlands in terms of accessibility to grant funding for energy-efficiency work.

Funding had been secured and proportioned to constituent local authorities based on perceived need. Properties in scope were eligible council homes, private homes (including rented) and public buildings.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 – decline opportunity to access Devolved Retrofit Pilot funding. This option would have several implications for wider activities.

Option 2 – Wait for alternative government funding. This option would have several implications for wider activities.

Resolved:-

- (1) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Place in consultation with the Executive Director - Finance and Transformation and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Infrastructure, to:
 - (a) use an evidence-based approach to prepare suitable projects eligible for Devolved Retrofit Pilot grant funding;
 - (b) submit Stage 2 bids to West Midlands Combined Authority for energy-efficiency improvements to designated council homes, private homes and public buildings;
 - (c) in consultation with the Service Director – Governance (Monitoring Officer), enter into a formal grant agreement with the West Midlands Combined Authority in relation to Devolved Retrofit Pilot Initiative resources;
 - (d) submit further Stage 1 and Stage 2 bids, to secure funding derived from any available unused allocations as appropriate;
 - (e) prepare tender documentation and conduct appropriate procurement processes, to award the required delivery contracts, following formal approval of allocated budget in the 2026/2027 MTF, in accordance with the Procurement Act 2023 and the Council's Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules, in relation to the Housing Revenue account Repairs and Maintenance service;
 - (f) enter into or execute under seal any documentation in relation to the award of the contract and/or development/partnership agreement with the properly procured contractor from current Buildings Maintenance tender for the delivery of any works associated with and in accordance with the Devolved Retrofit Pilot funding agreement;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Finance and Transformation to identify and commit Council funds to act as the Council's match funding contribution towards any projects undertaken, up to a limit of £11.761m;
- (3) that delegated authority is given to the Service Director - Governance (Monitoring Officer) to complete all necessary documents to give effect to Resolution (1) and (2) above.

Use of Water Billing Framework

Approval was sought to use the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO) water framework to appoint Anglian Water Business (National) Ltd (T/A Wave) to provide the billing and other ancillary services within the framework for four years commencing from January 2026. This would improve the Council's management of water, sewerage and drainage leading to benefits such as reduced costs, improved officer efficiency and access to additional related services.

Reason for Decision

The cost of water and wastewater for the corporate estate (excluding schools and leisure centres) was estimated at £700 000/yr. Whilst the costs for fresh water and wastewater were fixed and set by OFWAT, there were opportunities to reduce management and administration costs by changing supplier.

Use of the ESPO framework would provide an estimated 5% or £35,000/yr saving across the corporate state, based upon a sample of corporate buildings estimated spend for 2025/26.

Use of the ESPO Framework would allow the authority to benefit from reduced prices and increased oversight by being part of a larger purchasing group with other local authorities. Central management of invoices would mean the Council would appoint a dedicated account manager, leading to improved response times and accountability from providers.

Invoices for water were currently paid by individual sites, leading to uncertainty over the cost, usage and management of water as a utility. Sites would often receive separate invoices for supply and waste leading to additional uncertainty. Use of the framework would support the move to 'consolidated billing' whereby the information from individual sites was still available, but it was consolidated into a single invoice for payment. This would increase the Council's understanding of water use and significantly reduce the amount of invoices being sent for processing.

Consolidated billing supported the transition to Corporate Landlord model of property management and would bring water in line with the management process for gas and electricity. This allowed for improved monitoring of cost, usage and identification of savings, in addition to enhancing knowledge of the Council's estates, reporting and budget setting opportunities. Use of the software to provide bill validation would help identify errors and potential savings through leaks.

The existing 'Systems Link' software used for the management gas/electricity use could be used to provide the same bill validation for water so the Council would not need to purchase new software.

Electricity and gas were also purchased under ESPO frameworks and use of the framework would provide synergy across the Council's utilities. Moving towards a single team managing the water invoices would improve query resolution as specialists resolve issues at a corporate level. The framework also offered additional paid-for services including leak detection and rectification and tariff review, for example surface water drainage banding.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 - Use a similar framework contract with Crown Commercial Services: Water, Wastewater and Ancillary Services 3 valid until 8 July 2028. This was also awarded to WAVE.

Option 2 - Leave the water invoicing 'as is' with individual sites managing the invoicing. This option however would not deliver anticipated benefits and efficiencies.

Option 3 - Run a Council own tender to appoint a provider directly. This would entail additional resources in developing the tender and wouldn't provide the support and economies of scale from being part of a larger, multi authority framework. There were also no guarantees of lower prices as with the reduced number of sites from a single client, costs may be higher.

Resolved:-

- (1) that delegated authority is given to the Service Director for Economy, Environment, and Infrastructure, in consultation with the Cabinet Members for Finance and Resources and Regeneration and infrastructure to approve a direct award from the 1181 Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO) Framework 1181_23 and appoint Anglian Water Business (National) Ltd (T/A Wave) to provide the billing and other ancillary services via the ESPO Water, Wastewater and Ancillary Services framework contract for four years commencing from January 2026;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Place to take such actions as necessary to allow for the management and invoicing for water meters being brought under the same 'consolidated billing' model as used for gas and electricity;
- (3) that the Service Director - Governance (Monitoring Officer) is authorised to complete all legal documentation in relation to Resolutions (1) and (2) above;
- (4) that approval is given to extend an offer for schools to be invited to join the framework once it is established for the corporate estate.

126/25 Sandwell Air Quality Action Plan

Approval was sought to adopt the Sandwell Air Quality Action Plan and its submission to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs following consultation.

The Air Quality Action Plan was produced as part of the Council's statutory duty to work towards Air Quality Strategy objectives as required by The Environment Act 1995 (Part IV) and to meet the requirements of the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) statutory process. Air pollution had been a longstanding

problem in Sandwell and in 2005, the Council declared a borough wide Air Quality Management Area.

Reason for Decision

The current Air Quality Action Plan was adopted by the Council on 23 March 2021 and subsequently accepted by Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Local Air Quality Management team. Ongoing monitoring and reporting, specific projects and educational and engagement campaigns/activities had taken place since it was adopted.

A draft updated Air Quality Action Plan was made available in late June 2025. Along with the consultants involved in developing the technical aspects of the update work, a steering group had informed the process of revealing the issues involved and determining potential courses of action to improve air quality. The range of actions was formally consulted upon between 11 August and 29 September 2025, therefore the draft Air Quality Action Plan was made available to the public and other stakeholders. The draft Air Quality Action Plan was also sent to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who responded with requests for minimal changes to be made to the document. Having now updated the Air Quality Action Plan in response to the public consultation, approval to adopt the Air Quality Action Plan was therefore being sought from Sandwell Council's Cabinet, along with its submission to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Alternative Options Considered

There were no alternative options as the Council had a statutory duty to have a Sandwell Air Quality Action Plan and was required to produce it using the process prescribed by Defra. The process involved a consultation exercise to ensure that the measures proposed in the Sandwell Air Quality Action Plan could be amended where necessary and were generally supported by stakeholders.

Resolved:-

- (1) that approval is given for the adoption of the Air Quality Action Plan;
- (2) that delegated authority is given to the Director of Public Health to submit the Air Quality Action Plan to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by 31 December 2025.

127/25

West Midlands Safe Centre

Approval was sought to progress the West Midlands Safe Centre project, including the proposed establishment of the most appropriate legal form of Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) to enable the construction and operation of the West Midlands Safe Centre on behalf of the West Midlands local authorities for public sector delivery of secure children services. Once delivered, the Safe Centre would be the first regionally owned secure children's home in the country, providing 20 secure welfare beds and high-quality care, health and education to local children, saving local authorities, including Sandwell, from

high-cost private care placements and reducing the use and cost of unregulated provision.

Reason for Decision

Secure children's homes were safe settings for children whose liberty was restricted, where they could be supported through trauma aware and psychologically informed integrated care, health and educational services. Secure children's homes supported highly vulnerable young people with complex needs, providing care, health, and education in a safe environment where their liberty was restricted. These children often faced multiple placement breakdowns, missed education, unresolved emotional and physical health issues, and significant trauma.

There was a national shortage of secure placements for these vulnerable children, as highlighted by Ofsted, with 50 children waiting for a secure welfare placement on any given day. A total of 15 Sandwell children were placed in secure welfare during the period 2019–2025 with several other children in unregulated provision due to lack of availability of secure welfare. The West Midlands had no dedicated regional provision creating pressure on the existing secure estate.

The West Midlands Safe Centre would be the first regionally owned secure children's home in the country, providing 20 secure welfare beds and high-quality care, health and education to local children, saving local authorities, including Sandwell, from high-cost private care placements and reducing the use and cost of unregulated provision.

Sandwell Children's Trust was responsible for delivering children's social care services and securing appropriate placements for the children we care for. Operating under the governance and oversight of Sandwell Council, the Trust worked in partnership with the local authority to ensure that vulnerable children and young people receive the support, protection, and care they need.

12 of the 14 West Midlands local authorities, (including Birmingham and Sandwell Children's Trusts), were currently committed in principle to joining and authorities involved would be taking a formal decision to progress this provision through their governance process from September – December 2025.

The set up of the West Midlands Safe Centre was entirely funded by the Department for Education (DfE) who had recognised the national shortage of secure welfare beds and the lack of provision within the West Midlands region. The DfE capital funding of £61.8m for construction and "Seed Funding" revenue grant of up to £8.4m had been secured.

Alternative Options Considered

Option 1 - Do nothing – This would not resolve the shortage of secure welfare care for the most vulnerable children in the West Midlands. Local authorities would continue to have to place vulnerable children at a significant distance from their local areas, away from their families and other networks. This option was therefore not recommended.

Option 2 - Proceed with the project and establish a structured SPV as a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) – Whilst this scored favourably in the

options appraisal, tax advice identified a potential VAT and corporation tax liability with a CLG. Whilst a CLG could seek tax exemptions, there would be no guarantee of this and there would be a risk of delay in securing HMRC confirmations or approvals, which could affect operational timelines, especially if the CLG was to act as an SPV for public service delivery, so this option was not considered beneficial at the writing of this report and may need to be revisited and reported by to the West Midlands Safe Centre Project Board for consideration.

Resolved:-

- (1) that subject to the completion of the legal due diligence work, the development of the West Midlands Safe Centre as set out in the business case that has been submitted to the Department for Education is endorsed;
- (2) that the proposed legal formation of a Special Purpose Vehicle, subject to the completion of the legal due diligence work is endorsed;
- (3) that approval is given to the arrangements for the Council to join the Special Purpose Vehicle and be part of a formal partnership for governance of the West Midlands Safe Centre with other West Midlands local authorities with a share proportion as set out in the report;
- (4) that further reports be submitted to Cabinet for approval prior to any action continuing the Council's participation in the Partnership Agreement at a revised share if insufficient local authority members sign up and the maximum Sandwell share of 8.83% is exceeded;
- (5) that approval is given in principle the proposed procurement approach and property arrangements for the operation of the West Midlands Safe Centre as set out in the supporting appendices;
- (6) that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director - Children and Education Services in conjunction with the Executive Director - Finance and Transformation (S.151 officer) and Service Director for Governance / Monitoring Officer (or their delegates), to undertake the following:
 - (a) complete the necessary due diligence required including but not limited to legal and tax due diligence arrangements; and
 - (b) thereafter to complete all necessary documents to give effect to the above recommendations. The delegation shall also include the power to do anything necessary, incidental or ancillary for the carrying into effect the recommendations set out in this report.

Meeting ended at 4.03pm