

**Safer Neighbourhoods and Active
Communities Scrutiny Board:**

Scrutiny Review of the Communities in our Borough

2024- 2026



Chair's Foreword:

Sandwell is one of the most diverse and vibrant boroughs in the country, with strong neighbourhood identities and a long history of community resilience.

However, the Summer 2024 riots which took place outside of Sandwell and the wider national context highlighted the need to strengthen cohesion, rebuild trust, and ensure that all residents feel connected, informed, and able to participate fully in civic life.

Members of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board recognised that bringing communities together requires more than isolated initiatives. It demands a coordinated, evidence-led approach that addresses language barriers, improves access to information, strengthens local assets, and creates opportunities for meaningful interaction across Sandwell's six towns.

This report summarises the extensive work undertaken by the working group, supported by officers and informed by residents, partners, and community organisations. The Board is grateful to all those who contributed their time, insight, and lived experience.



Councillor Ashley Lewis
Chair of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board



Working Group Lead Members:



Councillor Amardeep Singh
Lead Working Group Member



Councillor Richard Jeffcoat
Deputy- Lead Working Group Member

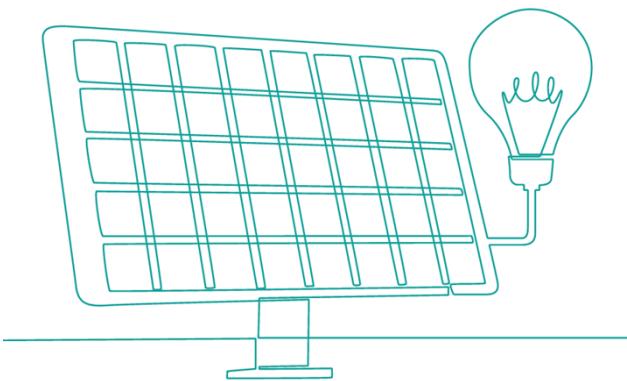


Links to the Council Plan:

Living in Sandwell



Thriving in Sandwell



The review directly supports the Council Plan by strengthening community cohesion, improving access to information, and ensuring all residents can participate fully in Sandwell's communities. By addressing language barriers, improving translation and interpretation, and creating clearer pathways into English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), the recommendations help make Sandwell a more connected and accessible borough.

Developing a Community Asset Map and promoting inclusive community events will contribute to strong, resilient communities by increasing visibility of local support, encouraging social mixing, and building trust between residents and services. These actions also support health and wellbeing by reducing isolation and improving access to community-based opportunities.

Finally, improving English language skills and strengthening community networks contribute to a strong and inclusive economy, helping residents access training, employment and progression. Together, the recommendations reinforce the Council's ambition for a cohesive, confident and thriving Sandwell.



Background and Context:

There is a strong evidence base demonstrating that cohesive, well-connected communities experience better outcomes across health, safety, education, and economic participation. Following the 2024 riots (none of which occurred in Sandwell), members identified a need to examine how Sandwell could strengthen cohesion, improve communication, and support residents to feel part of their local area.

The Interim Report of the Scrutiny Review into Communities Scrutiny Report, which was considered by the Board at its meeting in April 2025 identified four core themes:

- Intersectionality – recognising that residents hold multiple identities that shape their experiences.
- Local Identity – acknowledging the distinct character of Sandwell's six towns.
- National Best Practice – learning from councils such as Camden, Bradford, Rotherham and Stoke.
- Low Community Participation – particularly among groups facing language, trust, or access barriers.

The review sought to understand these issues through a combination of quantitative data, qualitative engagement, site visits, and comparative research.

Members also sought to understand the term “community cohesion” which had often been used broadly and inconsistently. Members agreed it was important to establish a clear and shared definition at the outset of the review.

Drawing on national frameworks, the working group understood “cohesion” as the strength of relationships and sense of belonging within communities, supported by participation in civic life and inclusion in access to information, services and opportunities.

Through the evidence gathered, members found that cohesion is strengthened when residents can communicate effectively with services, when trusted messengers help bridge gaps in engagement, and when local assets are visible, accessible and easy to navigate. Opportunities for communities to mix, celebrate and collaborate also play a vital role, as does ensuring that information is clear, consistent and available in multiple languages.



Barriers to cohesion:

Evidence gathered through the review highlighted several barriers:

- Language barriers limiting access to services, employment, and participation.
- Fragmented information about English for Speakers of Other Languages, community groups, and local support.
- Inconsistent translation and interpretation provision across Council services.
- Lack of a centralised map of community assets, making it difficult for residents and staff to navigate local support.
- Low civic participation in some areas, reflected in voter turnout and consultation engagement.
- Limited opportunities for social mixing, particularly across cultural groups.
- Trust deficits, where residents rely more on community figures than formal channels.

These barriers collectively reduce cohesion and increase the risk of misunderstanding, isolation, and disengagement.



Methodology:

The Scrutiny Review was conducted using a mixed- methodology approach to ensure that findings were robust, evidence based and rooted in the lived experience of Sandwell's communities. Members drew on both qualitative and quantitative sources, combining local insight with national best practice.

The scope of the inquiry was kept under review to agree themes to explore, analyse emerging evidence and refine recommendations. These meetings provided strategic oversight and ensured the review remained aligned with the Council Plan and the Board's priorities.

Desktop research was also conducted to ensure members could consider existing research, including national cohesion frameworks, academic literature and government guidance and case studies from analogous local authorities such as Stoke- on- Trent City Council, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council and Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. Local datasets were also included, such as Sandwell Trends and town profiles to understand demographical patterns, community engagement levels and barriers to close-knit communities.

Members held discussions with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders to gather insight from those working directly with residents. This included council services, voluntary and community sector organisations and education providers. These sessions helped identify challenges, gaps in provision and opportunities for improved coordination between services.

Alongside this, members undertook site visits to key local organisations observing frontline practice to understand the pressures experienced by services. These insights were pivotal in shaping several of the review's recommendations.

A Summary of Evidence is attached at Appendix One.



Sandwell Context:

Sandwell is a densely populated and highly diverse metropolitan borough in the West Midlands, comprising the six towns of Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich.

The borough has experienced significant demographic change over the past decade, with its population increasing from around 308,100 in 2011 to approximately 341,800 in 2021 which represents an 11% rise, and is notably higher than both the West Midlands (6.2%) and England (6.6%) averages.

The Sandwell Authority Monitoring Report (AMR) 2023–2024 provided clear evidence that underpins the Scrutiny Review's focus on cohesion and participation. It showed that Sandwell had one of the fastest-growing and most diverse populations in the West Midlands, with nearly 40% of residents being from an ethnic minority background.

The demographic change explored within the AMR combined with high deprivation levels and a large proportion of residents with no formal qualifications, reinforces the review's findings that language barriers and fragmented information limit access to services and civic life.

Community participation varies across the six towns. Sandwell Trends' resident survey data shows differing levels of engagement, trust in institutions, and awareness of local services between wards, reinforcing the need for targeted approaches to cohesion and communication.

Sandwell's strong neighbourhood identities and long history of migration have created resilient communities with rich local assets. However, the combination of rapid demographic change, language needs, and socio-economic pressures means that access to information, trusted communication routes, and opportunities for social mixing remain critical to strengthening cohesion.



Findings:



Visit to the Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service:

Summary:

Members conducted evidence- gathering sessions and undertook a visit to the Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS) which supports newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers. During the visit, Members observed that although STEPS provides tailored advice, staff spend considerable time manually directing people to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) providers because no single, authoritative directory exists. This results in delays, inconsistent information, and additional pressure on frontline teams.

STEPS staff emphasised that language barriers are the most immediate challenge for new arrivals, affecting their ability to navigate housing, healthcare, and employment. Members heard accounts of residents waiting weeks or months to locate suitable ESOL classes, often relying on word-of-mouth or fragmented provider lists. This reinforced the need for a central, accessible resource for both residents and council services.

National evidence shows that English proficiency is strongly linked to employment, progression, and wider integration. Although funded ESOL places have increased, demand continues to exceed supply, creating waiting lists and confusion about eligibility. Locally, Sandwell's diverse population and comparatively high proportion of adults with no formal qualifications make access to language provision even more critical. Without a clear directory, residents risk missing opportunities to improve their English and move into training or work.



A centralised directory would reduce fragmentation by bringing together information from colleges, council services, and community organisations.

The directory would improve the speed and accuracy of advice given by frontline staff and support clearer pathways into functional skills and vocational training, including practical details such as childcare and accessibility.

Members expressed a desire for the directory to be searchable by ward, level and delivery mode, include funding eligibility and waiting list information, be hosted on MySandwell with regular updates, and offer a multilingual interface.

The STEPS visit was pivotal in shaping this recommendation, as members saw first-hand the operational inefficiencies caused by the absence of a single ESOL resource. Staff described spending hours contacting providers individually, while residents experienced delays and confusion. A directory would streamline processes, reduce duplication, and provide a clear first point of contact, reflecting best practice elsewhere.

Expected outcomes include faster enrolment, increased participation in ESOL, improved employment prospects, and stronger coordination between council services and community organisations.

Recommendation:

That the Cabinet Member for Business and Skills create a publicly accessible comprehensive directory of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses.



Forum with External Stakeholders and Service Users:

Summary:

Improving access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) remains a national and local priority. Although funded places have increased, national reviews continue to report gaps, long waiting lists and inconsistent provision. Devolved areas are being encouraged to coordinate campaigns and adopt a shared ESOL framework.

In Sandwell and the wider West Midlands, varied language needs and lower qualification levels mean that awareness efforts must also reach residents who are not active online. Regional ESOL partners highlight the need for better information, advice and guidance, stronger online options, and a visible ESOL “hub” to support participation.

The campaign should focus on key audiences with distinct access routes. New arrivals such as those supported through Homes for Ukraine, Afghan resettlement and asylum schemes; can be reached through council welcome packs, GP practices, schools, and libraries. Women with caring responsibilities, who face lower employment rates when English proficiency is low, require tailored messaging that emphasises childcare support. Employers and Jobcentre Plus are also critical partners, helping link ESOL to progression routes and sector-specific pathways in areas like health and care, hospitality, and logistics.



A blended campaign approach is recommended. Digital elements include the My Sandwell ESOL finder, multilingual social media content, and WhatsApp broadcast lists. Community outreach should involve pop-up advice sessions in markets, faith settings, and community venues, supported by mobile enrolment clinics in every ward. Partnerships with libraries, children's centres and NHS Primary Care Networks will reinforce accessible communication. Employer engagement materials such as short "ESOL for work" explainers and case studies should align with West Midlands Combined Authority skills priorities.

Key messages should emphasise the convincing evidence that improved English leads to higher employment and progression, and that ESOL is now widely available locally. Communications must also highlight funded eligibility routes through Adult Skills Fund and West Midlands Combined Authority, alongside flexible timetables, and convenient local venues.

Recommendation:

That the Statutory Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finances and Resources conduct a coordinated campaign to increase the profile and awareness of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses across the borough.



Desktop Research and available Datasets:

Summary:

Asset- based approaches are recognised as a way to strengthen social networks and community resilience. Councils across the UK use ‘living maps’ to connect residents with local support and opportunities, and guidance emphasises that asset maps should be publicly accessible, co- produced, and embedded in commissioning.

National frameworks on community asset transfer highlight the importance of turning liabilities into assets and empowering communities, with mapping seen as a foundational step. Toolkits provide practical methods such as street audits, tabletop or digital mapping, and resident involvement that can be adapted to Sandwell’s six towns.

Sandwell already has a strong starting point through town profiles and Sandwell Trends, which collate population, diversity, and deprivation data. These datasets can form the contextual layers of a local asset map. Additional overlays should include ESOL providers, translation and interpretation access points, community centres, faith venues, libraries, parks, and youth provision, ensuring the map reflects the full range of local support and opportunities.

The map should operate at ward level across Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury, and West Bromwich. Data standards should cover core details such as name, category, opening times, accessibility, languages, and referral pathways. Embedding the map in MySandwell and linking it to the ESOL directory will maximise accessibility and integration.



The map will have practical use cases. Frontline staff will be able to filter assets to meet resident needs for example, identifying ESOL provision alongside childcare and nearby parks to support social mixing. It will also guide event planning by highlighting gaps and strengths in provision across wards, ensuring resources are targeted effectively.

Asset mapping strengthens engagement by helping communities identify their own resources and connections, and it complements the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment by adding a more detailed picture of local strengths. Evidence from resources and case studies shows that when communities map their assets, they build greater capacity to act collectively and play a more active role in shaping local planning and decision-making.

Recommendation:

That the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods produce and develop a borough wide Community Asset Map of organisations, services, and resources by ward.



Visit to Service Providers within the Borough:

Summary:

Limited English proficiency is a significant barrier to accessing services and is linked to poorer outcomes across housing, social care, education, and community safety.

The STEPS Centre visit emphasises the need for strong commissioning arrangements such as the use of qualified interpreters, fair and transparent fee structures and cancellation policies to ensure safety, equity and sustainability. Guidance also warns against the use of non-qualified interpreters, including family members, and sets out practical standards for telephone, video, and face- to- face interpreting.

Central government and specialist providers highlight the importance of secure, accredited services, and councils are encouraged to benchmark provider quality, including certifications, alongside robust data protection arrangements and safeguards.

The visit to the STEPS Centre strongly influenced this recommendation. Members saw how newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers rely heavily on interpreting support to navigate housing, healthcare, and safeguarding processes. Staff described challenges such as inconsistent interpreter quality, difficulty accessing rare languages and the risks associated with unqualified interpreters in sensitive or trauma-related situations. These insights demonstrated the need for a more coherent, dependable, and trauma-informed interpreting and translation offer across Sandwell Council services.



It is hoped that Sandwell Council's own provision is strengthened. This includes analysing demand across service areas and languages; assessing the qualifications and quality standards required for interpreters and translators; reviewing translation certification and evaluating how well current arrangements support equity of access, including for residents with rare language needs or those who have experienced trauma. The review should also explore commissioning options that ensure secure, high-quality provision and better alignment across council departments.

Resolution:

That a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of the commissioned translation and interpretation service is submitted as a suggestion for scrutiny topics in the 2026/ 27 municipal year.



Review of Event Programme of Council owned Community Assets and Green Spaces:

Summary:

Research consistently shows that well- designed local events can strengthen social cohesion by building bridges across social divides and fostering a sense of belonging. Effective events are those co- designed with local people, intentionally planned to encourage social connection, and supported by accessibility assessments.

Public and green spaces, as well as heritage venues play a significant role in this, acting as focal points for reunions, everyday interactions, and civic engagement. Their value has become even more apparent since COVID- 19, as communities seek opportunities to reconnect. Wider literature also highlights the power of cultural festivals to bridge divides and promote understanding, with UK polling indicating that 72% of people believe arts events bring individuals from diverse backgrounds together.

In Sandwell, this approach can be embedded through the use of the Community Asset Map to programme events in each ward. St George's Day offers a strong civic anchor, blending English heritage activities with faith and other local groups, alongside children's activities and youth volunteering opportunities. Rotating event locations across the six towns will maximise reach, reduce travel barriers and make use of existing footfall in libraries, parks, and other community settings.



Events should be co-designed with community groups and structured through shared activities and multilingual signage. Endeavours to reduce barriers is essential, including free entry, micro- grants for community performers, childcare provision, and quiet spaces.

Where suitable, events should also create opportunities for learning and progression by hosting ESOL enrolment desks, volunteering sign- ups, and pathways into local skills courses.

Recommendation:

That the Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods promote and support inclusive community events and cultural celebration days in public spaces, with family friendly activities provided free of charge.



Summary of Recommendations:

- 1 **That a publicly accessible comprehensive directory of English for Speakers of Other Languages Course is created.**

Cabinet Member for Business and Skills
Assistant Chief Executive

- 2 **That a coordinated campaign is organised to increase the profile and awareness of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses across the borough.**

Statutory Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources
Assistant Chief Executive

- 3 **That a Borough- wide Community Asset Map of organisations, services and resources by ward, is produced and developed.**

Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods
Assistant Chief Executive



- 4 **That efforts are explored to promote and support inclusive community events and cultural celebration days in public spaces, with family friendly activities provided free of charge.**

Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods

Service Director for Environment and Public Protection

Resolution:

- 1 **That a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of the commissioned translation and interpretation service is submitted as a suggestion for scrutiny topics in the 2026/27 municipal year.**

Statutory Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

Assistant Chief Executive

