

<b>Scrutiny Board:</b>	Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board
<b>Report Title</b>	New Neighbourhood Working Model – One Year On
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	5 February 2026
<b>Report Author</b>	Santokh Singh Neighbourhood Services Manager
<b>Lead Officer</b>	James McLaughlin Assistant Chief Executive
<b>Wards Affected</b>	All Wards
<b>Identify exempt information and exemption category</b>	Not applicable in this report.
<b>Appendices (if any)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Neighbourhoods Services Team Structure</b></li> <li>2. <b>Definitions of categorisations for Issues and Actions sheets</b></li> <li>3. <b>Ward Priorities</b></li> <li>4. <b>Ward Profile example</b></li> <li>5. <b>Town Newsletter example</b></li> <li>6. <b>Funding Forecast</b></li> </ol>

## 1. Executive Summary

1.1 Having been established through restructuring in January 2025, the new Neighbourhood Services Team was officially launched by the authority in July 2025. At the time of drafting this paper, there are six months of specific work to relate and reflect upon. In this time the objective of the service has been to lay the foundations for the new way of Neighbourhood Working and building relationships with Members and officers while setting expectations and developing new funding processes. The Team has undertaken a significantly increased volume of engagement activity, with a shift towards more targeted, purposeful and community-led approaches, rather than relying on traditional drop-ins or coffee morning style sessions. Engagement has focused on direct outreach events and partnership-based activity that better reflects the needs and priorities of local communities.

## **2. Recommendation**

2.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the information presented and determines whether it wishes to make any recommendations to the Executive.

## **3. Background and Context**

3.1 At its meeting on 17 July 2024, the Cabinet approved recommendations for a new model of neighbourhood working in Sandwell, which had emerged from the Review of Neighbourhood Working commissioned by the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council in the autumn of 2023. This was underpinned by the Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy, which was also approved by Cabinet on 17 July 2024. This document sets out what the Council wants to achieve to make the communities of Sandwell thrive and flourish. It is focused on the needs of all residents and aims to make their neighbourhoods places where people want to live and be proud of, enabling residents to become active participants in influencing change. It also recognises the crucial role of Members as community leaders who can affect short and long-term changes in their Wards.

3.2 Cabinet delegated authority to the Assistant Chief Executive to implement the new model and operating structures for a new Neighbourhoods Service to directly assist in the delivery of high-quality inclusive services for our customers.

3.3 Consultation with affected staff and Trade Unions on proposals for the new Neighbourhood Service started on 1 October 2024. At the conclusion of the consultation period, a new structure was agreed that merged the former Neighbourhood Engagement Team and Neighbourhood Partnerships Team as a single Neighbourhoods Service Team to be in place for January 2025. The Neighbourhoods Team continues to adapt its structure and ways of working to ensure we have the right skills and capacity in place. This has included refining roles and responsibilities to support efficiency and staff development.

3.4 **CONSTRUCTING A TEAM**

3.5 In January 2025, the Neighbourhood Services Manager was tasked by the Assistant Chief Executive with implementing the new structure which involved assimilating existing staff and merging teams to create an effective new Neighbourhood Services Team and thus to mobilise more of our front-line services to deliver at a neighbourhood level. **See Appendix 1.**

3.6 The recruitment process for new staff continued through February to July 2025 to ensure the effective delivery of services within the new team. The strategy to construct a strong Team was innovative: several open days for interested applicants were held in February 2025 where applicants could meet the existing team, discuss their roles and the vision for neighbourhood working going forward.

3.7 This exercise resulted in the recruitment of:

- 3 new Ward Coordinators (in addition to the two existing Ward Coordinators)
- 4 Neighbourhood Officers
- 1 Grants Support Officer
- 1 Grants Support Apprentice

A number of positions were filled through internal promotion, demonstrating the strength and capability within the existing team. This reflects the ongoing staff development work undertaken by Managers which included structured mentoring, skills-based training and the opportunities for all Team members to take on increased responsibility.

3.8 In July 2025, funded through the Plan for Neighbourhoods programme, the team's work with the Smethwick Plan for Neighbourhoods enabled them to develop and establish the role of Senior Ward Coordinator to have a strategic overview of the engagement and consultation within the Plan for Neighbourhoods. This also helped to support the transition and handover for each Town with the new Ward Coordinators. The role enabled the team to provide integral support for the Plan for Neighbourhoods and adopt an innovative approach to consultation and engagement with local residents.

3.9 A new position, Neighbourhood Development Officer, has been added to the structure in recognition of the Neighbourhood Services Team's involvement with the 10 year Plan for Neighbourhoods programme as a key part of community engagement.

3.10 The service is providing a more responsive and efficient, but less complex customer journey that can resolve local issues. Furthermore, this structure reflects the Council's ambition to honour the individual identity of the six towns of Sandwell by having dedicated officers with detailed local knowledge to work on bespoke solutions to issues in each town.

3.11 In September 2025, this process took another step forward as Ward Coordinators were allocated designated towns and the handover process accelerated, including ongoing training and intensive induction support for the new Ward Coordinators. There was ongoing development of the Ward Coordinator role to focus on their allocated towns. Feedback from Members indicates a positive impact to date and provides something for the service to continue to build upon in the coming year.

3.12 Neighbourhood Officers, though not yet up to full capacity, were allocated to towns, commencing projects and working with a Ward Coordinator. Officers received skills support: for instance, delivering presentations to Councillors and the wider Team to receive individual feedback, and being given the chance to work together to improve the outcome of tasks. This has helped to embed long-term change as part of the Neighbourhoods Strategy, building in team resilience and becoming more adaptable to change.

3.13 From September to November 2025, the Neighbourhood Services Team focused on promotion of Ward Budgets, collection of good news stories, monitoring of Ward Plans, consistency of working (e.g. diarising meetings, agendas etc.), and the transition of responsibility of towns to the designated

Ward Coordinators. This better positioned the team to be outcome focussed and it also created a consistent approach to prioritisation by finetuning the scheduling of Ward Meetings, and consolidating planning of walkabouts with action plans and trackers.

### 3.14 PROCEDURAL MATTERS AND SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

#### Supporting Members

- 3.15 From January 2025, Ward Partnership Meetings, walkabout structures and timetables were initiated to identify and ensure ongoing activity in resolving Members' concerns. Town Meetings were used to identify concerns through service areas' updates.
- 3.16 Arrangements are now entered into Members' and officers' calendars well in advance before every meeting or walkabout. This has helped the team to schedule in and organise Ward-based meetings and events and efficiently utilise Neighbourhoods Service team resources.
- 3.17 Constantly updated Issues and Actions Lists for every Ward have ensured ongoing activity from Ward Coordinators and Neighbourhood Officers in resolving Members' concerns. The focus is now on categorisation of issues, giving Members more accountability where issues are casework and instead allowing Ward Coordinators to focus on multi-agency issues or where solutions require project-based work. **See Appendix 2.**

#### Ward Priorities and Ward Plans

- 3.18 From May 2025, the team worked alongside Elected Members to identify their key priorities for their Ward, to establish how these can be measured and to plot which steps could be taken to make a positive impact. Ward audits and walkabouts identified the most pressing issues.
- 3.19 Each Ward now has an individual Ward Plan, which details the three main areas for improvement in that Ward. The Plans follow a corporate template and have been published on the 'Your Neighbourhood' website (<https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/Neighbourhoods/>). They have also been shared with Elected Members. This connects to the key thread in our Neighbourhood Strategy of strengthening the role of Ward Councillors and making the Ward the building block for community engagement.
- 3.20 From July 2025 onwards, Ward Coordinators have been working closely with Elected Members and appropriate officers to ensure that the targets in Ward Priorities are addressed. **See Appendix 3.** This has helped to ensure that the key areas identified by Elected Members have visible improvements. This helps us to prioritise intelligent tracking of issues, giving a solid evidence base to reports and strengthening the evaluation of progress. It also shows that the team are outcome focussed, targeting responses to meet customers' and Members' needs.
- 3.21 An excellent example of this in action was in November 2025 where multiagency action was undertaken in West Bromwich at Bullock Street and Grice Street. This involved Ward Coordinators organising and chairing multi-

agency meetings in response to concerns about the site. The multiagency visit to enforce action was a great success, with Members and officers able to highlight a good news story and resolve long-standing concerns.

## **Ward Profiles**

- 3.22 In September 2025, the process and plans for the approach to these were agreed with Neighbourhood Officers. Once towns were allocated to Neighbourhood Officers, initial information was compiled from Sandwell Trends and other data sources, and drafts were completed in consultation with Members. A branded, corporate template was used, and a rich picture of key issues in each Ward was painted.
- 3.23 These documents were one of the main Priorities for the service, and Ward Profiles were tailored to Members' requests. Their aim is to help Members and officers to utilise collective knowledge and resources at Town Meetings and elsewhere. **See Appendix 4.** It should be noted that the proposed changes to Ward boundaries in Sandwell mean that the packs will have to be amended in readiness for May 2026.

## **3.24 COMMUNICATION**

### **'Your Neighbourhood' Website**

- 3.25 Between January and July 2025, the team created a new web page for each Ward in Sandwell, with details on their Elected Members, funding, Ward Priorities and more. The website went live for public viewing on 22 July 2025. This links into the ambition of collaborating by informing residents and sharing issues using localised communications.

### **Town Newsletters**

- 3.26 Between February and July 2025, in consultation with Elected Members, the team created a new newsletter for each town focussing on good news stories at a neighbourhood level, showing residents the work being driven by Elected Members and officers. This is also a platform for sharing corporate updates that affect the wider community.
- 3.27 The first editions of the newsletter for each individual town were launched in July 2025. The Communications and Marketing Service have supported the Neighbourhoods Service to make these available on the website with the plan to release new editions quarterly using the GovDelivery email service. This marries into the Neighbourhood Strategy requirement to use consistent, localised communications and to evaluate working by highlighting good news stories. **See Appendix 5.**

### **Neighbourhoods Services Launch**

- 3.28 This event took place on 22 July 2025 in the Council Chamber and was held to introduce the new Neighbourhood Service and the new mechanisms for Neighbourhood Working to Elected Members, senior officers and key service areas. It was very well attended and provided an opportunity to demonstrate

what had already been achieved in the trial of neighbourhood working in 2023/24, as well as outlining the ambition for what is to come.

3.29 As a result, there is greater awareness of the role, purpose and potential of Neighbourhood Working, including specific detail around the new website, Ward Plans and Town newsletters. Multi-agency activities such as the autumn 2025 raids on untaxed and abandoned vehicles in Wednesbury and Smethwick (involving West Midlands Police Service, Environmental Protection, Parking Enforcement, SERCO and Penham Excel) demonstrate the speed with which the team was able to begin working constructively with a range of services and partners after its official launch.

### 3.30 **KEY PROJECTS**

#### **Pre-Council Marketplaces**

3.31 From January 2025, the team has continued to develop the format of the regular marketplace for all Services and Partners to meet, network and share information with Elected Members and other services before full Council meetings. This also ran in July 2025, November 2025 and February 2026, and will continue to do so in future at alternating full Council meetings.

3.32 This contributes to the delivery of the Neighbourhood Strategy by enabling problem-solving, especially of complex issues, allowing for better and more consistent government. It also demonstrates collaboration with other services and partners, delivering improved joint working, which lies at the heart of neighbourhood working.

#### **Safer 6**

3.33 In June and July 2025, the team co-ordinated the planning and delivery of the Safer 6 Campaign across every town in Sandwell. This included running the successful Launch Events in each town and liaising with service areas and partners who planned and ran the individual activities during each of the six weeks.

3.34 Each town in Sandwell had a Safer 6 week which reflected their priorities and concerns. Elected Members were consulted in the planning of the events and were invited to attend the sessions. Residents across Sandwell benefited from the activities taking place including litter picks, fire safety checks and ASB (Anti-Social Behaviour) information stalls.

3.35 The wide range of events were variously resident, tenant and Member centric. The programme demonstrated the commitment to collaborating by allowing teamwork during partner events on cross cutting issues, for instance supporting events run by Housing, ASB and the West Midlands Fire Service. It also demonstrated our commitment to supporting the council's partners' priorities. Safer 6 clearly contributed towards our Living in Sandwell and Healthy in Sandwell ambitions to improve long-term health and wellbeing and protect our most vulnerable residents.

3.36 In September 2025, the team drafted the evaluation report for Safer 6 2025. 73% of Members and Officers who responded to a survey about the

coordination of the campaign stated that Safer 6 was organised in a “good”, “very good” or “excellent” manner. Planning for this year’s campaign commenced in January 2026.

### **Smethwick Plan for Neighbourhoods Engagement and Consultation**

- 3.37 In collaboration with the Smethwick Partnership Board and the Regeneration Team, from June to August 2025 the team designed and developed a programme of consultation for the Smethwick Plan for Neighbourhoods. This led to an expansive initial phase of consultation for the plan, linking in to Vision 2030 and the specific aim of building stronger community links, continuing effective working with the Police and partner organisations.
- 3.38 The Plan for Neighbourhood consultation involved engagement with a huge array of community and faith organisations, as well as service providers and businesses. Neighbourhood Officers supported the completion of online resident surveys (over 1,600 were completed in total); the team organised and ran 8 community workshops across Smethwick Town, involving 150 attendees. Following this an engagement and consultation report was prepared by the service for the Board. During the autumn, officers drafted a variety of reports in conjunction with the Regeneration team to meet Government submission deadlines. Funding criteria were initially drafted and presented to the Smethwick Plan for Neighbourhoods Subgroup in November 2025. These activities align with the Council Plan and the Neighbourhood Strategy in seeking to develop an inclusive approach to empower and engage residents and build community capacity for decision making around issues affecting their neighbourhoods.
- 3.39 On 31 October 2025, the Team enabled a Business Breakfast consultation for the Plan to be held at Keltruck in Smethwick. 20 representatives of large businesses and employers attended, and the organisation of the event required liaison with the Business Growth Team, Gurinder Singh Josan MP and the Smethwick Partnership Board.
- 3.40 Once again, this connects to Ambition 5 in our 2030 Vision: building stronger community links and continuing our effective working with partner organisations. It also feeds into our 2030 Vision Ambition 10: getting things done by everyone working together; a “strengths” and “opportunities” based approach.

### **Sandwell Networkers**

- 3.41 Whilst the Sandwell Networkers group runs as an external activity, from August 2025 onwards officers from the team have stepped in to support the delivery of these sessions. Taking place on the first Tuesday of each Month, the team now partners with the administration of the Networkers’ meetings to support minuting and registration. The Team also provides guidance to the Chair of the meeting to support the identification of actions leading to meaningful outcomes. Whilst previously the Chair of the Sandwell Networkers was finding it difficult to continue running this meeting, the meeting now has the resources needed to carry on providing opportunities for community groups to network, which is a key part of the Neighbourhoods Service’s mission to collaborate.

## **Christmas Lights Planning**

3.42 From August until December 2025, the team supported the Events Team with the facilitation and administration of Christmas Lights Planning Meetings, in addition to liaising with Elected Members and appropriate officers. Neighbourhood Officers engaged with local businesses and residents in each Town to raise awareness, confirm logistics and pursue sponsorship options. In Tipton, for example, 350 chocolate selection boxes were acquired for local children through these efforts; whilst the team went to Santa's Village at Sandwell Valley to run a charity tombola on Saturday 13 December 2025.

3.43 Seven switch-on events were held across the Borough in 2025 and were highly successful. In total, in conjunction with the Events Team, £823.88 for charity was raised over the course of the 2025 Christmas events. The service's involvement in these key events demonstrate the commitment to collaborate with partners to support and influence community led events. Christmas Lights switch-on events are being planned earlier than before, with effective communication between the Events Team and Elected Members. To highlight this further, it is worth noting that preparation for the Christmas 2026 events began in February 2026.

## **Fireworks Charter**

3.44 In response to the resolution of Council in December 2024 and an enquiry from a local MP, the Neighbourhood Services led on co-ordinating an action group in response to resident's complaints around fireworks. This working group is still ongoing, reviewing the data of complaints to inform next steps.

## **Remembrance Parades**

3.45 In November 2025, the team supported the Events Team with resourcing to run separate parades in each Town.

## **Sandwell Aspirations**

3.46 The team met with the Service Improvement team in October and gave advice on next steps, before supporting a cross-service meeting in December 2025 to share information on options for locations to be considered for environmental improvements. The team provided intelligence to aid Town Leads to select the areas they wished to be part of the initiative. This will continue to be a growth area of work for the Neighbourhoods Service in the coming year.

## **Pride in Place Impact Fund**

3.47 In December 2025, the team met with the Regeneration team to discuss how best to support on engagement with stakeholders and the identification of projects for the Impact Fund across the six towns. Ward Coordinators drew up a list of potential interventions for each town.

### 3.48 **FINANCIAL**

#### **Funding and Budgets**

3.49 At the end of the 2023/2024 financial year, the Local Area Budget and the Innovation Fund ceased and a new budget package for the Neighbourhoods was created in conjunction with the Finance Team. This featured the four elements of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), the Events budget, the Members' Ward budget and the Neighbourhood Support Fund.

3.50 Protocols for the use of Ward budgets, as well as the new Neighbourhoods Support Fund, were based on best practice and examples from other authorities that were identified during the review in 2023. A broader advisory briefing note for Members on the new Neighbourhoods Budget package was shared during the Neighbourhoods Services launch in July 2025.

3.51 Each Elected Member now has their own individual budget to spend to support either their Ward Priorities or themes within the Council Plan. Each Town has a new budget which will enable them to fund any projects that would otherwise not be able to be funded through other means. This strengthens the role of Ward Councillors as community leaders, enabling them to Lead by utilising Ward Budgets as appropriate.

3.52 From September 2025 the team focused on three areas: Ward Member Grants were coordinated and implemented; Neighbourhood Officers received CIL funding training to take on some funding responsibilities, identifying possibilities for projects whilst carrying out the Neighbourhood Officer's role; and the team trialled initial projects for the Neighbourhoods Support Grant to see how efficient and effective the process would be. The team has also reviewed old Local Area Budget projects in order to be realistic about financial constraints and to use data to inform local investment, as required by the Neighbourhood Strategy. **See Appendix 6.**

### 3.53 **DEMOCRATIC**

3.54 One of the key outcomes of the Review of Neighbourhood Working in 2023/24 was to outline the key roles that councillors undertake in their neighbourhoods:

- Advocating for residents, tenants and communities in our neighbourhoods and towns
- Leading by displaying community leadership skills and knowledge
- Convening local views and opinions together with the Council and partners' resources and expertise
- Collaborating with others including fellow councillors, local leaders and partners
- Problem Solving concerns and hard-to-solve issues by getting to the heart of them

- Listening to all aspect of local opinions and concerns and supporting them
- Intervening where matters require attention and emphasising prevention rather than reliance on public sector services
- Empowering local residents, tenants, groups and communities to do things for themselves and reduce reliance on public services
- Explaining the scope of services and help that the Council and partners can bring to local issues
- Identifying opportunities within localities and highlighting what matters to communities

3.55 The new Neighbourhood Service has been established to support Members in discharging all those roles in their capacity as Ward Councillors. More specifically, the service supports Town Leads to focus on community leadership and acting as advocates and drivers for positive change across all six towns.

## **Reporting**

3.56 The review of Neighbourhood Working recommended that there be an annual Ward and Town Report, presented by Councillors and Town Leads at Council meetings. As these are still early days in respect of neighbourhood working, outcomes worthy of reporting to Council are still in process and therefore this is likely to be implemented after the whole Council election in May 2026.

3.57 Accountability and transparency are at the heart of the neighbourhood working model and there will be an annual statement on spend against Ward budgets, the Events budget and the Neighbourhood Support Fund after the close of each financial year. This will provide a detailed breakdown of which Members have spent the specific £2,000 allocated to each of the 72 Members of the Council.

## **4. Consultation**

4.1 As this report is submitted to this committee for the purposes of scrutiny there has been no consultation specifically on its contents. As set out earlier in this paper, the Neighbourhoods Service is focused on enabling Members to lead, consult and engage with the communities of Sandwell

## **5. Financial Implications**

5.1 There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

## **6. Legal and Governance Implications**

6.1 Changes were required to the Council's Constitution arising from the reporting of Ward Updates to meetings of the Council following implementation of the new model in April 2025. The budget report considered by the Council in February 2025 detailed arrangements for new Ward budgets and the decision-making processes and the discharge of delegated authority associated with those budgets.

6.2 The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community has oversight of and political accountability for the implementation of the new model of neighbourhood working. This remains one of the key strategic priorities for the authority and will continue to be a matter of interest to Cabinet and Scrutiny Members, as well as all Members in their ward councillor roles.

6.3 There are no other legal or governance implications associated with this report.

## 7. Risks

7.1 A clear project plan and critical path was established for the implementation of the new model of neighbourhood working. At the time of preparing this report there are no specific risks to draw to Members' attention.

## 8. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

8.1 The decision by Cabinet to implement a new model of neighbourhood working should improve the Council's ability to respond to the specific needs and expectations of Sandwell's diverse communities. The needs and requirements of citizens, businesses and communities in each Ward are different, and the new model allows flexibility to respond to these needs by making the Ward the building block for community engagement. Additionally, the production of Ward Plans has enabled a targeted response to community concerns and priorities.

## 9. Other Relevant Implications

9.1 There are no other relevant implications associated with the purpose of this report to this committee.

## 10. Background Documents

- Report to Cabinet – 17 July 2024 – The Future of Neighbourhood Working in Sandwell
- Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods – The Sandwell Neighbourhoods Strategy 2024 – 2027
- Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board – 10 September 2024 – Neighbourhood Working – Implementation of the new Model

## 11. How does this deliver the Outcomes in the Council Plan?

11.1

One Council One Team	The new model of neighbourhood working should directly assist in the delivery of high-quality inclusive services for all our customers. It also contributes towards the objective of all our residents, including our children and young people, being active participants in influencing change – through being
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	listened to and their opinions heard and valued – within Ward Plans and Ward Priorities.
Living in Sandwell	The new model of neighbourhood working contributes significantly to this objective through enhanced community engagement and the establishment of plans and priorities that are focused on improving access to local services.
Growing Up in Sandwell	The implementation of the new model does not directly deliver against these objectives of the Council, but it should indirectly contribute to the delivery through the development of Ward Plans and Priorities which include actions in respect of these objectives.
Thriving Economy in Sandwell	
Healthy in Sandwell	