

## CABINET

<b>Report Title</b>	LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Findings and Recommendations
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Cabinet – Wednesday, 11 March 2026 Full Council – Tuesday, 17 March 2026
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<b>Lead Officer</b>	Assistant Chief Executive
<b>Lead Cabinet Member(s)</b>	Leader of the Council
<b>Why is this a key decision?</b>	To be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards of the Borough.
<b>Wards Affected</b>	(All Wards);
<b>Identify exempt information and exemption category</b>	Open
<b>Is the report urgent?</b>	No
<b>Reasons for urgency (only where applicable)</b>	
<b>Appendices (if any)</b>	1. Appendix 1 – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – January 2026 – Feedback Report 2. Appendix 2 – Recommendations

### 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 In January 2026, Sandwell Council hosted a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) facilitated by the Local Government Association (LGA). A team of experienced local government elected members and senior officers visited Sandwell from 19 – 22 January 2026. During this the team met with over 200 members, staff and partners to develop a view of Sandwell Council's current performance and areas for improvement.
- 1.2 Every local authority is encouraged to have a regular CPC and Sandwell had its last one in January 2022. At that time the review found that the Council had experienced political and managerial instability, it was less visible than it needed to be in local and regional partnerships and there was a need for significant cultural change within the organisation to respond to the challenges of the past. This review took place immediately prior to the Council then

entering a period of government intervention from March 2022 to March 2024, which ended following significant improvements within the Council which were recognised by the then Minister of State for Local Government. The CPC in January 2026 was arranged to follow up on and assess the progress made by the Council since the exit from intervention in March 2024.

- 1.3 This paper provides the findings of the Peer Team and their recommendations for improvement during the Peer challenge and the report was received on 2 March 2026. In line with our values of accountability, openness and transparency the report is required by the LGA to be published by the Council by 22 April 2026, three months after the CPC. The LGA will also publish this on their website by this date.
- 1.4 The Peer Team found that Sandwell Council has undergone a remarkable transformation, moving from a period of Government intervention to being widely regarded – internally and externally – as a stable, credible, ambitious and high-performing organisation. The Peer Team found a fundamentally different council compared with several years ago, driven by strong political and managerial partnership, improved culture, and a focus on getting the basics right.
- 1.5 However, while progress is substantial, the council now faces a different challenge: ensuring the improvement is sustained, scaled, and embedded, particularly around housing, strategic capacity, economic ambition, the corporate transformation programme, and EDI.

## **2. Recommendations**

For the reasons set out in the report, Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Receive and welcome the findings of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and the positive progress it recognises across leadership, culture, governance, and financial management.
- 2.2 Approve the development of a CPC Action Plan, aligned with the Council's strategic priorities and Medium-Term Financial Strategy.
- 2.3 Support the communication of the findings to staff, partners and residents as part of reinforcing the Council's ongoing journey to become 'Outstanding'.
- 2.4 Note that the LGA will conduct a follow up visit in Autumn 2026.

## **3. Proposals – Reasons for the recommendations**

- 3.1 The LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is designed as an improvement and assurance tool, providing local authorities with robust, strategic and credible challenge and support. The CPC is delivered through a review of key financial, performance and governance information contained within the Council's Position Statement and pre-briefing materials, followed by four days of on-site interviews and focus groups with staff, elected members and partners.

- 3.2 Local authorities are expected to undertake a peer challenge at least once every five years, supporting the Council in meeting its Best Value duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. It also provides ongoing external assurance following the conclusion of government intervention two years ago and contributes to the authority's continued progress towards becoming an outstanding council.
- 3.3 The CPC strengthens continuous improvement by putting in place several structured arrangements that ensure councils act on findings, monitor progress, and sustain change over time. These include a clear set of recommendations and an expectation for the Council to develop and agree an action plan. There is a built-in progress review process with the Peer Team due to return within a year to follow up on the recommendations. This return visit is intended to support the ongoing improvement cycle rather than a one-off review.
- 3.4 The expectation from the LGA is that the CPC report is published no later than 22 April 2026 – three months after the CPC. Furthermore, an action plan to address the recommendations is to be developed and published no later than 22 June 2026. The follow up visit by the Peer Team is expected to measure the authority's progress and identify areas for further action and improvement.
- 3.5 The Peer Team was made up of experienced local government members and officers, recruited to share their knowledge and expertise as well as learning from Sandwell's approach:
- Kate Josephs CB - Chief Executive, Sheffield City Council
  - Cllr Arooj Shah – Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Growth, Oldham Council (Labour peer)
  - Mayor Jason Perry – Mayor of Croydon LBC (Conservative peer)
  - Jacqui McKinlay - Chief Operating Officer, Liverpool City Council
  - Nick Edmonds - Corporate Director Resources (Section 151), City of Stoke-on-Trent Council
  - Andrew Maughan – Borough Solicitor, Camden LBC
  - James Millington - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA
- 3.6 The core scope of the CPC covers five elements including local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management, and capacity for improvement. These areas are examined to build a holistic, balanced understanding of the council's overall performance, identifying strengths as well as where further improvement and support may be needed.
- 3.7 Preparation materials and evidence setting out Sandwell Council's current position was shared with the Peer Team in January 2026, prior to onsite activity.
- 3.8 The LGA Peer Team spent four consecutive days onsite at Sandwell from 19 January 2026 and, across 50 meetings, engaged with in excess of 200 individuals comprising council staff, elected members, external partners and stakeholders. These included Voluntary Community Sector (VCS), Local

Anchor Institutions and young people from Youth Services, SHAPE, Change makers and Young People's Panel.

### **Corporate Peer Challenge - Key Findings and Recommendations**

- 3.9 The LGA Peer Team's initial feedback described Sandwell's progress over recent years as "*remarkable*." Their reflections were overwhelmingly positive, noting how genuinely moved they were by the passion and energy demonstrated by everyone they met. During their presentation, the Peer Team shared insights on both strengths and areas for development across the five core components they reviewed.
- 3.10 The Peer Team recognised the significant progress made over the last four years, recognising a council that was placed in government intervention and a whole reset of the political and executive leadership.
- 3.11 In summary, the report received on 2 March 2026 identifies that the Peer Team found that Sandwell Council has undergone *a remarkable organisational, cultural and leadership transformation*. They found a council that is now credible, confident, professional and ambitious, widely recognised by partners and staff as fundamentally different from the organisation that was previously under Government intervention. Staff described a dramatic positive shift in culture, behaviours and morale.
- 3.12 The following themes set out the progress made and positive outcomes being realised that were identified by the Peer Team:

#### ***Strong, inspirational leadership***

- The partnership between the Leader and Chief Executive is viewed as one of the council's greatest strengths, providing stability, clarity and momentum.
- Senior Leadership Team and Cabinet work with shared purpose and trust, modelling the council's values.
- Staff consistently report feeling supported, safe to raise concerns and empowered to innovate

#### ***A positive, values led culture***

- Staff describe a culture of psychological safety
- openness and honesty
- leadership willingness to call out poor behaviours
- shared commitment to continuous improvement

#### ***Strong Partnerships and Place Leadership***

- The council is seen as a reliable, capable and constructive partner across the region
- Partnerships with police, health, education and anchor institutions are strong and increasingly strategic
- The Sandwell Story has helped to create a unifying, borough wide sense of ambition

#### ***Clear Strategic Direction and Delivery of Key Improvements***

- The Council Plan 2024 – 27 provides a sound and well-aligned strategic framework

- The council is highly effective at unlocking external funding and delivering regeneration, particularly in West Bromwich, and through the Towns Fund, Levelling Up and other programmes
- Children’s Services have achieved a ‘Good’ Ofsted rating – a major milestone after years of challenge

### ***Financial Stability and Improved Governance***

- Sandwell’s financial position is materially stronger than many councils, with three consecutive underspends and healthy reserves.
- Governance has significantly improved:
  - a rewritten Constitution
  - stronger audit and risk arrangements
  - mature, respectful member–officer relations
- Scrutiny is more strategic, engaged and evidence-based.

### ***Commitment to Continuous Improvement***

- The council is adopting new tools and ways of working, including early innovation in AI (e.g. streamlining blue badge processing).
- Transformation work is progressing, with strong examples such as Adults Social Care demonstrating what is achievable when programmes are evidence-based and well-led.
- Staff demonstrate high levels of passion, energy and willingness to embrace change.

### ***Strengthening Capacity and Talent***

- The council is increasingly able to attract and grow talent, with new appointments bringing expertise and credibility.
- Workforce culture is strong and aligned behind improvement.
- The neighbourhood model, family hubs and locally retained assets give Sandwell a strong platform for community-focused delivery.

3.13 The detailed findings of the CPC and recommendations for improvement and further action are set out in the Peer Team’s report at Appendix 1.

3.14 The Peer Team recognised the substantial improvement achieved but emphasised the need to maintain momentum. Stating a continued focus on culture, governance safeguards, and high-quality recruitment will be essential to avoid regression. The Council’s ambition to be “outstanding” was highlighted as commendable, but it was noted that further work is needed to define what “outstanding” means for Sandwell’s services, outcomes, and communities. Overall, the Peer Team reported strong evidence that the Council is well positioned to meet the borough’s challenges, with a motivated workforce and leadership committed to sustained improvement.

3.15 The Peer Team made eight key recommendations for the council to consider and build into its continuous improvement journey. The council will develop an action plan to address these recommendations that will be published by 22 June 2026. The recommendations are:

1. Maintain a laser like focus on tackling health inequalities & deprivation, improving outcomes and building a culture of aspiration: challenge every activity to ensure it is making an impact and improving lives.

2. Housing must be a priority and should be given sufficient prominence in the current organisational structure and transformation. The Housing Improvement Board is vital, should be led from the top, and involve independent expert membership that will help the Council drive improvement.
3. Continue to develop and implement the neighbourhood model to better meet the needs of communities, be understood by the organisation and engage in the wider partner development of neighbourhoods, including the VCFSE.
4. Examine the Council's economic growth strategy for its level of ambition, ability to make opportunities, have the capacity to deliver and be an active contributor and leader in the region. Ensure the Council has sufficient resources in this area.
5. Expedite the development and implementation of the corporate transformation programme with a focus on devising a clear operating model and what will have the greatest impact in the MTFS period. Ensure improvement priorities are delivered.
6. Build on the strength of the 'Sandwell Story', transitioning the narrative from an organisational/partner identity to one that resonates with all members and most importantly residents.
7. Deepen the organisation's commitment to EDI, internally and with communities. Recognise the challenging environment, be bold and vocal in your leadership, maximise the expertise and lived experience of staff, the VCFSE and communities.
8. Decide what "outstanding" means for Sandwell and continue to build a Council which will deliver for the people of the borough irrespective of political or officer leadership.

3.16 In addition to these eight key recommendations, the Peer Review Report includes 16 additional recommendations that the council will need to consider and build into the required action plan. All recommendations are set out in Appendix 2.

3.17 The Council is currently developing an action plan to respond to these recommendations. Work is already underway in these areas, and the action plan will articulate the further development of workstreams to build on the current approach and enhance the outcomes in line with the recommendations. The action plan will also seek to demonstrate the linkages between agendas set out in the recommendations, such as how the 'Sandwell Story' can be used to build momentum around the borough's ambition for economic growth and maximising the strengths in our communities. The action plan will be submitted to Cabinet for approval in Summer 2026, and progress towards delivery will be monitored through the Peer Review follow-up visit in late Autumn 2026.

- 3.18 Given the Council's commitment to openness and transparency, as well as recognising the positive feedback from the LGA Peer Team, it is proposed that the findings are communicated to staff, partners and residents as part of reinforcing the Council's ongoing journey to become and be recognised as 'Outstanding'. It is anticipated that this will build further confidence in the Council as an enabling force, as a partner and an employer.

#### **4. Alternative Options Considered**

- 4.1 An alternative option would be to reject the recommendations. This is not recommended as independent feedback is welcomed to inform and support the journey to become and be recognised as 'Outstanding'.

#### **5. Consultation**

- 5.1 The peer team took part in over 50 meetings in addition to a tour of key sites within Sandwell. Speaking to over 200 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders. Individuals included staff from front line roles, managers, Senior Leadership, Members, Voluntary Sector representatives, Chief Executives of neighbouring local authorities, and Young People, who were invited to feed in their views and were used by the Peer Team to inform their report and recommendations.
- 5.2 The report was developed by the Peer Team following the CPC and councils are able to fact check the content only. Senior leadership has reviewed the report and is assured that all facts presented are valid and correct.

#### **6. Financial Implications**

- 6.1 The CPC was funded by LGA at no cost to the council. Minimal costs were incurred by the authority in delivering the review through use of internal meeting rooms to host CPC activity.
- 6.2 Future activity to address recommendations will be delivered through existing resources. Should the action plan identify that additional resources are required then this will be built into the budget planning cycle for 2027/8 onwards.

#### **7. Legal and Governance Implications**

- 7.1 There are no specific legal and governance implications associated with the recommendations of this report.

#### **8. Risks**

- 8.1 This report sets out a number of challenges that the council faces with regard to service delivery, governance and the council's ongoing improvement journey. Existing governance mechanisms are in place to provide oversight of progress and management of risks.
- 8.2 Through the preparation of the Action Plan in response to the recommendations from the CPC, senior leadership will continue to maintain oversight of progress and risk management arrangements.

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

9.1 An equality impact assessment has not been carried out as the proposals in the report have no direct equality and diversity implications.

## **10. Other Relevant Implications**

10.1 There are no direct implications on other council priorities from this report. These will be considered in relation to the development and delivery of the Action Plan.

## **11. Background Documents**

11.1 None.

## **12. How does this deliver the objectives of the Strategic Themes?**

12.1 This report will support the delivery of the following Strategic Themes: -

- Growing up in Sandwell
- Living in Sandwell
- Healthy in Sandwell
- Thriving Economy in Sandwell
- One Council One Team Approach.

12.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge examined how the council works with residents and partners to identify and agree priorities and uses its resources effectively and efficiently to generate a positive impact on outcomes for local people.

12.2 The feedback from the CPC highlighted good practices across many areas of Sandwell Council, recognising the progress made towards achieving the Council Plan priorities. The recommendations from the CPC will help inform the council's focus to improve ways of working and service delivery across the organisation, which in turn will have an impact on all strategic priorities in the Council Plan. This paper identifies where there are already plans and assurance mechanisms in place to address the issues and highlights further challenges for the council. By raising awareness of these issues across SLT, this paper seeks to enable the council to develop plans to mitigate risks or ensure positive outcomes are achieved.

12.3 The One Council One Team chapter sets out the principle of being 'brilliant at the basics' that is the stepping stone towards the ambition to be an outstanding council. The CPC tested where the council is on its journey and identified areas for further improvement across the organisation as part of the council's approach to continuous improvement.