

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

19<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2026

Feedback report



**Corporate Peer Challenge**



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# 1. Introduction

A team of local government peers, led by the Local Government Association (LGA) delivered a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of Sandwell Council from 19<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2026. This was the council's third CPC, with their previous one taking place in 2022 (report available [here](#)).

CPC is a well-established and respected improvement and assurance tool that provides robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils. Further details about the CPC process can be found in Appendix A.

Our peer team consisted of highly experienced and knowledgeable senior local government councillor and officer peers (see section four). We considered the five core areas covered by all CPCs: local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management and capacity for improvement.

This report provides Sandwell Council with feedback on the peer team's findings. It provides the council with a set of a high-level recommendations alongside further recommendations under each of the CPC's core areas. There is an expectation the council will publish this report and a clear action plan to respond to all the recommendations highlighted.

# 2. Executive summary

Sandwell Council has undergone a remarkable and profound transformation. In recent years the council has been known for the significant organisational and governance challenges that led to Government intervention but the peer team found that it has now evolved into a fundamentally different council - one that partners, staff, and members now consistently describe as rejuvenated, functional, and ambitious. The peer team heard moving testimony of the impact this has on members and staff and the energising impact this has had on relations with partners. The scale and pace of improvement has been impressive to everyone that the peer team met with.

Central to the improvement is the council's strong and inspirational political and managerial leadership. The partnership between the leader and the chief executive was repeatedly highlighted as a key source of stability and energy, with staff highlighting how the chief executive is the right fit for the council. This leadership has modelled a culture of care, psychological safety, and openness - conditions that have enabled staff to acknowledge problems early, call out poor behaviours, and aim to innovate confidently to deliver excellent services. This shift represents an essential safeguard against the issues of the past and is fundamental to the council's future aspirations. The council also demonstrated a clear understanding of the further work required to continue their improvement.

The cabinet and senior leadership team (SLT) function cohesively with a shared purpose, and with mutual support. Productive and trusting relationships between members and officers have underpinned a renewed organisational culture where new ideas are welcomed and acted upon with energy. The peer team observed staff's passion and commitment, with many describing the vast difference between the organisation today and that of previous years. The peer team were overwhelmingly impressed by the staff we met.

A key contributor to the council's success has been its relentless focus on being "*brilliant at the basics*". Significant improvements have been made in responding promptly and professionally to enquiries - whether from Government, MPs, members, or the public - sending a clear signal of a functioning, reliable organisation. This foundational discipline must continue as the council moves forward.

Sandwell Council's stated ambition to be "outstanding" is commendable. However, it now needs to define what "outstanding" truly means in its specific context. Is it measured through external inspection outcomes, or does it encompass broader community impact and the lived experience of Sandwell's residents? Clarifying this ambition will help better direct the next phase of improvement and align organisational effort around shared expectations.

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Whilst the council has made significant strides, the peer team would encourage it to remain vigilant into the future. Progress does not eliminate the need to remain aware of past issues; rather, it highlights the importance of maintaining and strengthening the cultural, behavioural, and governance safeguards that protect against regression. Sustaining improvement requires ongoing attention to culture, conduct, and organisational values. The council has moved on from the past and needs to continue to build its confidence that it will not slip back even if there are changes at either political or executive level.

Recruitment and retention of high-quality, permanent staff remains critical. The council has begun to attract talented individuals, but a continued, targeted focus is essential to ensure long-term stability and capacity. A strong, proactive HR function will be vital in leading recruitment, ensuring fairness, and supporting staff development across the council.

The scale of Sandwell's social and economic challenges makes the council's role as a leader, employer, and convenor of place even more important. The borough needs a fully functioning, ambitious, and forward-looking council to navigate these challenges. Encouragingly, all evidence suggests that the council is well on its way to fulfilling this role, with staff and members committed to delivering the kind of council the community deserves.

## 3. Recommendations

The following are the peer team's key recommendations which have been prioritised on the grounds of urgency and importance.

### 3.1 Recommendation 1

Maintain a laser like focus on tackling health inequalities and deprivation, improving

outcomes and building a culture of aspiration: challenge every activity to ensure it is evidence-based and data-driven, including being rigorously evaluated for impact in the short, medium and longer term.

### **3.2 Recommendation 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.

### **3.3 Recommendation 3**

Continue to develop and implement the neighbourhood model to ensure the organisation can better meet the needs of communities and engage in the wider national policy drive towards neighbourhood working and partner development of neighbourhood, including the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector.

### **3.4 Recommendation 4**

Review the council's economic growth strategy to articulate 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.

### **3.5 Recommendation 5**

Expedite the development and implementation of the corporate transformation programme with a focus on devising a clear operating model to prioritise activity which will have greatest impact in the MTF5 period. Ensure improvement priorities are delivered.

### **3.6 Recommendation 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.

### 3.7 Recommendation 7

Deepen the organisation's commitment to Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (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.

### 3.8 Recommendation 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.

In addition to the key recommendations section five of this report captures our detailed feedback and additional recommendations within each of the CPC's core areas of focus.

## 4. Peer team

Peer challenges are conducted by experienced LGA peers, including elected councillors and senior officers. The composition of the peer team was shaped by the specific focus of the challenge, with the LGA selecting peers based on their relevant expertise. The peers for this CPC were:

- **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 Council (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 Council
- **James Millington** - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

## 5. Detailed feedback and recommended actions

This section of the report provides detailed feedback along with additional recommendations related to the five core areas of focus.

When developing the action plan (in response to the CPC's findings), the council should consider both the key recommendations presented in section three and any additional recommendations set out below.

### 5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Sandwell Council has made substantial progress since government intervention. It has rebuilt governance, stabilised services, and invested in modern infrastructure. The peer team heard how the council has a deep understanding of the key challenges facing the borough.

There are solid foundations in place through the Council Plan (2024–2027), aligned with performance indicators. Supporting its ambitions the council has shown real strength in capitalising on opportunities - unlocking regeneration sites through the Towns Fund and Levelling Up investments, and leveraging programmes like Pride of Place and Test, Learn and Grow to support its new approach to neighbourhood working and develop innovative practice. Feedback from partners demonstrates how the council is viewed as responsive, reliable, and capable of delivering visible improvements.

Despite these strengths, the council does face challenges in prioritisation, capacity, and strategic focus. Staff feel stretched in some areas due to too many simultaneous priorities, and feel gaps in resources and capability are slowing momentum.

While delivery oversight exists through the corporate performance board, performance data is not yet fully informing strategic decision-making or long-term horizon scanning. Innovation often appears in isolated pockets rather than as part of a systematic approach. There did appear to be a lack of corporate expertise and capacity to support the council in its strategy, policy, data, insight and innovation

ambitions. Significant capacity pressures are also noted in housing, where leadership and improvement capability need strengthening. Although the borough has real economic strengths – in its connectivity, manufacturing base, and anchor institutions - there is a widespread view that Sandwell is not yet “punching its weight,” and that greater pace and ambition are needed to meet its potential.

### **Are the council’s priorities clear and informed by the local context?**

Sandwell is a diverse, densely populated metropolitan borough of around 353,000 residents, characterised by strong community identity, deep local pride, and rich cultural heritage. It is one of the youngest and most diverse areas in England, with 43% of residents from Black and minority ethnic communities, and it continues to grow due to high birth rates and new housing. Sandwell faces some of the most significant socioeconomic challenges nationally: it is the 19th most deprived local authority in England, with high levels of long-term sickness, low healthy life expectancy, and 37.7% of children living in low-income families. The borough’s historic industrial base remains a defining feature, with a strong manufacturing presence and a £6.5bn economy, but worklessness and skills gaps continue to limit the ability of residents to access opportunities locally and across the region.

The borough is undergoing large-scale regeneration and transformation, supported by a £3bn regeneration pipeline and major regional investments including the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital, the Wednesbury–Dudley Metro extension, and multiple Towns Fund and Levelling Up programmes. Sandwell has six towns (Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich) and each has a distinct identity but are connected by strong place-based partnerships.

The peer team found a strong sense of pride in Sandwell from across the council, at all the levels, by staff and by councillors. Externally too, the peer team found that whoever we asked for their opinion on Sandwell and the council there was support for the work being delivered to improve the borough.

There is clarity and openness about the challenges to address in Sandwell and the borough continues to face a series of deep-rooted and complex challenges that cut across socioeconomic, health, housing, and service-demand pressures. The health inequalities are pronounced, with particularly low healthy life expectancy and high levels of obesity, disability, and mental health need. Demand for both children's and adults' social care is rising in volume and complexity, placing additional financial and workforce strain on the council's ability to deliver responsive services. Housing also presents a major challenge: Sandwell is one of the largest council landlords in England, yet faces a significant repairs backlog, and other compliance issues as highlighted in the 2024 C3 Regulatory Judgement. There is also a long waiting list of 24,200 households currently seeking affordable homes - all within the constraints of brownfield land, viability pressures, and fragmented land ownership.

The council recognises that aspiration and opportunity across the borough needs to be lifted. There is a sense that, particularly for young people growing up here, there's a 'settling' mentality. The council understands this and is planning to address this through its work developing aspiration for communities.

The Council Plan (2024–2027) reflects the challenges of the borough and is built around five strategic priorities, each reflecting what residents said matters most. The priorities are: Growing Up in Sandwell; Living in Sandwell; Healthy in Sandwell; Thriving Economy in Sandwell; and One Council, One Team. The Council Plan is underpinned by refreshed corporate performance indicators which are monitored through the corporate performance management framework. This is an important and well-structured framework for the council but the peer team found that whilst the Plan is sound, once into delivery, staff reported that they can feel very stretched and there either seems to be too many priorities or there isn't enough clarity on what is the immediate or longer term priority. There is an opportunity to consider the sequencing of projects and ensure that there is a clear sense of focus – otherwise attention can be reactive, and capacity can be thinly stretched.

The peer team found the council has a talent for seizing opportunities and the ability to knit together funding from different places including the Towns Fund, and Levelling Up to unlock critical regeneration sites. Large scale transformation of parts of Sandwell are going to make a difference for the whole borough, and for all of the six towns, demonstrating what is possible for the whole borough. The peer team saw this first hand in West Bromwich where the council is delivering a major programme of regeneration and renewal, positioning it as one of the borough's flagship areas for economic growth, culture, and improved public services. A central focus is the West Bromwich Masterplan, which sets out an ambitious vision to increase town-centre living, redevelop underused sites, and create a high-quality mixed-use environment that includes new homes, leisure, education facilities, and a revitalised public realm. The wider regeneration pipeline also includes the £67.5m Towns Fund, supporting multiple projects across West Bromwich, and the delivery of major regional infrastructure such as the Midland Metro extension, improving connectivity with the wider West Midlands.

Similarly, there are other initiatives like Pride in Place and the Test, Learn and Grow programme where the council can demonstrate its ability to work effectively. This can support the development of the neighbourhood working model and innovative practice across all services.

### **Is there an organisation-wide approach to continuous improvement?**

The corporate performance board is gripping delivery and providing oversight. The peer team think there are more opportunities to utilise and embed the performance framework here to drive strategic decision making at the corporate level. This would enable the SLT, and cabinet to have discussions about the future direction of the borough, ensuring these are routinely informed by data and insight. Alongside this there is an opportunity to strengthen the approach for horizon scanning, and considering the next 10-15 years for the borough and what that means for the council's focus.

The peer team have seen many examples of innovative practice around the council, this includes the innovative use of Artificial Intelligence to speed up the blue badges process. However, there does not appear to be a systemic approach to learning and adoption of AI across council, and as part of the approach to continuous improvement this could be further expanded.

The council is the 5th largest council landlord in England, owning and managing around 27,900 homes, which make up 21% of all housing in the borough. The council faces significant challenges in this area, including a major repairs backlog, historic weaknesses in building safety compliance, and limited stock condition data - all of which contributed to a C3 Regulatory Judgement, signalling that urgent improvements were required. In response, the council has undertaken a comprehensive Housing Improvement Programme, achieving substantial early progress by becoming 100% compliant on asbestos removal, completing all overdue fire risk assessments, introducing new systems to track electrical safety work, and surveying 43% of housing stock with a goal of full coverage by December 2026. The council has communicated openly about the judgement and its recovery plan through scrutiny groups and tenant and resident updates.

The council recognises the severity of the issues in Housing. However, given the issues and the council's commitment to addressing this the peer team think that there is a need to now bolster the amount of leadership time and improvement capacity to meet the scale of the challenge. This isn't a reflection on the team and the work which has been delivered so far, but a need to consider the future capacity which is now required.

From regional partners, businesses and others the peer team heard positive feedback from across the region on the journey which Sandwell has been on, but a sense that the council is not yet punching its weight based on the strengths of the

borough. This includes the excellent and expanding connectivity opportunities in the Metro expansion, the manufacturing business space and businesses that want to stay here and grow in Sandwell, and the anchor institutions. The peer team appreciate the regional changes - with a new Economic Delivery Vehicle at the WMCA and significant funding reductions - have meant that the council has carefully considered the timing of recruiting to economic development roles. This currently means the pace and ambition around the council's economic strategy does not yet match the potential. The council's future resourcing intentions in this area can play an important role driving the aspirations within the borough and the peer team recommend that this is taken forward as a priority.

### **Delivery against priorities and comparative performance**

The council has some significant achievements in relation to its performance, including the Children's Services rated 'Good' by Ofsted at the end of 2025. This has been a significant improvement journey and a major milestone after previous inadequate or requires-improvement judgements. The sustained leadership, strengthened partnerships, and strategic alignment between Sandwell Council and Sandwell Children's Trust was recognised in this. This is a huge shift for the Borough and system working.

At the time of the Peer Review the council was awaiting the outcome of the recent Care Quality Commission inspection.

The peer team also reviewed Sandwell Council's performance using [LG Inform](#) when compared to CIPFA near neighbours. The council demonstrates particularly good performance in relation to the following measures:

- Low on the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- Comparing high on the social care-related quality of life measures

- Comparing high on the processing of planning applications.

However, as described already there is recognised challenged performance in Housing where the council has received a C3 grading following inspection by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH).

On other LG Inform metrics the council is performing below comparative areas in:

- The proportion of population aged 16-64 qualified to at least Level 2 or higher
- Health: a higher percentage of adults aged 16+ who are inactive; a large smoking prevalence rate in adults; and higher child obesity rates
- A larger number of total households on the housing waiting list
- A lower percentage of household waste which is sent for reuse, recycling and composting.

In addition to the key recommendations of:

- **Maintain a laser like focus on tackling health inequalities and deprivation, improving outcomes and building a culture of aspiration: challenge every activity to ensure it is evidence-based and data-driven, including being rigorously evaluated for impact in the short, medium and longer term; and**
- **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.**

We also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Consider the sequencing and holistic resourcing of all projects across the**

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**council and ensure that there is a clear sense of focus – otherwise attention can be reactive, and capacity can be thinly stretched**

- **Strengthen the approach for horizon scanning, and considering the next 10-15 years for the borough and what that means for the council’s focus, and the capacity and expertise required to lead and co-ordinate this work; and**
- **Develop a systemic approach to learning and adoption of AI across council, and as part of the approach to continuous improvement this could be further expanded.**

## **5.2 Organisational and place leadership**

Sandwell Council has experienced a period of rapid transformational leadership, driven by the effective partnership between the chief executive, the leader, and senior teams. This leadership has positioned the council well for future success. Confidence is now demonstrably higher across the organisation and partners view the council as a credible and capable organisation that delivers. There are strong and trusting multi-agency partnerships across children’s services, adult services, health, policing, and education which further reinforce the council’s progress, supported by the shared ambition captured through the jointly developed Sandwell Story.

As the council moves towards its ambition of becoming “outstanding”, the next phase requires broadening leadership visibility and strengthening strategic capacity across the SLT and cabinet. There are also opportunities to fully embed the Sandwell Story as a unifying identity and economic narrative for the borough. There remain significant opportunities to amplify success by widening the voices telling Sandwell’s story and by communicating confidently and consistently the scale of change being delivered.

### **Does the council provide effective local leadership?**

The peer team saw outstanding, transformational, outcome-focussed leadership driven by the chief executive, leader and their teams. Impressively, this is set against

the context of Sandwell's rapid improvement journey which led to Government ending intervention in just two years in 2024, the fastest of any council. This was achieved through "*strong and consistent political leadership*" and a chief executive who has been central to stabilising the organisation and driving cultural change. This political and managerial leadership has enabled the council to position itself for the future and resulted in national recognition, including being a finalist for the Local Government Chronicle 2025 'Most Improved Council' award.

It is clear that the chief executive has played a critical personal leadership role in the journey so far – this is a strength and was right for the time. There is now an opportunity to amplify the vision and accelerate pace with greater visibility of the whole senior team, internally and with partners.

There is also now scope for cabinet members' strategic role to be clearer. Members are committed but there can be overlap with their roles as ward members with cabinet and organisational responsibilities. The council has made ongoing improvements to member development, including personal development plans, a member toolkit, and strengthened training to ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities.

The SLT and cabinet needs to be effective for this next phase. This should include considering how meetings can create the time for deeper thinking. The peer team heard that SLT and cabinet spend significant time on operational detail, but recent changes to governance structures have been made to encourage more strategic, collective oversight. The joint SLT and Cabinet approach in developing the budget is a good example of practice which is already working well for the council and can provide a framework for other areas.

The peer team heard how the council has "turned a corner" and there is demonstrable pride in the council, much more confidence in the direction of travel and Sandwell is considered to be a good partner able to get things done. Staff the

peer team met with are proud to represent the council, as reflected in the staff survey results. Sandwell is now seen regionally and nationally as credible, hosting major events, delivering the Sandwell Aquatics Centre, and attracting large-scale investment. The Sandwell Aquatics Centre is a good example of how the council has delivered and is one of borough's flagship assets as an iconic, world-class facility. Originally built to host the swimming and diving events for the 2022 Commonwealth Games, the centre has since been transformed into a valuable state-of-the-art community leisure facility.

### **Are there good relationships with partners and local communities?**

There are really strong partnerships and multi-agency partnerships evident at strategic level – with the new Sandwell Together Partnership Board and anchor partners (schools, colleges, NHS, Police and business) – and operationally (e.g. across the children's and adults' systems). There is trust, openness and a sense of shared purpose. These partnerships co-design strategies, share intelligence, and jointly deliver programmes such as Harvest View, the Family Help reforms, and shared community safety interventions.

The Sandwell Story has enabled partners at a senior leadership level to feel invested in the borough and committed to embedding a shared vision across their organisations. This borough-wide narrative was co-developed with public, private, education, voluntary and community organisations, and senior partners sit on the Sandwell Together Partnership Board, shaping the shared vision and strategic priorities. This is used jointly to promote Sandwell nationally. There is now a huge opportunity to harness the Sandwell Story into a strategic 'north star' and identity for the borough. As it evolves it can speak to a clearer plan for economic growth, translate into something communities can understand and harness pride in place. This forms the basis for a borough-wide vision but is still being developed, with workshops running into 2026 to create agreed priorities. As it becomes more fully embedded it can be a powerful means of tackling the area's challenges together and raising aspirations locally.



The Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector is important in supporting residents, delivering services, and strengthening community resilience. Sandwell has over 1,000 organisations working in its voluntary and community ecosystem. The peer team heard about specific challenges with the (VCFSE) sector; they feel undervalued and disconnected from the vision. They felt that while the leadership of the council has vastly improved there hasn't been consistent, open engagement; and there is lack of clarity about plans for future sector funding. The council recognises a need to reset the relationships following the external review which identified issues around governance, communication, and demonstrating value for money and it acknowledges sector concerns and is developing plans to redesign the council's approach to funding and engagement.

The peer team heard about the improvements in communications, including a new communications strategy aimed at shifting from reactive messaging to a proactive narrative. There is an opportunity to broaden out the voices telling the story and utilise officers, members, partners and residents further as ambassadors. Sandwell should shout from the rooftops and communicate the impact and change!

In addition to the key recommendations of:

- **Review the council's economic growth strategy to articulate 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; and**
- **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.**

We also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **There is now an opportunity to amplify the vision and accelerate pace with**

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- greater visibility of the whole senior team, internally and with partners
- **There is scope for cabinet members' strategic role to be clearer. Members are committed but there can be overlap with their roles as ward members with cabinet and organisational responsibilities;** and
  - **The SLT and cabinet needs to be effective for the next phase. This should include considering how meetings can create the time for deeper thinking.**

### **5.3 Governance and culture**

Sandwell Council has made significant progress in strengthening its governance and culture, with markedly improved relationships between Members, officers, and external partners. Stakeholders consistently reported that relationships are now respectful, transparent, and mature, in sharp contrast to the dynamics that contributed to government intervention. A strengthened SLT and core of passionate officers have contributed to a renewed “One Team” ethos, underpinned by clear values and a shared commitment to preventing any return to past behaviours.

Governance has developed significantly and a fully rewritten constitution, improved Member oversight, respected statutory officers, and strengthened audit arrangements all contribute to a more stable and accountable organisation. Scrutiny also appears to have shifted from adversarial practice to a more informed, strategic and engaged model, with members now actively shaping the budget and key policies.

While improvements are substantial, the peer team recognises that they are still in early stages and require a sustained focus. Overall, Sandwell is on a firm upward trajectory, with a strong foundation of improved relationships, governance, culture and strategic leadership that positions the council well for the next phase of its improvement journey.

### **Are there clear and robust governance arrangements?**

Everyone the peer team met with attested to the much-improved relationships between members and officers. The peer team heard about the strong, respectful, and transparent relationships between members and officers, grounded in improved governance, clearer roles, and a shared commitment to preventing any return to the past issues. This marks a major shift from the issues identified before Government intervention and this improvement is one of the council's important successes. It was recognised that improvements are still at an early stage and that there would need to be close oversight of this positive culture to maintain the improvements, particularly during any periods of significant change. Importantly, members and officers demonstrated commitment that they would not allow things to reverse and ensure that the improvements made in the 'scaffolding' are protected.

The Sandwell Together Partnership Board referenced how the relations were very open and productive. Statutory partners operate through a mature "Five Boards Arena" which are the set of strategic, statutory multi-agency partnerships that collectively oversee the major cross-cutting priorities for Sandwell and bring together senior leaders from the council, NHS, police, voluntary sector, and other partners to coordinate strategy, share intelligence, and drive joint delivery. The newly established Sandwell Together Partnership also provides a shared leadership for place. Partners repeatedly emphasised improved relationships, describing trust, openness and a shared purpose across systems.

There is a positive view of SLT and a passionate core of officers. Staff have a pride in their place and their work, with a willingness to support one another. The peer team heard from staff that they are not looking back but are looking to the future. Staff described feeling proud to represent the council with 76% of employees proud to work for Sandwell, and they describe an increasing confidence in leadership.

Governance improvements were recognised as substantial but still maturing and the peer team found effective governance mechanisms in place which includes:

- The constitution being rewritten and adopted in July 2025
- A feeling of much greater member oversight
- The monitoring officer commanding respect from members and officers
- The monitoring officer, part of the “Golden Triangle” with the chief executive and s151 officer, now playing a visible and respected role in governance
- Audit arrangements which have been put in place
- The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee oversight has strengthened, with Internal Audit providing “reasonable assurance” that governance and internal control arrangements are effective.

The peer team saw how accountability is a core value for the council. The ‘One Team’ values explicitly include being accountable - “delivering what we say we will”, and this principle is reflected consistently in governance, leadership, partnerships, and performance culture. Clear decision-making structures, strengthened scrutiny, and a streamlined constitution ensure transparency and collective responsibility for outcomes. It is also central to the relationships with partners, commissioned services and the workforce. Together, these arrangements create a culture where accountability is visible, embedded and continuously improving across the council.

### **Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?**

Scrutiny has moved on to a more informed work programme and members feel involved in the process. It appears to have undergone a major reform since intervention, shifting to a more strategic, evidence-based model with in-depth sessions to review all elements of the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS). Scrutiny members reported feeling more engaged, and the council continues to refine its approach annually.

Scrutiny must be focussed on scrutinising Cabinet members and not only officers. The peer team heard some evidence that scrutiny was only seeing officers and not

cabinet members and although this appears to have changed recently it should be cabinet members that are being scrutinised, supported by officers and the work programme. There is good work in setting the scrutiny work programme, but at times members felt this was perhaps a little too much officer led. However, the current 28-day council forward plan is recognised as a constraint, limiting scrutiny's ability to shape its work programme proactively. The peer team recommends extending the forward plan period and ensuring cabinet members appear regularly at scrutiny, to reinforce accountability.

The peer team found evidence of better decision making, particularly around the Children's Trust and the MTFs, where there is now an appreciation of the need to make difficult decisions. The council has demonstrated discipline in decision-making, including delivering the major waste service redesign in 2025 – to alternate weekly collection and dual-stream recycling - following a six-month programme of preparation. Despite risks, the change was implemented successfully with minimal disruption and is expected to reduce disposal costs and environmental impact. Improved governance around the Children's Trust and the MTFs also reflects greater willingness by the council to make tough, financially responsible decisions.

The peer team saw improvements in contract management, such as for Kore Sandwell (the Leisure Trust). There have been previous challenges in this and the relationship had been strained but is now in a much more positive position. The improved partnership has resulted in increasing visitor numbers, investment in facilities and, for the first time, a reduction in subsidy, demonstrating both improved performance and financial stewardship.

There appears to be good planning in place to deliver the first "all-out" elections at the council in 20 years. The peer team heard from officers about the planning for the outcome of elections and how to support all new and returning members. The elections service is well functioning and was commended by the Electoral Commission and selected as a national case study on accessibility. Preparations for

the May 2026 all-out elections are well underway, including scenario planning and a new member induction programme to ensure councillors are supported to be effective immediately.

There has been significant investment in member development and a multi-year programme includes personal development plans, a digital member toolkit and tailored training. The peer team encourage the council to continue to consider the support needs of members. Training needs to be offered at different times of the day and should cover both the role of councillors within the wider community and the leadership of the council. Member induction following the elections will be crucial to set the tone, boundaries and mutual expectations and establish the differences between running the council and running a political group and the different roles and responsibilities that councillors hold.

Equalities Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has not yet moved past foundational work and as a result staff networks do not feel that they are as supported as effectively as they could be. While Sandwell's staff networks are active and well-engaged, EDI is still in the "Middle Developing" stage of the Equality Framework, with significant work required. Network feedback has been central to shaping the new Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy 2026–2029, but they reported to the peer team that they want to see visible action beyond commitments.

A housing improvement board is in place, but feedback suggests it lacks corporate ownership and power. Given the scale of risk the peer team stresses the need to strengthen this board's authority and visibility.

In addition to the key recommendation of:

- **Deepen the organisation's commitment to Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (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.

We also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Consider extending the forward plan period and ensuring cabinet members appear regularly at scrutiny, to reinforce accountability; and**
- **Continue to consider the support needs of members. Training needs to be offered at different times of the day and should cover both the role of councillors within the wider community and the leadership of the council.**

#### **5.4 Financial planning and management**

The council is in a comparatively strong financial position, with consecutive underspends over the last three years and has healthy reserves in place. Financial scrutiny has been strengthened, with the MTFS and annual budget now subject to more strategic and evidence-led member oversight, improved value for money (VfM) controls and monthly financial reporting to SLT.

The s151 officer and cabinet member demonstrate a clear grip on the organisation's financial position and the major pressures facing the authority. There is a culture of collective corporate responsibility for financial management which is evident, supported by strengthened governance arrangements such as the monthly statutory officers' group and improved financial reporting.

While the foundations are significantly stronger, the council must now progress the next phase of financial improvement at pace. Work needs to start now for the council to be able to deliver the transformation needed to manage future demand and cost pressures. Future MTFS development must be underpinned by strong business cases linked to the transformation programme; demand-driven pressures also require more sophisticated modelling, including rising adult social care complexity.

## Does the council have a clear understanding of its financial position?

The s151 officer and cabinet member have a grip on the financial position of the council and are clear on areas that need to be addressed including the housing revenue account (HRA), the Children's Trust deficit and emerging pressures relating to the Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs budget. There is collective responsibility from the top of the organisation for financial management and reporting. The s151 officer, as part of the council's "Golden Triangle", provides strong assurance and oversight, and works closely with cabinet members and through the monthly statutory officers group meetings to monitor risks and financial issues. The council has clear sight of key financial risks including:

- £19.792m deficit in the Children's Trust that must be addressed over the next three-year contract period.
- 24,200-household housing waiting list, significant repairs backlogs and major compliance work, requiring strengthened HRA financial management.
- Emerging pressures in relation to the Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs budgets.

In comparison to many other councils, Sandwell's general fund financial resilience is currently relatively strong. The council also has a healthy reserves position that will support the transformation agenda if this work progresses at pace. Sandwell reported a £3.5m underspend on the general fund in 2024/25, contributing to a £22.6m general fund balance and £159.6m earmarked reserves at 31 March 2025. The council has delivered consecutive underspends for three years through strong corporate controls: £13.9m improvement in 2024/25; £6.0m underspend in 2023/24; and £1.9m underspend in 2022/23. This places the council in a materially strong position in comparison with other councils.

The peer team heard how the financial scrutiny and the budget process has been strengthened and improved. The MTFS and annual budget undergo dedicated

scrutiny sessions, with scrutiny now reviewing all components of the MTFs including pressures, savings plans and growth items. The process is continuously refined, with scrutiny now described as more strategic, informed and engaged, especially around financial risk and forecasting.

A procurement and contracts board has been established and is scrutinising VfM. The procurement board was established in October 2024 to provide strategic oversight of all high-value contracts (£100k+), ensuring compliance with the Procurement Act 2023. A separate voluntary and community sector grants board was implemented in March 2025 to ensure alignment and VfM for all grants to the voluntary sector. Regular updates from the procurement and contracts board are provided to audit and risk assurance committee to ensure transparency.

Corporate governance has been reviewed and strengthened across the organisation. As part of the constitution rewrite and adoption to modernise governance, this aligned with the CIPFA/SOLACE framework, and strengthened member–officer accountability. Internal Audit’s 2024/25 opinion judged that governance, risk and control arrangements provided “reasonable assurance” - a marked improvement from pre-intervention assessments.

### **Does the council have a strategy and plan to address its financial challenges?**

There appear to be potential opportunities to reduce service expenditure and the peer team consider that it would be useful to undertake appropriate benchmarking and analysis.

The finance team already recognises the need to rapidly develop robust and affordable financial plans in a number of areas and the peer team endorse this approach. This includes addressing DSG High Needs and HRA/Housing challenges, and ensuring the financial management arrangements for the Children’s Trust are appropriate and effective. The Children’s Trust faces a £19.792m accumulated deficit

relating to social care pressures. This is an unusual position for a Trust, however, there is now a clear agreement in place with the council that will address this deficit over the coming 3 years. It is critical this agreement is delivered. Housing requires substantial investment to address the stock condition surveys; repairs backlogs; major compliance failures, including historic Fire Risk Assessments and electrical works needing major investment – and these pressures require long-term affordability modelling.

The future MTFS pressures will need to be addressed and underpinned by clear and robust business cases linked to the transformation programme. The transformation programme includes 10 major workstreams with £6m of attributed savings, but an independent review found limited confidence that current governance and capacity would fully deliver the scale of required MTFS savings. A new 3-year programme plan is being developed in response and the peer team recommend that this is prioritised for delivery.

Future demand forecasts should include sensitivity analysis and modelling. Key demand-driven risks requiring enhanced modelling include:

- High levels of adult social care complexity (spend increased nearly £3m in 2024/25)
- Rapidly rising EHCP requests, projected to exceed 1,200 assessments in 2025/26
- Growth in homelessness pressures despite new temporary accommodation contracts.

The peer team consider that now would also be a good time to review the council's capital strategy to ensure it aligns with and enables future ambitions of the council. Aligning capital investment to long-term financial sustainability is now essential to ensure the council is able drive forward the changes and regeneration it is aspiring for across the borough and is able to take full advantage of links to the Combined Authority. The council should develop a clear asset management strategy that is data

driven and needs led. This will create the framework for the council's planned move to a Corporate Landlord model, which is recognised best practice. This will enable the authority to ensure it is making best use of its available assets, consider appropriate disposals and drive efficiency across the council.

The council recognises that there are ongoing issues relating to financial accounts which must be addressed within required deadlines as the council has experienced delays in finalising financial statements. This will be supported by recruitment of permanent appropriate skills and capacity within finance teams. The 2024/25 accounts were published in draft in August 2025, and the external auditor (Grant Thornton) reinforced the need for timely delivery. Recruitment to strengthen permanent finance capacity, particularly in technical accounting, is underway and essential for sustainable compliance. In addition to the key recommendation of:

- **Expedite the development and implementation of the corporate transformation programme with a focus on devising a clear operating model to prioritise activity which will have greatest impact in the MTFS period. Ensure improvement priorities are delivered.**

We also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **It is critical the issues relating to the outstanding financial accounts are addressed as quickly as possible to ensure robust financial reporting and related governance is in place;**
- **There appear to be potential opportunities to reduce service expenditure and the peer team consider that it would be useful to undertake appropriate benchmarking and analysis;**
- **Review the council's capital strategy to ensure it aligns with and enables future ambitions of the council. Aligning capital investment to long-term financial sustainability is now essential; and**

- **The council should develop a clear asset management strategy that is data driven and needs led.**

## **5.5 Capacity for improvement**

Sandwell is rightly focused on strengthening its capacity for improvement as it works towards its stated ambition of becoming an “outstanding” council. The organisation is now at a point where it must consolidate the significant gains made during intervention while ensuring it has the leadership, systems and cultural discipline required for long term excellence.

## **The Transformation Programme**

Transformation's role in improving outcomes and financial sustainability is understood and there is a plan for the next stage. The peer team reviewed the council's transformation activity and found an encouraging degree of self-awareness about what has been achieved to date and what remains to be done. Officers were open about distinguishing between work undertaken to meet the requirements of intervention and activity that constitutes genuine organisational transformation. The adults' transformation programme provides a positive example of strong practice which is rooted in evidence, business cases and subject matter expertise.

The peer team observed that some elements of transformation are still operating in service based silos, that could result in inconsistent customer experience (i.e. too many front doors), inefficiencies, poorer outcomes and slower delivery. For example the peer team heard about the continuing challenges including declining FOI and complaints timeliness. This is understandable given the scale of improvement required in children's services, adults' services and housing. However, the council now has a significant opportunity to bring this work together into a coherent, corporate transformation programme.

Leadership and capacity within Housing will need to be prioritised and included in the transformation to ensure corporate ownership, urgency, resourcing and grip. Internal discussions have reflected uncertainty about whether Housing is undergoing improvement or transformation. If this work is integrated into the wider corporate transformation programme, it will help strengthen oversight and strategic ownership, both of which are required given the scale of challenge.

The council has put in place, or is putting in place, several new systems including Oracle ERP that have the potential to support transformation. Staff expressed a clear appetite to maximise these tools, but further work is required to ensure these systems are embedded, understood and utilised to full effect.

However, time is running out to deliver a transformation programme that will impact in the MTF period. Priority should now be given to delivering the agreed plan, mapping resources and resourcing adequately. The peer team believes there is a time critical window for delivering the council's transformation ambitions. Without this, the council risks having to revert to short term savings measures that could undermine the wider transformation agenda.

### **Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities?**

The council has a strong vision and set of values and behaviours that are widely recognised by elected members, staff and partners and people feel held to account against these. It was clear to the peer team that a strong and positive organisational culture is now well established. Staff at all levels were able to articulate the council's values and behaviours and describe how these are 'lived in' practice. They also referenced constructive challenge and accountability when behaviours fall short, reflecting a culture where issues are addressed promptly and consistently. This cultural maturity was evident from SLT through to frontline colleagues, and

demonstrates a workforce willing to embrace change and the demands that come with it.

Good progress has been made in strengthening the senior structure, with new appointments bringing additional energy, expertise and visibility. The peer team saw evidence of talent both recruited into the organisation and promoted internally, which has been recognised by staff across the council. Although some appointments are very recent, there is confidence that they will make a significant contribution to the council's improvement capacity.

Leadership have provided the stability required for improvement, alongside a drive for resident and customer focused change. The council's political and managerial leadership has managed successfully the dual challenge of stabilising the organisation while driving forward improvement. Staff consistently spoke about a focus on residents, customer experience and positive outcomes, not just meeting regulatory expectations or exiting intervention. This was a strong indicator that improvement efforts are rooted in purpose rather than process, and that the council understands the need for sustainable, long term change.

There is a clear direction set out in corporate plans (People, ICT, EDI, Customer, Digital etc) and service improvement plans (Housing, Neighbourhood, etc). Staff understood these plans and were able to describe how they relate to local priorities and their own roles. As these plans move into delivery, coherence and alignment will be increasingly important to ensure the council is not overstretched and that the cumulative impact is clear.

Support services and some directorates are making good progress in restructuring to better meet the demands and ambitions for change. For example, in considering the council's capacity for improvement, it will be important to ensure that enabling services - such as finance, HR, ICT and others - have the capability and capacity to

support the scale of change required. The peer team heard examples of where current capacity is limiting progress, particularly in relation to recruitment processes and workforce planning.

Some feedback provided to the peer team suggested that the council may currently be managing too many priorities simultaneously, resulting in slippage in some areas. A more disciplined approach to prioritisation and programme management will help ensure that resources are deployed to greatest effect. Clarity on what needs to be delivered first, and what can follow, will strengthen the council's ability to manage change at pace. The council may wish to explore this further.

The council has retained its asset base locally and maintained investment in areas such as youth services and family hubs and reintroduced a neighbourhood model. The peer team recognises this as a strength and encourages the council to evaluate how effectively these assets are supporting improved outcomes for children and young people. Continued investment provides a strong platform, but clarity on purpose, impact and outcomes will be essential for the next stage.

Addressing issues relating to diversity and inclusion are important to maximise the talent and expertise in the council and communities. The peer team emphasises that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) will be critical in a borough as diverse as Sandwell. Partners and staff acknowledged the council's positive stance on EDI and its strong public response to recent disorder. However, sentiment now needs to translate into visible, sustained action in order to maintain credibility and strengthen trust with communities. There is significant talent within the council, among members, officers, staff networks and the wider voluntary and community sector. The council should consider how best to harness this to support improvement and embed sustainable change.

## **Becoming an “outstanding” council**

The council recognises that it must define clearly what “outstanding” means in the

Sandwell context. This will require further conversations about the council's operating model, including future use of companies, the role of the neighbourhood model and the organisational characteristics required to deliver outstanding outcomes for residents.

Recognising corporate support services are also improving, there are some key basics that are not yet brilliant and getting in the way of delivery e.g. recruitment, management of poor performance, systems in housing and Oracle ERP implementation. The peer team heard strong feedback that recruitment processes are not yet supporting the pace of change required. Delays in recruitment, concerns about process efficiency and inconsistent management of performance were cited as barriers that require attention. The organisation is aware of these issues and has begun work to address them.

In addition to the key recommendations of:

- **Continue to develop and implement the neighbourhood model to ensure the organisation can better meet the needs of communities and engage in the wider national policy drive towards neighbourhood working and partner development of neighbourhoods, including the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector; and**
- **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.**

We also recommend the following actions:

- **The council has put in place, or is putting in place, several new systems including Oracle ERP that have the potential to support transformation. Further work is required to ensure these systems are embedded, understood and utilised to full effect;**
- **In considering the council's capacity for improvement (HR, legal, procurement, strategy/policy/insight) ensure that enabling services have the capability and capacity to support the scale of change required;**

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**Chair:** Councillor Louise Gittins

**Chief Executive:** Joanna Killian

**President:** Baroness Grey-Thompson

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- **A more disciplined approach to prioritisation and programme management will help ensure that resources are deployed to greatest effect; and**
  - **Evaluate the purpose, use and impact of the council's locally retained asset base to ensure continued investment is clearly aligned to improving outcomes.**

## 6. Action plan and progress review

The senior political and managerial leadership of the council should review and reflect on the findings and recommendations from this CPC.

To promote the principle of transparency, it is a requirement of the CPC process that the final report of the peer team is published in-full within three months of the review being completed. In this instance, this requires the report to be published no later than 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2026.

There is a requirement for Sandwell Council to develop and publish an action plan within five-months of the peer team being onsite, no later than 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2026. This action plan should provide clarity on the activity, milestones, and timelines that the council will work to in responding to the team's findings.

The action plan will also be central to the peer team's re-engagement with Sandwell Council through a progress review which is due to be completed and published by 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2027.

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) have published the Best Value Standards for Local Authorities. These standards expect every council to engage in a Corporate or Finance Peer Challenge at least every five-years. It is expected that Sandwell Council would commission their next Corporate Peer Challenge no later than January 2031.

## 7. Contact details

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your council and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Helen is available to discuss any further support you require and can be contacted on

Helen Murray, LGA Principal Adviser for the West Midlands

Email – [Helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.murray@local.gov.uk)

## Appendix A – What is CPC?

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CPC is a valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officer peers undertaking a comprehensive review of key information and spending three days at the council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the [improvement and assurance framework](#) for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of [Sector-led Improvement](#) (SLI) put in place by councils and the LGA to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These principles state that councils are responsible for their own performance; accountable locally, not nationally; share a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector; and rely on the LGA to provide the tools to support them. CPC is also key to councils in meeting their [Best Value duty](#). UK Government expect all councils to have a CPC at least every five years.

### Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five areas which form the core components of all CPCs. These are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council? Has the council developed a robust transformation programme that underpins the medium term financial strategy?

5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core areas outlined above, every CPC has a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance

### **The peer challenge process**

Peer challenges are designed to support improvement, not inspection. They are not intended to provide a detailed or technical assessment of plans and proposals. Instead, the peer team uses its experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information shared with them, the things they observe, and the material they review.

To prepare, the peer team looks at a range of documents and information to understand the council and the challenges it is facing. This includes a position statement prepared by the council before the visit, which sets out the local context and highlights areas for the team to focus on. The preparation also involves reviewing an LGA Finance briefing (based on public reports from the council's website) and an LGA performance report that shows benchmarking data across a range of measures. The performance report is produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool, LG Inform.

The peer team then spends three or four days at the council. During this time, they gather evidence, information, and views by meeting with council staff, councillors, and external stakeholders. This helps them build a rounded picture of the council's strengths and areas for improvement.