

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

5 February 2026 at 6.07pm at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Lewis (Chair).

Councillors: Dhatt (Vice- Chair) Crompton Jeffcoat	Councillors: Kordala A Singh
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Also present: Councillor Hartwell (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods & Community & Deputy Leader), Councillors Bhamra, Chidley, S Gill, W Gill Kalebe-Nyamongo, Kaur, Loan, Millar and Randhawa.

In attendance: A Yasin (Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

Officers: J McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), L Dove (Service Director – Property and Assets); B Percival (Service Director – Environment and Public Protection); L Willams (Assistant Director-Customer, Democracy and Neighbourhoods), N Bould (Neighbourhood Operations Manager); R Davies (Visitor Services Operations Manager); S Singh (Neighbourhood Engagement Manager); A Wade (Business Manager Libraries, Archives and Museums) and Stephnie Hancock (Deputy Democratic Services Manager).

10/26 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Khan and Ms P Brown.

11/26 **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no interests or party whips declared at the meeting.

12/26 **Urgent Additional Items of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

Neighbourhood Working Model - One Year On

The Board noted an update on delivery of the Neighbourhood Working Model, which had been launched in July 2025 along with the newly established Neighbourhood Services Team, following a review of neighbourhood working commissioned by the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council in late 2023.

This was underpinned by the Strong and Resilient Neighbourhoods Strategy approved in July 2024, which set out what the Council wanted to achieve to make the communities of Sandwell thrive and flourish enabling residents to become active participants in influencing change in their neighbourhoods. The Strategy also recognised the crucial role of members as community leaders who could affect short and long-term change in their wards.

The objective of the service in its initial six months had been to build relationships with members and officers while setting expectations and developing new funding processes. The new team had undertaken significant engagement activity, with a shift towards more targeted, purposeful and community-led approaches, focusing on direct outreach events and partnership-based activity that better reflected the needs and priorities of local communities. Feedback to date had been positive with members being better able to resolve more complex issues that had previously gotten stuck.

From the comments and questions from members of the Board, and those members present as observers; the following was highlighted:-

- the Neighbourhood Services Team was not responsible for managing member case work, but provided support to members to resolve issues that they had previously had difficulty resolving;
- members services was being reviewed to ensure that it aligned to the new model and the organisation was responsive to issues raised by members on behalf of their residents;
- connectivity with other services, as well as the voluntary and community sector was necessary continue to drive positive change and deliver Ward Plans;
- the Team was not yet fully staffed but outcomes were already evident and resources would be reviewed after a review of the Strategy's effectiveness;
- a comprehensive member induction programme was in development, which would include introduction to the Service and set out the parameters of officers roles and responsibilities;
- ward co-ordinators were currently assessing how ward priorities had been met and what lessons could be learned;
- ward priorities would move towards an evidence based, data driven approach to measure success and identify new areas of focus;
- holding ward meetings in community settings would be explored;
- actions arising from ward partnership meetings were captured and followed up using Excel, and no actions were closed until

everyone involved was clear on what had been done/or would be done to resolve the matter;

- data would be shared with the Board on communications analytics;
- further detail would be provided to the Board on data used for the evaluation of the Safer 6 2025 campaign;

Resolved that the Assistant Chief Executive reviews the ICT systems in place to support the Neighbourhoods Team to ensure that they are fit for purpose and support efficient record keeping.

14/26

Heritage Assets and Archives Update

The Board noted an update on projects to upgrade and restore some of Sandwell's heritage assets and proposals to improve the current archives storage facilities.

Works at West Smethwick Park, match funded by the Council and Heritage Lottery Funding, had seen the full restoration of the Grade II listed James Chance memorial, refurbishment of outside spaces, upgrades to the multi-use games area and extensive nature conservation improvements. The new West Smethwick Park Pavilion and Café was in demand and had a growing community events programme.

Conservation works at Bromwich Hall, a Grade I listed building, funded by Historic England, had started in January 2026. Due to its deteriorating external condition, the Museum was classed as "Vulnerable" on the Historic England register, on the basis without urgent repair or intervention the building would need be included on the "Heritage at Risk" register.

The Council's current archives storage was inadequate in both size and condition. A feasibility study carried out in 2022/23 had identified land at the rear of Smethwick Council House as a site for a new facility at an estimated cost of £20million. Visits to other local authorities' archives facilities suggested that a new facility could be developed for significantly less than this however.

A number of Sandwell's heritage assets were being held by Dudley Council pending the development of an appropriate facility in Sandwell that would preserve important artefacts for generations to come. Members wished to emphasise the need to ensure that the facility reflected the entirety of Sandwell's history, including pre 1974, and its distinct six towns.

The project was subject to ongoing consultation with key stakeholders, including the development of a funding strategy. The Board would continue to monitor progress.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community ensures that the new Sandwell archives facility is reflective of the

entirety of Sandwell's history, including pre-1974, and reflects the distinct six towns that make up the borough.

15/26 **Work Programme 2025/26**

The Board noted its work programme for 2025/26.

16/26 **Exclusion of the Public and Press**

Resolved that the public and press are excluded from the remainder of the meeting to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, relating to the financial and business affairs of any person, including the authority holding that Information and information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority.

17/26 **Visitor Services Update**

The Board received a report on the work of the Visitor Services team following concerns about service performance. Visitor Services currently comprised Sandwell Valley Country Park, Sandwell Valley Visitors' Centre, Lightwoods House and Forge Mill Farm. The team also worked closely with the Parks team in relation to events and catering provision.

Since 2024 operational improvements had been implemented at Sandwell Valley, which had significantly improved service standards and included:-

- development of the kitchen garden;
- installation of new greenhouses;
- upgrades to the adventure play area (to be complete by April 2026);
- reorganisation of retail offer;
- enhanced events programme;
- a targeted dog offer (to be complete by April 2026);
- upgrades to site security with new CCTV installed.

Further improvements were proposed to other distinct spaces located within the Valley, after which the Sandwell Valley Master Plan would be reviewed to ensure that it was realistic and achievable .

Similarly, a review of operations at Lightwood House had driven improvements, placing greater emphasis on longer time bookings/tenancies at the House, including:-

- the successful tenancy of 1,000 Trades had been expanded to include the whole ground floor;
- re-purposing of the former bridal suite as office accommodation now occupied by a disability arts charity.

Efforts were being made to raise the profile of Sandwell Valley and Lightwoods House across West Midlands with a focus on tourism and Visitor Services. The Operations Manager was actively building networks across the Black Country to share best practice and raise the profile of Sandwell Valley and Lightwoods House.

In response to member comments and questions the following was highlighted:-

- Sandwell Valley continued to be a principal events venue for the borough, but careful consideration was required as to the size and appropriateness of events held there;
- the borough safety Advisory Group was consulted on all events and the Visitor Services team worked closely with the Events team;
- engaging with neighbouring residents on events was crucial;
- whilst the removal of the animals from Sandwell Valley had removed one of the Valley's unique selling points, Forge Mill Farm was a much more appropriate location for them from a welfare perspective;
- poor signage had led to some visitors being unaware of the appropriate access points for the event they were attending;
- communication and promotion of events needed to be reviewed to ensure that it was effective in terms of informing and engaging neighbouring residents and events were publicised widely to maximise attendance.

Resolved that the Executive Director – Place reviews communication methods relating to events at Sandwell Valley to ensure that they are effective in terms of informing and engaging neighbouring residents and events are publicised widely to maximise attendance.

[Meeting ended at 8.24pm, following a motion which was moved, seconded and carried by a vote, to extend the meeting, in accordance with paragraph 17.1 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules.]

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