

## Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Wednesday, 28 January 2026 at 6.30 pm at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

**Present:** Councillor Fenton (Chair)

<p>Councillors: Davies (Deputy Chair) Dhatt E A Giles</p>	<p>Councillors: Jeffcoat Kordala Singh</p>
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**Apologies:** Councillors Ashraf, Fitzgerald, Hinchliff, Lewis and Carmichael

**Also present:** Moore (Statutory Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, S Gill, and W Gill

**In attendance:** James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Alex Thompson (Executive Director - Finance and Transformation), Mike Jones (Monitoring Officer), Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place), Sally Giles (Executive Director of Children and Education), Frances Howie (Interim Director Public Health), Rashpal Bishop (Executive Director - Adult Social Care and Health), Ben Percival (Assistant Director • Contracts, Projects, Strategy & Policy), Claire Spencer (Service Director – Finance), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead - Service Improvement, Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead Officer - Corporate Performance Management) and David Knight (Democratic Services Officer).

### 1/26 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

### 2/26 Quarter 2 2025/26 Corporate Performance Report

The Board received the Quarter 2 Corporate Performance Report 2025/26, setting out the Council's progress in delivering the Council Plan 2024-2027. It was noted that a two-tiered approach to performance measures had been developed: With 168 performance measures that were within the gift of the Council to influence; and 30 contextual measures that were important for the Council to monitor to track outcomes for residents but were not solely influenced by the Council. The Board noted the following performance highlights:-:

## **Growing up In Sandwell**

- ❖ Performance in relation to completion of Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments had dipped since the last quarter and was below the target rate of 50.3% at 15.65% for a number of reasons including poor pathways, reassignment of the additional staff after the backlog was cleared in August 2025 and delays in the receipt of statutory education advice.
- ❖ Redesigned pathways to make it easier and more appropriate for very young children with significant needs to receive an EHCP plan earlier had led to a double spike in assessment activity and applications, both from the early years age group and the usual volume from primary age children.
- ❖ The Council had now developed a very comprehensive Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) data dashboard, which was allowing officers to dig down and to fully appreciate the situation in regard to SEND in local schools.
- ❖ The Council had appointed a SEND improvement partner to work with the whole SEND system across education, health, and social care over the next 12 to 15 months to help drive forward transformation and improvement and review the EHCP process from end to end.
- ❖ Further to the additional temporary staff resources in the EHCP team to address the previous backlog, there would be 10 additional permanent posts in the team.
- ❖ Eligible working parents could now access up to 30 hours of funded childcare per week for children aged from 9 months to 4 years old (up until they started school). The Council had achieved its target, and a total of 403 places had been created with a further 131 to come.

## **Healthy in Sandwell**

- ❖ The Council had recognised that having designated help for users to set up direct payments had been crucial for managing the complex legal and administrative responsibilities of hiring personal assistants, handling payroll, taxes, and insurance. Such expert support ensured that users complied with regulations, maintained accurate records, and allowed users to focus on choosing care that met their needs, rather than becoming overwhelmed by bureaucracy. It had been about building people's confidence in what they could do with a direct payment, and then ensuring the infrastructures had been properly established to support them.
- ❖ The Council had transitioned away from a dedicated downloadable "MySandwell" app to focus on the fully mobile-optimised MySandwell website for a better user experience. In addition, the Cabinet had in November 2025 agreed the need for a digital strategy to establish a clear, modern, approach to digital delivery especially with the rapid advancements in technology, which had presented transformative opportunities that the Council's existing digital framework had not been optimised to use.
- ❖ Whilst the Council had achieved a record-breaking 16 Green Flag Awards for its parks and green spaces in 2025, satisfaction in this area had dropped and there was no indication of any diminution in standards therefore the Council would be undertaking a review of parks and green spaces.

## **Living in Sandwell**

- ❖ It was important for the Council to bring empty properties back into use is a priority as it is a cost-effective method to address urgent housing needs while tackling the negative community impacts of derelict buildings. Also by reducing the time properties sat empty, the Council could decrease the reliance on expensive bed-and-breakfast or temporary accommodation for homeless households.
- ❖ Whilst the Council had a legal duty to act when it identified a Category 1 hazard under the Decent Homes Standard, the law did not set a single, rigid deadline for all scenarios, the approach was to minimise risks to health and safety as far as is practically possible, prioritising hazards based on their potential for harm.
- ❖ The Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board had been considering the issue of Category 1 hazards including both environmental and structural in relation to any residential dwelling that is considered unfit for habitation.
- ❖ The Board indicated that it wanted to know if the £300,000 underspend in the Housing would reinvest into prevention of homelessness. The Council had implemented a more proactive, intelligence-led approach to fly-tipping by targeting known hotspots, increasing CCTV usage, and the training SERCO staff on how to find evidence to identify the perpetrator in order to make a prosecution. The Council was also working with the London Borough of Brent to understand best practice and how this could improve enforcement activity. In addition, the Council had put together a multidisciplinary team to look at waste issues, planning issues, private sector housing issues, enforcement issues, and social behaviour.
- ❖ The Council's call centre had shifted away from traditional triaging (where call centre staff function as gatekeepers who pass issues to the back office) towards a model focused on aiming to address customer issues during the initial interaction. This approach had been driven by the understanding that reducing customer effort and eliminating the need for repeat calls boosted customer satisfaction and productivity, whilst more generally, the Council had started the process of introducing a new telephony system with improvements in terms of functionality.
- ❖ The Council had a strong, long-term record of reducing road casualties, with total incidents having been halved over the past 22 years and child casualties reduced by two-thirds. The Council had achieved some of the best casualty reduction rates in the West Midlands and had been rated Green in a new government traffic light system for road maintenance (2025-2026), ranking 4th out of 154 councils nationally and top in the West Midlands.
- ❖ The Council had seen a massive increase in food waste recycling, with collections tripling from roughly 50 tonnes to 168 tonnes per month following the introduction of new Alternate Weekly Collections in late 2025. This had been driven by the new system required by upcoming national legislation for April 2026, that aimed to reduce landfill, with residents encouraged to register for the free, weekly brown bin service. However, whilst there had been a delay in the supply of additional food waste caddies, Serco had assured the Council that 2,000 such caddies would be arriving within the next two weeks.

**One Council One Team**

- ❖ The Council had undertaken significant work to improve response rates and to consolidate a structured, step-by-step procedure to manage Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for recorded information within statutory time limits. The Council had therefore considered use of appropriate assistive technologies to ensure that it maintained full compliance with the legislation.
- ❖ Staff absence was managed through a properly structured, data-driven, and supportive framework to maintain service delivery whilst ensuring the well-being of employees

**Resolved:-:**

1. that the Executive Director-Children and Education provides the Board with timescales for delivering the additional 131 childcare places which had been delayed due to (a) Council commissioning of LA sites, (b) Ofsted registrations not yet being received and (c) contractors being allocated to the building work;
2. that the Executive Director -Place provide the Board with the timescales in relation to the resolution of category 1 Hazards (serious, immediate risks to health and safety) identified under the Decent Homes Standard;
3. that the Executive Director -Place provides the Board with information on how the underspend in Temporary Accommodation of £300,000 is being utilised.

**3/26 Budget 2026/27**

The Board noted that at its meeting on 4th February 2026, the Cabinet would be asked to recommend the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Draft Budget 2026/27 for approval by Full Council at its meeting on 24th February 2026. Accordingly, in advance of that Cabinet meeting, the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board had been asked to review the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Draft Budget materials and identify any recommendations that it wished to make. Arising from the presentations, questions, and comments that arose, the following items were of particular note:-

- ❖ There had been consistent calls to government for the updating of the formulas and the underlying data used for the assessment of relative needs and resources to ensure that varying levels of local need and demand had been appropriately reflected in the funding allocation system.
- ❖ This was the first multi-year settlement in a decade (2026/27–2028/29) and it had provided the Council with more certainty to plan beyond the immediate financial year.
- ❖ The budget had been designed to deliver on both immediate resident priorities and long-term goals for the Council and underlined a "balanced" approach—investing in essential, day-to-day services whilst simultaneously funding regeneration, housing, and infrastructure projects. The financial plan had been developed through comprehensive consultation, including through this Board and was intended to manage fiscal demands (e.g. inflation and increased service demand), whilst continuing to have one of the lowest council tax rates, not just in the region, but in the country as well.
- ❖ The Board welcomed the acknowledgment by the Executive of the crucial work it had undertaken as this commitment to reviewing spending plans, ensuring

transparency, and driving value for money had been essential for effective financial management.

- ❖ to address any emerging financial deficits in later years, the Council would be contributing money to reserves to be able to cover any disproportionate increase in financial and operational costs.
  - ❖ going forward the scrutiny of the deliverability of proposed efficiencies would be a critical part of the overview and scrutiny process.
1. The Chair of the Board placed on record her gratitude to the Statutory Deputy Leader and council officers on the comprehensive reports that had been presented to the Board in recent months and the work that had gone into producing those reports; and the thoroughness of Board members in their efficient and effective investigation over the past months of the financial, legal, and operational information presented to them for their scrutiny.