

# Improvement Plan

May 2023



# Foreword from Leader and Chief Executive



Kerrie Carmichael  
Sandwell Council Leader

**A year on from the approval of our Improvement Plan, we are proud to look back over our achievements.**

We have embarked on whole-scale organisational change at the same time as delivering on our Corporate Plan commitments.

The long-standing service issues raised by external reviews in 2021 have now either been addressed or are well-progressed with robust delivery plans in place. This has enabled the council to shift its focus to longer-term planning. We welcomed follow-up external reviews from Grant Thornton, the Local Government Association and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy in Autumn 2022. Together with our Commissioners, they noted our significant progress.

Over the past year our achievements have been recognised. Sandwell's Emotional Wellbeing Programme has been shortlisted as one of eight finalists in the Innovation in Partnerships category at The Municipal Journal Awards. The project has supported more than 2,000 children and young people who are struggling with mental health issues. The prestigious Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) West Midlands Awards

for Planning Excellence 2022 honoured Sandwell Council's planners for shaping the regeneration of Smethwick. Our Housing Team were also shortlisted for an Inside Housing Development award for Best Older People's Housing Development - in 2022.

The launch of our One Team Framework, which sets out the organisational values and behaviours, was a significant milestone in our improvement journey. The five new organisational values and behaviours set out an ambition to be 'one team united and working together with a shared purpose of achieving great results' that is customer focused, inclusive, ambitious and accountable.

Over the past year, firm foundations have been laid and we have established mechanisms and approaches for new ways of working. More of our work is being driven by engagement, co-production, and using evidence effectively. We are also benefitting from strengthened relationships between Members and Officers and effective input from Audit and Scrutiny Committees as part of our One Council approach.

Examples of this include:

- Proposals around Brandhall Golf Course and consideration of the 4-Yearly Election Cycle, which involved resident engagement and consultation, and Scrutiny involvement to inform the decision-making process
- Using our resident's consultation to inform business planning and budget setting
- Development of the One Team Framework through staff engagement
- Developing our Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy through focusing on insight and data

This report presents our progress against each of the six Improvement Plan themes. It contains the objectives for each theme, a timeline of the milestones achieved, evidence of success, and the next areas of focus.

We have refreshed our Corporate Plan for 2023 to reflect priorities raised during our business planning process, the significant amount of change over the past 12 months, and the longer-term activity contained within the Improvement Plan. This paves the way for our improvement activity to be embedded within our Performance Management Framework and to move away from a stand-alone plan in forthcoming months.

Our ambition is not simply to see the end of Government intervention; we're striving for excellence.

Within the Improvement Plan our key areas of focus over forthcoming months are driving our plans around Organisational Culture, Customer Journey, Transformation and Delivering the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

We enter the year ahead with pride in our achievements and a commitment to continue to work as One Team to drive the council's improvement.

Our progress so far could not have happened without the commitment and dedication of Members and Officers alike and we want to pass on our thanks and appreciation to them.



Shokat Lal  
Sandwell Council Chief Executive



# Organisational Culture

Organisational Culture

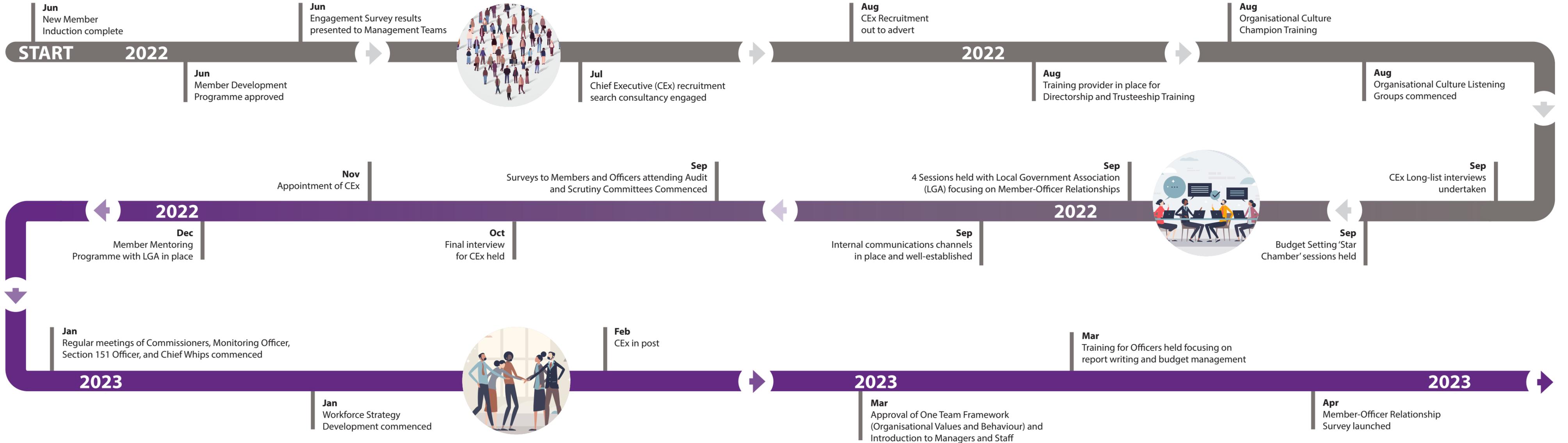
Corporate Oversight

Strategic Direction

Decision Making

Procurement and Commercial

Partnerships and Relationships



## Objectives

- For Senior Leadership (Officers and Members) to work together effectively
- That Officers receive appropriate support and direction from Senior Leaders
- For the council's organisational culture to change, ensuring sustainable improvement through a focus on improving outcomes for residents, empowering staff to make decisions at the right levels, learning lessons and embedding customer focus throughout the organisation

## Evidence of Success

**We said that when we have made progress towards embedding an effective organisational culture, we would see evidence of:**

- Employee engagement results improving
- Managers demonstrating expected behaviours (via employee engagement survey results)
- Members demonstrating effective behaviours
- Officers and Members having confidence in their decisions
- Healthy and regular dialogue between Senior Leaders (Officers and Members)
- Improved take-up of Member Development Programme opportunities
- Improvements in external review outcomes

The launch of our One Team Framework (organisational values and behaviours) marks the start of the next phase of our organisational culture change programme. The framework is the result of cross-council staff engagement which was facilitated by an internal network of Culture Champions. It sets out an ambition to be one team 'united and working together with a shared purpose of achieving great results' that is customer focused, inclusive, ambitious and accountable.

The repeat of our employee engagement survey in Autumn 2023 will further our insight into how our organisational culture is changing and how well the values and behaviours are becoming embedded. We have learnt from our 2022 Employee Engagement Survey results and we are committed to involving staff in the changes that affect them. An example includes staff views being used to inform policy development around hybrid working through a survey which received more than 1,350 responses from staff and managers.

# 474

staff involved in developing the One Team Framework



Our comprehensive Member Development Programme has been developed based on Members' needs and learning from previous years. Member and Officer training around decision-making and governance has been well-received and is helping to embed the constitutional changes made during the year. Personal Development Plans have been developed for Members and learning needs are being addressed within the next update to the Member Development Programme.

We have made significant strides in the relationship between Members and Officers which was acknowledged by our external reviewers. Along with training and support, a range of meetings are in place to facilitate a healthy and regular dialogue which includes meetings with Group Leaders and Chief Whips and cross-party working groups. The strength of the relationship has enabled the council to move forward on difficult decisions such as the 4-Yearly Election Cycle, development of Brandhall Golf Course, the introduction of garden waste charging, and setting a balanced and sustainable budget for 2023/24 without reliance on reserves.

We know that culture change will take time. We are committed to continuous improvement

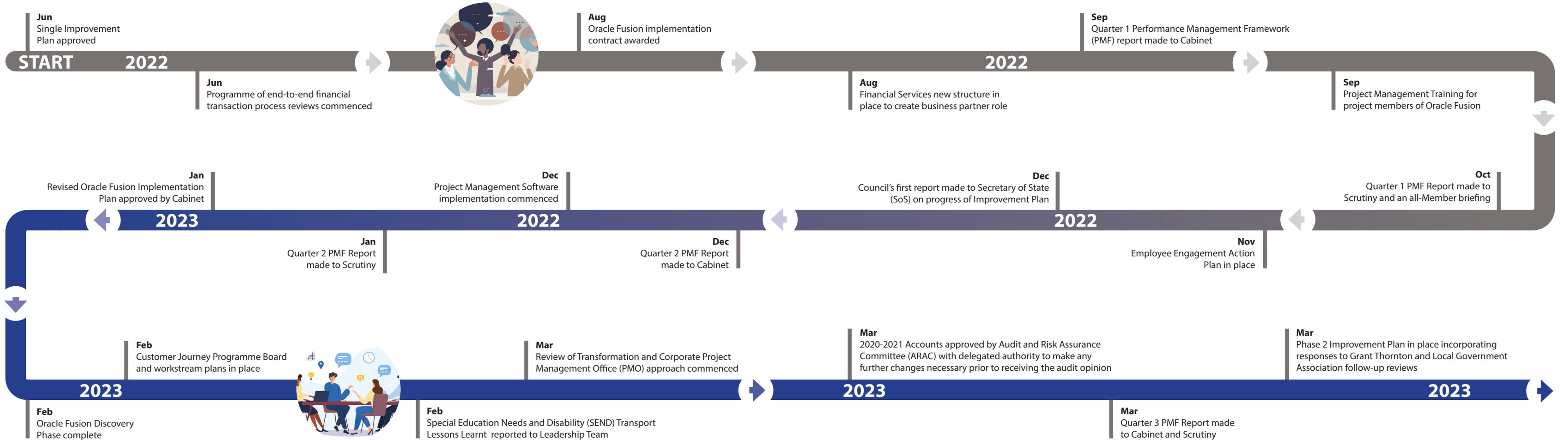
and have recently launched a Member-Officer Relationship Survey to build on insight gained to date through seeking views from Officers and Members participating in Audit and Scrutiny Committees and the Employee Engagement Survey.

*'Cabinet and Leadership Team are working increasingly well'*  
LGA

## Next Steps

- Roll out of the One Team Framework to embed values and behaviours
- Continued focus on Member-Officer Relationships and New Member Induction
- Workforce Strategy approved and implemented
- Continued focus on learning and development for Members and Officers to embed corporate governance changes
- Using insight to drive continuous improvement - Employee Engagement Survey and Member Officer Relationship Survey

# Corporate Oversight



## Objectives

- Take effective corporate oversight of long-standing service issues and the council's overall improvement journey
- Embed learning from service issues identified in external reviews
- Provide a corporate approach to performance management and the delivery of programmes and projects
- Ensure the role of the Corporate Core is strengthened to enable front line services and staff to focus on outcomes for residents

## Evidence of Success

**When we are demonstrating effective corporate oversight, we said that we would see evidence of:**

- Performance information being used by Leadership Team and Members to set strategic direction and respond to issues
- Improvement in performance measures relating to One Council
- Improvement in Employee Engagement Score
- Improvement in the views of external reviews

The long-standing service issues raised by Grant Thornton in their original Value for Money Governance Review have either been resolved or good progress has been made with a firm delivery plan in place. A major area of focus for the council is around improvements to the customer journey and we are developing a far-reaching programme of work linked to our One Team Framework.

*'The council has a greater corporate grip over improvement, performance and decision making'*

Grant Thornton Autumn 2022

In June 2022 we made our first quarterly report on our newly agreed Performance Management Framework. Over the past year we have reported quarterly on our progress in delivering the Corporate Plan along with our key performance measures around organisation health, finance and customer. Governance structures have been established to ensure regular monitoring and performance conversations are taking place. The Local Government Association (LGA) commented that 'the [Performance Management] Framework, and the information and insights it provides, act as a prime example of the way in which an increased evidence-base for decision-making can be seen in the council.'

Performance information is being used to set strategic direction and respond to issues. Examples include:

- Prioritising work around the customer journey
- Conducting additional analysis around recruitment and retention issues to inform a corporate approach
- Taking in-year action to manage the projected budget position e.g. through vacancy management arrangements
- Work to improve our response rates on Subject Access Requests (SAR) and Freedom of Information Requests (FOI) bringing them closer to target

- Reducing the number of Corporate Plan actions with significant progress issues
- Using an evidence bundle, including performance information and the outcomes from resident's consultation to inform our refreshed Business Plans and Corporate Plan
- Pulling together activity into a comprehensive transformation programme that will improve accessibility, systems, service and embed a customer focused culture

FOI response rate from  
**62% at Q1**  
to  
**82% at Q3**

Strong governance arrangements were put in place to deliver the Commonwealth Games with regular updates to Leadership Team. Close working partnerships between the council, Commonwealth Games Organising Committee (CGOC) and Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) allowed for the robust management of issues that arose throughout the project, resulting

in the successful cross-council delivery of the Commonwealth Games events at the Sandwell Aquatic Centre.

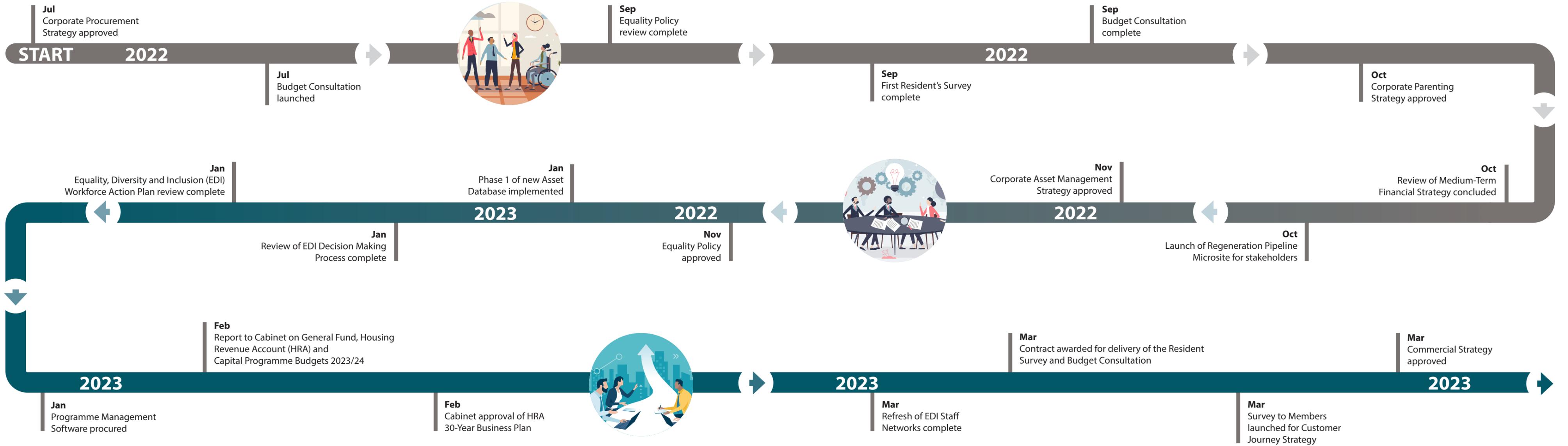
The Oracle Fusion Programme now has a more robust governance and resource model in place. A new Systems Integration Partner was procured in 2022 and a revised, realistic implementation plan and budget was approved by Cabinet in January 2023. A comprehensive Change Strategy is now in place.

We are taking time to reflect and learn. We completed a lessons learnt exercise around Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Transport Procurement. This is informing the council's overall approach to procurement such as through the creation of a procurement pipeline to help manage resources along with revised guidance and templates. It has also informed developing plans around the creation of a Programme Management Office and approach. This is currently under review with Local Partnerships. We are undertaking a lessons learnt exercise with Grant Thornton around the closure of our financial accounts and have sought out and have reflected on lessons learnt from a neighbouring local authority around their implementation of Oracle Fusion to assure ourselves around our approach and mitigations. A standard approach to lessons learnt is being developed.

## Next Steps

- Continued focus on using performance information and insight to set strategic direction and respond to issues
- Implementation of service standards
- Creation of Corporate Project Management Office
- Transformation Programme in place
- Oracle Programme 'go live'
- Sign-off of final accounts for 2021/2022 and 2022/2023
- Delivery of Customer Journey Programme

# Strategic Direction



**Jul**  
Corporate Procurement Strategy approved

**START 2022**

**Jul**  
Budget Consultation launched



**Sep**  
Equality Policy review complete

**Sep**  
First Resident's Survey complete

**2022**

**Sep**  
Budget Consultation complete

**Oct**  
Corporate Parenting Strategy approved

**Jan**  
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Workforce Action Plan review complete

**2023**

**Jan**  
Phase 1 of new Asset Database implemented



**Nov**  
Corporate Asset Management Strategy approved

**2022**

**Oct**  
Review of Medium-Term Financial Strategy concluded

**Jan**  
Review of EDI Decision Making Process complete

**2022**

**Nov**  
Equality Policy approved

**Oct**  
Launch of Regeneration Pipeline Microsite for stakeholders

**2023**

**Jan**  
Programme Management Software procured

**Feb**  
Cabinet approval of HRA 30-Year Business Plan



**2023**

**Mar**  
Refresh of EDI Staff Networks complete

**Mar**  
Contract awarded for delivery of the Resident Survey and Budget Consultation

**Mar**  
Survey to Members launched for Customer Journey Strategy

**2023**

**Mar**  
Commercial Strategy approved

## Objectives

- Ensure that focus is maintained on longer-term direction through effective strategies being in place to support our Corporate Plan outcomes
- Ensure that sustainable financial planning is in place that is aligned to our priorities
- Conduct consultation and use the findings to inform budget setting and our understanding of how the council is performing

## Evidence of Success

We said that when we are maintaining focus on our longer-term plans, we will see evidence of:

- Improvement to Corporate Plan Outcome Measures
- Sustainable Financial Planning in Place aligned to priorities
- Consultation and Engagement Shaping Strategic Direction and Financial Planning
- Examples of Sandwell's national profile showcasing the good work of the council

Through focused reporting, we have demonstrated significant progress on our Corporate Plan, and have reduced the number of areas with significant issues over the year (from 9 to 3, between quarter 2 and quarter 3). In July 2023 we will make our first report against Corporate Plan measures which will further grow our insight into performance to drive our strategic thinking and direction.

The original Grant Thornton Review of 2021 identified the disproportionate amount of time spent firefighting in recent years. In their follow-up review of 2022, Grant Thornton commented that 'by taking a grip of many long-standing operational challenges the leadership of the council is starting to create time and space to better consider the long-term'.

Our strategic capacity is growing. Leadership Team are dedicating more collective time to strategic thinking, for example through our recent work around the cost of living crisis and the customer journey.

We now have a set of new long-term strategies in place developed through engagement with partners. These include strategies around Early Help, Corporate Parenting, Green Spaces and Health and Wellbeing along with the £2.3bn pipeline of regeneration projects set to transform Sandwell's six towns in the coming years. We are monitoring the delivery of these strategies through the Performance Management Framework and we are making a positive impact. Of families who received multi-agency early help, 76.2% were not referred back to Early Help services or Children's Social Care within 12 months. New strategies around the Customer Journey, Workforce and Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion are in development. All of which are drawing on extensive engagement.

We have set a balanced budget for 2023-24 that is aligned to our Corporate Plan priorities. Our Medium-Term Financial Strategy has been fundamentally reviewed and looks ahead to 2026. It identifies medium term savings options, closer integrates capital and revenue planning and we are committed to reviewing this annually.



CIPFA rating from 2\* to 3\* rating for Financial Management

In Summer 2022 we conducted a Resident's Wellbeing and Perception Survey and Budget Consultation. This has informed our 2023-2026 budget and business planning. For example, residents' preferred way to close the budget gap was to introduce more charging for non-essential services and to make savings through reducing buildings. This shaped our considerations of charging for garden waste collections, and informed our Corporate Asset Management Strategy which was approved by Cabinet in November. We are committed to continuing this approach and have a commission in place for resident's engagement and budget consultation for the next three years.

We enjoyed national and international coverage of Sandwell through the Commonwealth Games, and we are continuing to build Sandwell's profile for example with coverage in Local Government press for the Assistant Chief Executive recruitment, and successes in awards. These include:

# 1,062

participants of resident's survey – providing a representative sample

- Sandwell's Emotional Wellbeing Programme which has been shortlisted for the Innovation in Partnerships category at the Municipal Journal Awards
- Our Planners being awarded for the shaping of the regeneration of Smethwick by the prestigious Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) West Midlands Awards for Planning Excellence 2022
- Our Housing Team being shortlisted for an Inside Housing Development award for Best Older People's Housing Development - in 2022.

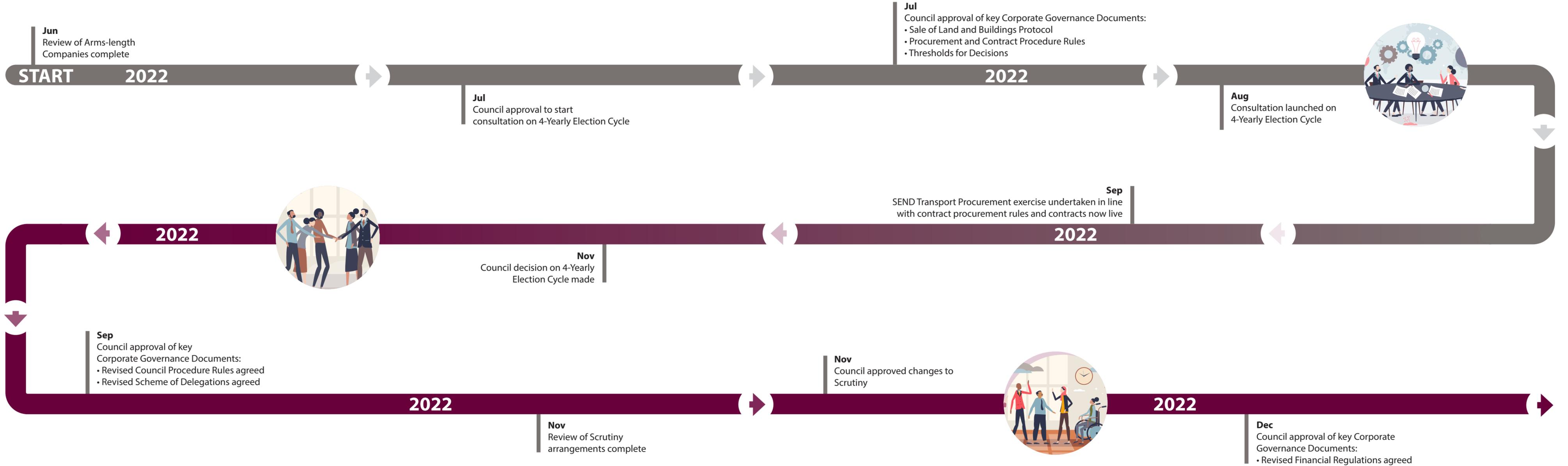
Sandwell has some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country and the challenges facing residents have been exacerbated by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Sandwell has been recognised as an area in need and we are excited to be working in partnership with the Government to bring forward proposals for a Levelling Up Partnership to further our regeneration aspirations.

## Next Steps

- Development of our strategies around Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion and Customer Journey
- Prioritising Leadership Team collective time on strategic matters
- Continuing to use insight from consultation and engagement and the Performance Management Framework to inform strategic direction



# Decision Making



## Objectives

- Review and refresh key corporate governance documents laying the foundations for robust decision-making, audit and scrutiny and culture change
- Create a clear and strong role for Scrutiny and Audit and embed in practice
- Explore options around a 4-yearly electoral cycle

## Evidence of Success

**When we are demonstrating clear effective decision making, we said that we would see evidence of:**

- Decision reports written which set out options and an assessment of their impact on outcomes for residents
- Evidence of effective scrutiny work through robust scrutiny review / input into priority areas
- Audit input driving assurance and improvement
- Commissioners' role embedded and understood across the council

Over the last twelve months we have undertaken a comprehensive corporate governance review, building in best practice and taking a co-production approach by engaging Members and Officers throughout. As a result, key corporate governance documents have been revised that clearly set out roles and responsibilities at all levels improving the transparency in decision making and ensuring decisions are made at the appropriate level. These include Thresholds for Decisions, Financial Regulations, Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules, Sale of Land and Buildings Protocol, and a revised Scheme of Delegation.

The current focus of the governance review is to embed the constitutional changes. This involves a series of learning and development activities for

Members and Officers, implementation of phase 2 of the Mod.gov system, and developing a new set of performance measures within the Corporate Performance Management Framework to track our progress.

In October 2022 the LGA revisited us to review our progress and reported positively on the effective work of Scrutiny. Examples of effective scrutiny work include a call-in around the Brandhall development, scrutiny of the SEND Transport Procurement, work underway on the customer journey, and a review into the impact of lockdown on children and families.

*'Scrutiny is going from strength to strength'*

LGA 2022

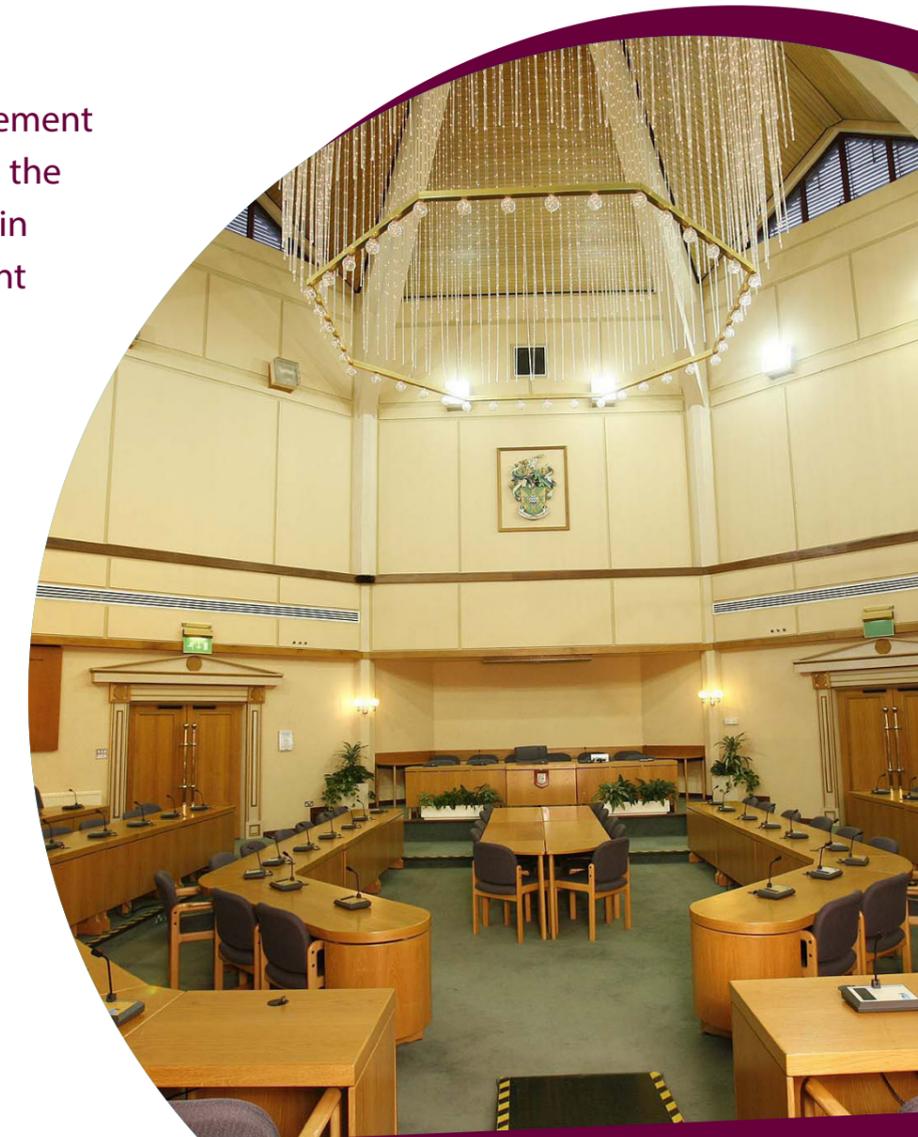
Grant Thornton also provided feedback on their return visit around the positive contribution of Audit and acknowledgement of the focus on matters of strategic importance rather than historic matters. A series of improvements to Audit and Scrutiny have been embedded throughout the course of the Municipal Year including agenda setting meeting and pre-meeting briefings with Chair and Committee Members. In order to

provide continued assurance around the work of Scrutiny and Audit, a survey is sent out at the end of each meeting to collate Officer and Member responses that are used to aid the continuous improvement work around these committees. The insight has led to conversations around etiquette in meetings to clarify expectations, improving the robust questioning from panel members and it has informed the Member Development Programme.

The Commissioners' role has been embedded within the council and the understanding of the role has been aided by regular staff communications. This included an 'All Staff Briefing' held January 2023 where updates were provided on the transition arrangements when the new incoming Chief Executive was due to join the council. The Commissioners' priorities were also shared at this meeting and live Q&A allowed for staff to ask questions.

## Next Steps

- Continuing to embed constitutional changes
- Focus on continuous improvement in decision-making including the development of metrics within the Performance Management Framework



# Procurement and Commercial

Organisational Culture

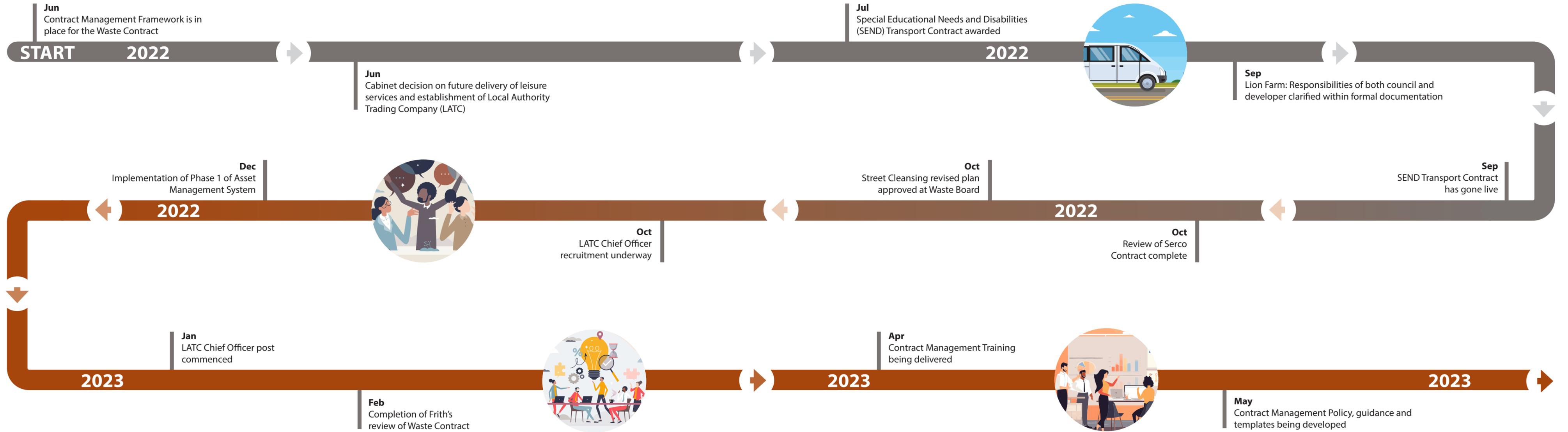
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## Objectives

- Conclude procurement and commercial matters in relation to key legacy issues
- Ensure that learning in relation to issues around commercial decisions, procurement and contract management are understood across the council
- Ensure corporate ownership and effective contract management of major contracts
- Ensure that major contracts have an effective focus on service quality and outcomes
- Conduct effective procurement for the new systems that are needed to support the delivery of the council's Improvement Plan

## Evidence of Success

**When we have robust systems and processes around procurement, commercial matters and contracts, we said we will see evidence of:**

- Key contracts being effectively managed
- Improved outcomes from key contracts and commercial decisions as demonstrated by performance indicators for leisure, and waste
- Lessons learnt documented

In the original report from Grant Thornton, it was highlighted that contracts had been impacted by either poor specification during procurement, lack of clear contract management responsibility or poorly defined approaches to contract management. During their return visit in October 2022, they were able to see that there was clear evidence that the council was making better procurement and commercial decisions.

They pointed to Sandwell, Land and Property (SLaP) having been dissolved, Lion Farm and Providence Place being managed to a conclusion and notice having been served on Sandwell Leisure Trust. It was also noted that Sandwell Children's Trust had seen their rating improve on their most recent Ofsted inspection representing significant improvement.

Key major contracts are being managed across the council and they are embedded within the Corporate Performance Management Framework

to review their performance and service outcomes.

As a result of this focused monitoring, resident reported missed bins have been reducing month on month, and a clear plan is in place to improve street cleansing. Serco has now purchased a suite of new equipment including mini-sweepers, large mechanical sweepers and electric street vacuums, all of which should significantly improve the borough's cleanliness.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Transport Contract was awarded in September 2022 following a robust procurement process. Lessons learnt sessions were carried out with staff involved in the process and documented to aid continuous improvement. The findings are being shared and embedded within business plans.

We have commissioned a piece of work to review the council's current contract management arrangements, provide training for relevant officers and develop a suite of contract management policies and templates. Specific contract management support is being provided externally for a small number of key contracts.

## Next Steps

- Waste and Leisure Contracts being added to In-tend Contract Management Module to assist contract monitoring
- Review of council's current contract management arrangements
- Corporate Performance Management System in place
- Report to Cabinet on determination of position of developer for Lion Farm
- Establishment of Local Authority Trading Company for future delivery of leisure services
- Phase 2 of Asset Management System implementation



# Partnerships and Relationships

Organisational Culture

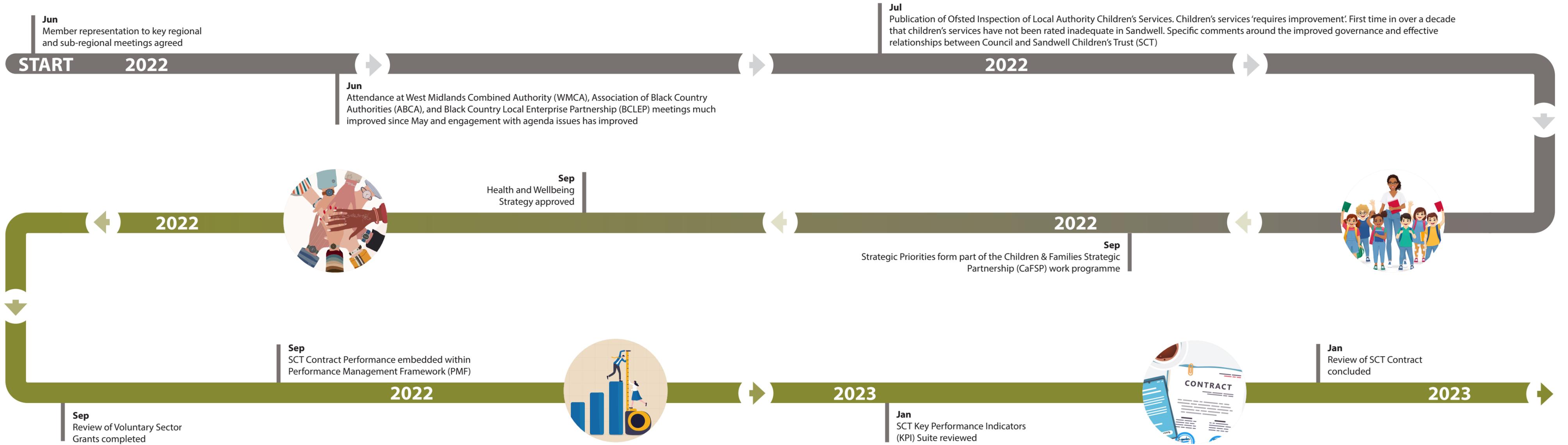
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# Partnerships and Relationships

## Objectives

- Improve Sandwell Council's standing with key partners and professional bodies at national, regional and local level
- Improve corporate approach to partner relationships
- Determine the future relationship between Sandwell Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and the approach to funding

## Evidence of Success

**When we have effective partnerships and relationships at all levels, we said that we will see evidence of:**

- Improved outcomes for children and young people in Sandwell evidenced in Key Performance Indicators
- Improved external review outcomes
- Regular and active presence at regional and sub regional meetings resulting in more opportunities linked to Sandwell's priorities (e.g. Sandwell's financial asks realised)
- Improved performance in outcomes on the impact of health inequalities on individuals
- Clear understanding of the relationship between the council and the VCS that is embedded in practice – evidenced by feedback from VCS

Key Performance Indicators relating to the contract with Sandwell Children's Trust are reported and tracked through the Corporate Performance Management Framework to support senior leadership oversight. Over the year, there has been a significant reduction in the number of children in care and continued efforts across the Trust and council on workforce issues. New KPIs have been reviewed and will be introduced during Q1 following the commencement of the Sandwell Children's Trust

contract on 1 April 2023, and a dashboard of KPIs has been developed to support the Early Help Strategy delivery.

We regularly attend and participate in key regional and sub regional partnerships such as the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Board, the WMCA Economic Growth Board, the WMCA Housing and Regeneration Board and the Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA) Leaders. This participation has meant that we have secured support from the Mayor and all Metropolitan Leaders to the agreed allocation of £2million from the Commonwealth Games 2022 budget underspend of £70million to fund increased utilities costs for the Sandwell Aquatic Centre. We have also fully participated in the negotiations and discussions on the proposals for a Devolution Deal with Government and formal decisions will be taken on this in the Autumn of 2023.

External Partners were spoken to by the Local Government Authority (LGA) when they returned in October 2022 and noted that Sandwell Council was much better again at sub-regional level, with the Leader of the Council being seen to engage in all the right places.

*'Sandwell's voice is now being heard more widely'*

LGA 2022

We are also working well with local partners, as demonstrated by our recent Cost of Living Emergency Summit. The summit brought together more than sixty public, private and voluntary sector partners to coordinate our efforts to support our community through this crisis. It resulted in a series of partnership-wide commitments and asks.

Our relationship with the VCS continues to deliver significant outcomes for Sandwell. A comprehensive review of grant funding across the sector demonstrated that our investment is to be aligned to our corporate objectives, and we continue to be committed to working in partnership in the long-term. Our partnerships are recognised as good practice, e.g., Community Cost of Living Champions and the Emotional Wellbeing Programme (shortlisted for MJ Award 2023 Innovation in Partnerships).

## Next Steps

- Transitions Project (Children's to Adult Services) commences
- Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy to be formulated and approved
- Continuation of participation at regional and sub-regional level

