

DRAFT Letter to Secretary of State from Sandwell Council Leader December 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

Our focus since the start of intervention has been to make sure that we are set up to deliver the best possible outcomes for our residents. From the outset, we understood that this meant making changes to the way we work and are proud of the progress made.

We believe we are not the same organisation we were when intervention began and are now looking to the future with confidence and optimism. Our ambition is to become an outstanding council and recognise this means we cannot be complacent about the progress made to date. We are now focussed on growing a culture of continuously looking for ways to improve and deliver better services.

Since our last letter to you, we have continued to deliver at pace and are seeing more evidence that these improvements are having a positive impact for our residents.

Over the last six months, we received an Area SEND inspection and have now moved up a level, to Category 2. The report recognises that children and young people with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) are valued and describes a “renewed dynamism in Sandwell” where “Leaders across the local area partnership [...] are making sustained improvements for children and young people with SEND.”

In July, we officially opened the Sandwell Aquatics Centre in Smethwick as a community leisure facility. Since opening, we have welcomed an average of 15,500 visits per week, more than 4,600 fitness members have joined, 2,171 children are learning a vital life skill through our learn to swim programme and 46 schools are booked in for school swimming.

We are also proud to have won four awards in the last six months which recognise the hard work and dedication by officers to deliver for our residents.

We have won the Regional Large Employer of the Year at the Apprenticeship Awards recognising our commitment to apprentices and the contribution of apprentices to the organisation. Our offer includes ring-fenced apprenticeships for care leavers and we work to ensure that apprenticeships help us to diversify our workforce so it better reflects the residents we serve.

Josh Singh, Planning Regeneration Team Leader, was awarded National Young Planner of the Year 2023, after becoming the West Midlands Young Planner of the Year 2023 earlier in the year. In his time with Sandwell Council, Josh has led on a number of improvements to West Bromwich town centre and we are determined to use the investment through the Towns Fund as a catalyst for further regeneration and to create good jobs and opportunities for our residents.

Sandwell also secured two awards at the Children and Young People's Awards last month; the Supporting Child Refugees Award for our Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service and the Partnership Working Award for the Horizons Exploitation & Missing Team, led by the Sandwell Children's Trust and including the council's youth service as part of the Sandwell County Lines Intensification Week Partnership.

We are also proud to announce that we have been successful in gaining up to £5million in a grant from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) to fund partnerships with a focus on improving health research. The funding will help us to make decisions driven by research and data to drive real improvement to the quality of lives for Sandwell residents.

We have also welcomed Grant Thornton's return visit to review our progress against their recommendations and look forward to their report in the New Year.

Some of our achievements and the improvements we've made since June are summarised below, along with how our changes have been embedded.

Organisational Culture

Our cultural change is being driven from the top but is owned and led throughout the organisation. Over the Summer, managers came together with Senior Leaders in a series of events to commit to embedding the One Team Framework (organisational values and behaviours) throughout their teams. We also held our first in person all staff event, since the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of the opening of Sandwell Aquatic Centre and introduced the framework to staff. The values and behaviours are informing recruitment and have been built into our revised staff appraisal approach that will be launched next year.

The impact of the framework can be seen throughout the organisation with numerous examples of staff living and breathing the values in our [We are Sandwell](#) campaign.

We are also seeing the impact of cultural change in the relationship between Members and Officers. The relationship has continued to strengthen and we are becoming more Member-led as an organisation. Examples of this include our work around becoming a child-friendly borough driven by the Cabinet's manifesto pledges.

We are continuing to value insight into how our culture is changing to make sure we are on track. We have conducted an employee engagement survey this Autumn to follow on from our 2022 survey and are continuing to gather Members' perspectives on the Member-Officer relationship to inform continuous improvement. Staff groups are working to explore the results of the engagement survey, identifying areas of good practice and developing actions for improvement. These will feed into our continuing cultural transformation journey to embed our values and behaviours framework.

Our Chief Executive is now well-established. We have welcomed a new appointment to our Senior Leadership Team, increasing our strategic capacity. The Assistant Chief Executive Directorate has been brought together to make up the 'engine room' of the local authority, helping to shape our culture and how we transform ourselves as an organisation.

Council approved a new senior leadership team structure in October which is fundamental to driving the next phase of the council's transformation journey at pace, with a leaner and strategically focussed Leadership Team more able to deliver in an agile and joined up way. Recruitment to the new Executive Director posts commenced in November.

Our confidence is growing and Sandwell is more outward-looking. The opening of the Sandwell Aquatic Centre in Summer 2023 was a major cause for celebration and we enjoyed sharing our pride with national media. We are also in the spotlight amongst our peers. Council staff were invited to share Sandwell's approach on voter ID and accessibility measures at a national conference of the Electoral Commission and Electoral Management Board for Scotland.

Corporate Oversight & Strategic Direction

Through our focus and grip on our finances, we remain financially stable. We are managing an in-year overspend and are forecasting a balanced budget for 2023-24. The majority of savings adopted for the 2023/24 Budget have been secured or are in delivery and we are well on the way to developing our plans for 2024/25 onwards.

The Council's transformation approach is strengthening and comprises an important part of the emergent plans to balance the MTFs especially in the medium term. For the second year running we have worked collectively across Cabinet and Leadership Team through a series of star chamber sessions and away days.

The Council has an agreed plan to deliver £1.6m in savings from its asset base in 2023/24 by increasing commercial income and reducing expenditure by rationalising buildings and exiting leases that are no longer required. It has just completed a significant review of 139 surplus assets and recommendations on future use and disposal will be coming through for Member decision soon. The Council is progressing the establishment of a Corporate Landlord so that its assets are managed and maintenance is prioritised in a consistent manner. Work continues to deliver the savings target of £2.5m from asset rationalisation from the 2024/25 financial year.

In relation to our financial oversight, we achieved a key milestone with the signing of our 2020-2021 accounts. Our 2021-2022 accounts are due to be provided to our auditor in line with agreed timescales and have secured the technical resource to oversee the production of our accounts up to and including 2023/24. We have largely completed the implementation of our asset management system, providing the tools for us to address an area of concern previously raised by external reviewers.

We are seeing the benefit of our performance culture and Performance Management Framework which are stimulating discussion and leading to action. For example, our exploration of school attendance performance has led to us making a strong case for Sandwell and we have gained recognition as a priority education investment area.

Other examples include:

- Our 2023 State of Sandwell report indicating areas of positive change in outcomes for Sandwell residents since 2017 as well as areas for focus
- Incorporation of SEND within our transformation programme with new performance metrics in place and weekly review because we know that we need to target work in this area
- 'Evidence bundles' compiled across core corporate functions being used to inform business planning for 2024/25, building on our approach last year and now becoming an embedded feature of business planning
- Our newly produced Ward and Town plans are bringing additional insight to shape our local priorities and our approach to neighbourhood working
- Continued focus on residents' concerns, issues, and opinions e.g.
 - Residents consultation undertaken for the second consecutive year to inform business plans and budget priorities
 - Hosting a tenant engagement conference
 - Growth of our Consultation Hub platform to provide organisational oversight of consultation feedback
- Staff brought together to commence work on a business intelligence strategy

- Assistant Director workshop on improving employment, training and work experience opportunities for care leavers building on training in Corporate Parenting Week and performance reporting on Care Leavers NEET
- We are committed to a culture of corporate oversight and continuous improvement, and, whilst we are proud of the progress we have made, perhaps the best demonstration of this commitment is seen in what we do when we identify something has gone wrong. As part of a corporate review, it was identified that not all processes had been followed in relation to a number of repair contracts. When this was understood, we transparently reported this to Cabinet, setting out the actions we put in place both to remedy the situation and learn the lessons in order to avoid it happening again.

Building on our recent work to set targets for performance metrics in the framework, our intention over coming months is to create and use corporate performance dashboards and integrate our performance and financial reporting.

We continue to progress our work on our Customer Journey and see it as a corporate priority, establishing a robust framework, resources, and performance improvement programme.

- We have procured a new cloud-based telephony system which is anticipated to go live in April 2024.
- We have seen sustained improvements across responses to SARs, FOIs and Member enquiries through our corporate oversight. Work has been carried out with Members around the Member portal resulting in an Action Plan being drawn up, 70% of the actions have been completed and we are continuing to work on the rest.
- We have extended the Community Hub Pilot for a further 6 months, continuing to provide face to face services for residents that require this. The new Neighbourhood model is being piloted and we have taken on 3 Ward Co-ordinators to work with Elected Members on Ward plans and priorities.

- The new Council website has been launched and we have purchased a Navigation Bot that is in User Acceptance Testing phase. This should aid residents in using the website to find information and raise queries.
- We have commenced a review of our Neighbourhood Working model, to develop a new and refreshed coherent, cross-council model for neighbourhood working which has elected members and communities at the core for delivering outcomes in their localities.

We continue to be ambitious for the future of Sandwell and have secured grant investment of £459m over the past 2+ years from a range of national and regional public funding bodies to deliver the Regeneration Pipeline projects from now to 2027. This includes investment in the delivery of ten new education and skills facilities in the Borough at primary, secondary, special needs and further education level.

Decision Making

In our last letter, we relayed to you our pride at our work around the Cost-of-Living crisis which shows Leadership Team increasingly focusing on strategic matters and working effectively with our partners.

A Cost-of-Living Emergency Summit held in March 2023 brought together more than sixty public, private and voluntary sector partners to coordinate our efforts to support our community through this crisis. Since March, we have worked collaboratively with partners to codesign the [Sandwell Tackling Poverty Plan](#), seeking to address the underlying causes of poverty in Sandwell. The plan was launched at a further Cost-of-Living Summit in October, where over 80 partners joined us to agree ways we will work together to deliver the plan.

Cabinet continues to work well as a team and we have continued to take difficult decisions. We recently reviewed our approach to the management of leisure services in light of changed circumstances. The business case to provide leisure services through a Local Authority Trading Company was reviewed and Cabinet demonstrated our commitment to take agile decisions that are responsive to a changing external environment and to obtain value for money through revising our approach.

This was made possible through our improved relationship with Sandwell Leisure Trust.

Scrutiny and Audit Committees continue to focus on the subjects that matter most. The scrutiny work-planning process is now well-established and embedded as part of how scrutiny works in Sandwell. For example, the following topics have been discussed by Scrutiny over last six months:

- Playing Pitch Strategy- request to establish a steering group to support the completion, adoptions and implementation of the strategy
- Europa Avenue Cycle Path consultation in response to residents' feedback
- Haden Hill Leisure Centre Rebuild- request for consideration and comments on the three options available.
- Customer Journey performance and transformation programme.

The Audit & Risk Assurance Committee regularly receives reports from both the internal and external auditors and operates with a specific focus on improving governance across the council. Audit & Risk Assurance Committee has been keen to ensure that the council mitigates its key risks appropriately. The Committee regularly receives and reviews the Council's strategic and improvement risk registers and has sight of a wide range of directorate risk registers. The Committee has called in items such as the customer journey for a more detailed deep-dive review. In June, Audit Committee resolved long standing historical committee related matters.

We are developing a set of new measures as part of the performance management framework to provide us with further insight into the quality of the decision-making process and drive our continuous improvement. We continue to strengthen our arrangements for accountability and scrutiny.

Partnerships and Relationships, Procurement and Commercial

We continue to invest in our work with partners. Our recently launched Family Hubs, supporting families with children aged 0-19 (or 25 with SEND), show the strength of our partnerships at a local level. At the official launch of the Family Hubs parent forums were held with the parent representatives of each town.

I am pleased to be leading the Inclusive Communities Portfolio for the WMCA and in September, Sandwell hosted the launch of the Race Forward Strategy for the region.

We are becoming a more mature partner. Our recent State of Sandwell report is the foundation of a review of our partnership wide Vision 2030 which is being undertaken during this Municipal Year.

We have seized partnership opportunities such as our effective working with Government on our Levelling Up Partnership to bring forward robust proposals. We have also demonstrated our strength through our approach to the Devolution Deal and holding firm on red lines that matter most to ~~outcomes~~ Sandwell residents.

Our performance management framework continues to enable oversight and management of key major contracts. Through a period of industrial action over Summer, we worked closely with our waste partner (Serco) to continue delivering a service to residents and were able to recover service levels quickly once a resolution had been reached. We have engaged with West Midlands Police and Serco in a debrief exercise to ensure that lessons are learned for the future.

Our established governance arrangements for the Sandwell Children's Trust contract have provided strong oversight of the Trust's financial position enabling us to work proactively with them to address the increase in their projected outturn for 2023/24.

Accompanying this letter are our quarterly progress reports to Cabinet which provide a greater level of detail around progress issues, risks, resources and changes to the Improvement Plan.

Our key areas of focus over forthcoming months continue to be driving our plans around organisational culture and the successful recruitment of a new senior leadership team, improving our customer journey, and delivering the Medium-Term Financial Strategy through a robust transformation programme.

We are also looking further ahead and working with the Local Government Association to develop the mechanisms we will put in place to continue our improvement journey after March 2024 and assure ourselves of our onward trajectory. Our ambition is to be an excellent authority, delivering for our residents – the journey we have been on over the last two years has established a sound basis from which to achieve that goal.

Yours faithfully

[Leader's Sign-off]