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Minutes of Cabinet

Wednesday, 7 May 2025 at 3.30 pm at Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Freeth Street, Oldbury, B69 3DB

Present: Councillor Carmichael (Chair)

Councillors: Allcock Hartwell P Hughes	Councillors: Moore V Smith Taylor
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In attendance: Councillors Jeffcoat and Lewis

Officers: Shokat Lal (Chief Executive); James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive); Alex Thompson (Executive Director – Finance and Transformation); Alan Lunt (Executive Director - Place); Rashpal Bishop (Director of Adult Social Care); Mike Jones (Assistant Director of Legal and Assurance); Matthew More (Head of Communications); Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager) and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

36/25 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Uddin, E M Giles and Fenton.

37/25 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

38/25 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held 9 April 2025 are approved as a correct record

39/25 Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider as a matter of urgency.

Customer Experience Strategy

Approval was sought for the Customer Experience Strategy, covering the period 2025 – 2028.

The Strategy set out Sandwell's plan to achieve its vision of providing excellent customer service to all residents, staff, businesses, partners, visitors and community groups and working with them to ensure that the Council's services met their needs and were inclusive and accessible for all.

The Strategy established five principles in which the Council would operate:

- delivering a customer focused culture;
- providing excellent and consistent customer services;
- focusing on digital customer services but always create inclusive, accessible services that meet the changing needs of our customers;
- listening, learning and improving services based on Customer Feedback;
- provide value for money services that balance the needs of vulnerable service users within the resources available.

The Strategy aligned with the Council Plan 2024-2027, underpinned Sandwell's Values and Behaviours compact, and would complement the forthcoming Data Strategy and Digital Strategy for Sandwell.

Reason for Decision

Improving customer experience was a key area of focus for the Council. A wide-ranging programme of work had already been undertaken to ensure interactions with customers were of a consistently high standard, and that a customer-focused approach was at the heart of everything the Council did.

The strategy set the direction for how Council employees would interact with customers and colleagues, as well as emphasising the importance of council values and behaviours and ensuring the authority achieved its aim to put the customer at the heart of its service delivery.

Alternative Options Considered

The Council had the option of not adopting a Customer Experience Strategy and continuing to operate without a strategic focus on the needs of customers. However, as one of the organisation's priorities was to provide a high-quality customer experience, this was not recommended.

Resolved:-

- (1) that approval is given to the Customer Experience Strategy 2025 – 2028;
- (2) that in connection with (1) above, the Assistant Chief Executive is authorised to implement the Customer Experience Strategy across the Council.

Approval of the Black Country Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Plan

Approval was sought for the Black Country Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Plan. The plan identified gaps in the walking, wheeling and cycling network that were not covered by the West Midlands Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan and Sandwell Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan.

The plan was primarily aimed at improving facilities for cycling and walking as modes of transport. Routes looked to link residents with local facilities, health centres, hospitals, town centres, and centres of employment.

Reason for Decision

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans, set out in the 2017 Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, were a new, strategic approach to identifying cycling and walking improvements required at the local level. They enabled a long-term approach to developing local cycling and walking networks, ideally over a 10-year period, and form a vital part of the Government's strategy to increase the number of trips made on foot or by cycle.

The Black Country Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Plan set out improvements to the local network, which aligned with existing Sandwell and West Midlands strategies for planning and transport. It would be refreshed in a three to five-year period, incorporating new and updated data sources to support walking, wheeling and cycling interventions in the Black Country.

Alternative Options Considered

For each scheme within the Black Country Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Plan, the options considered and the reasons for the recommended option would be set out in the individual approval reports as they were submitted to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways.

Resolved that approval is given to the Black Country Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Plan subject to consultation and authorisation for approval of detailed proposals by the Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways.

Approval of Housing Policies

Approval was sought for four Housing Management policies; the Tenancy Sustainment Policy, Tenancy Fraud Policy, Good Neighbourhood Management Policy and Domestic Abuse Policy.

A Self-Assessment against the Regulator for Social Housing Consumer Standards in 2024 identified improvements that could be made to the Council's governance and strategic oversight through the publication of new housing management policies.

The Housing Improvement and Transformation Programme had been established to ensure compliance with the Regulator for Social Housing consumer standards and to ensure service excellence in the future. Ensuring the Council had a comprehensive library of policies, which were regularly reviewed and updated, would underpin other work being delivered to transform

the service. Further work was being undertaken on additional policies, which would be presented at a later date.

Reason for Decision

Cabinet had approved the adoption of the Housing Strategy 2023-2028 at its meeting in June 2023. The four policies for which approval was now sought would facilitate the effective delivery of the adopted strategy.

The policies set out Sandwell Housing Service's commitment to fairness, support, and safety for all tenants. The Tenancy Fraud Policy ensured housing was allocated fairly, preventing misuse of resources. The Tenancy Sustainment Policy provided support to help tenants maintain stable housing and avoid homelessness. The Domestic Abuse Policy prioritised the safety and well-being of tenants affected by abuse, offering immediate support and safe housing options. The Good Neighbourhood Management Policy encouraged community cohesion, addressing antisocial behaviour to create safer, more supportive environments. Together, these policies focussed on providing inclusive and responsive services to vulnerable tenants.

These policy documents would provide clarity for the Housing Service as to the standards that the Council should hold itself to as part of the Consumer Standards introduced in April 2024. This also allowed the Council to hold itself to account as a housing provider, providing the best possible service to customers and residents. By enacting these policies, the Council aimed to maintain council-owned assets to a high standard, investing in homes and communities and fostering an environment where residents could thrive.

Alternative Options Considered

The alternative option was to not seek adoption of the four policies. However, if this were to be the process followed, it would not be possible to deliver the objectives of the Housing Strategy 2023 – 2028 and the Regulatory Housing Standards that came into effect in April 2024. Therefore, this would result in the sub-optimal management of our Housing Services.

Resolved that the following listed Housing Management Policies are approved:

- Tenancy Sustainment Policy
- Tenancy Fraud Policy
- Good Neighbourhood Management Policy
- Domestic Abuse Policy

43/25

A4123 Bus, Cycle & Walking Corridor – Land Appropriation, Ormiston Academy, Tividale

Approval was sought for a £1.56m grant from West Midlands Combined Authority for the purposes of the early design and delivery of the section of the A4123 Bus, Walking and Cycle scheme on the A4123 from Burnt Tree junction to Lower City Road, Tividale and to consider the appropriation of land adjacent to the A4123 New Birmingham Road from The Ormiston Academy.

Reason for Decision

The A4123 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor project formed part of the West Midlands City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement programme for the funding period 2022-27. In principle, scheme approval for the project was granted at Cabinet on 7 February 2024. Approval for the preferred scheme was to be further developed through detailed design. Approval to full business case stage was given by Cabinet on 11 September 2024.

An initial West Midlands City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement grant of £1.56m had been offered to deliver the Burnt Tree junction to Lower City Road section of the scheme along the A4123 Birmingham New Road. This section would connect to the delivered Tipton Road to Burnt Tree junction scheme, delivered using funds from the Department for Transport's Active Travel Fund 2 via the Burnt Tree Junction bus and active travel improvement scheme and developed by Transport for West Midlands. Early delivery of the Burnt Tree junction to Lower City Road section of the scheme would enable a continuous route, encouraging a greater take up of active travel by the public. The acceptance of the initial West Midlands City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement grant of £1.56m would also reduce the risk of delay in the overall delivery programme which required the scheme to be delivered by 1 March 2027.

There was a requirement to increase the footprint of the highway network to enable construction of the new fully segregated bi-directional cycle track. To achieve this, 338.2 sqm of land adjacent to A4123 New Birmingham Road, which was not currently designated as Highways land, was required. Whilst the land was Council owned, it was currently leased to the Ormiston Academies Trust and formed part of the Ormiston Sandwell Community Academy. The land comprised of unused vegetation, known as 'Millenium Trees', which was administered by the Big Lottery Fund, and was located adjacent to the Ormiston Sandwell Community Academy's playing field land.

The Ormiston Academies Trust was in support of surrendering part of its lease to enable construction of the new fully segregated bi-directional cycle track.

Alternative Options Considered

One alternative option was to not continue with the early delivery of the section of the A4123 from Burnt Tree to Lower City Road. This was not recommended, as users would have to wait longer to make use of the infrastructure and its linkages. Also, construction costs were likely to continue to rise, putting pressure on the overall budget for the A4123 Bus, Cycle and Walking Corridor Scheme. The £29m allocated within the West Midlands City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement programme was specifically for the development and delivery of the A4123 Bus, Cycle and Walking Corridor Scheme. However, if monitoring and evaluation processes highlighted a risk of not being able to deliver the project on time and within budget, funding may be reallocated to another scheme not necessarily within Sandwell, potentially resulting in a loss of investment within the borough.

An alternative option was to not continue with the land appropriation required to construct the scheme. This would mean that the widths required to deliver a compliant segregated bi-directional cycle track would not be available and the current infrastructure, comprising of a non-compliant shared-use walking and

cycling facility would have to remain. This would have safety implications for users who were required to 'give way' to other users on some sections of the facility where it was too narrow for users to comfortably pass one another.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the £1.56m grant from the West Midlands Combined Authority is accepted for the purposes of the early design and delivery of the section of the A4123 Bus, Walk, and Cycle scheme on the A4123 from Burnt Tree junction to Lower City Road;
- (2) that authorisation is given for the appropriation of land at A4123 New Birmingham Road (as shown in Appendix A) as highway to allow for highway improvements on the A4123 New Birmingham Road subject to the relevant completion certificates being issued to Highway Services under Section 36 (2) (a) of the Highways Act 1980, so that they are adopted as public highway and maintainable at public expense;
- (3) that authorisation is given for an application to the Secretary of State for Education for the appropriation of land at Ormiston Sandwell Community Academy, Lower City Road, Oldbury to Highways Services:
 - (a) subject to the application being approved by the Secretary of State for Education, the Director of Children and Education be authorised to complete appropriation of the land to Highways Services; and,
 - (b) subject to (3a) above, the Director of Regeneration and Growth be authorised to complete the appropriation from Children and Education to Highways Services and agree to any compensation required.
- (4) that approval is granted to Council to cover the cost of the appointment of legal advisors (up to a maximum of £5,000) to act on the behalf of the Ormiston Academies Trust to enable the legal drafting of documents such as a Deed of Surrender and the Re- Grant of new lease with amended extent of demise for the purpose of the Academy lease, to enable the disposal of part of the nonplaying field land leased by them under Part 3 of Schedule 1 to the Academies Act 2010;
- (5) that authorisation is given to the Assistant Director for Legal and Assurance to surrender the original lease dated 17 July 2013 granted to the Ormiston Academies Trust for the Ormiston Sandwell Community Academy and to re-grant the lease with amended extent of demise, which would exclude part of the land required for the purpose of

the A4123 Highways Improvements and to vary the lease between Council and the Ormiston Academies Trust to take into account the disposal of part of the non-playing field land leased by them under Part 3 of Schedule 1 to the Academies Act 2010;

- (6) that authorisation is given to the Assistant Director for Legal and Assurance to apply to the Land Registry Applications to:
 - (a) update the current Freehold Title (Title Number: WM881722);
 - (b) update the Leasehold Title (Title Number MM8928) owned by the Council;
 - (c) update the Leasehold Title owned by the Ormiston Academies Trust (Title Number MM134250); and,
 - (d) subject to (a), (b) and (c) above, close any title/s no longer remaining and update title registers by arranging for the removal of any reference to non-applicable title/s.
- (7) that authorisation is given to the Assistant Director for Legal and Assurance to arrange for a Deed of Release of Big Lottery Fund administered land.

44/25

West Midlands Combined Authority Adult Education Functions Amendment

Approval was sought for the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Adult Education Functions Amendment. The WMCA, through its devolved powers, already funded a wide range of qualifications at multiple levels across various sectors, delivered by colleges, local authorities, independent training providers, and voluntary community sector organisations. With its existing powers, the WMCA could decide which provisions and qualifications to fund to best support the skills development of residents.

It was proposed to develop new technical qualifications at levels 2 and 3, providing residents with access to relevant training underpinned by qualifications that enabled them to acquire essential skills for successful careers.

This new power would further support the region's ambitions to deliver a strong foundation level 2 skills offer and to upskill and reskill at level 3 and above, as outlined in the WMCA Employment and Skills Strategy approved by the WMCA Board in 2024. This funding power would not apply to adults under 25 who had an Education, Health, and Care Plan, as they would continue to be funded from the 16 to 19 budgets, nor would it apply to adults in detention, as, they were funded by the Ministry of Justice.

Reason for Decision

Adult education functions were currently funded by the Secretary of State for Education under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (the 2009 Act). The Secretary of State had the authority under Section.105A of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 to transfer functions to Combined Authorities, and under Section.19 of the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (the 2023 Act) to transfer functions to Combined County Authorities.

As part of its ongoing qualifications reform programme, the Department for Education, in collaboration with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and Ofqual, had developed a new suite of technical qualifications at levels 2 and 3. These qualifications would be available from 1 August 2025 for both 16–19-year-olds and adults.

Since this was a new type of qualification, it would be funded nationally under Section.100 (1B) of the 2009 Act. This new sub-clause had not yet transferred this power to combined authorities.

In November and December 2024, the Secretary of State conducted a public consultation to gather opinions on the proposal to transfer additional funding powers to combined authorities, enabling them to finance new reformed technical qualifications starting in August 2025. The 2023 Act mandated that the Secretary of State must hold a public consultation before assigning public functions to any existing combined authority.

The Department for Education required formal consent from each combined authority, including their constituent authorities, before it could proceed with the Parliamentary process to transfer the additional funding power.

Alternative Options Considered

Withholding approval would reduce opportunities for residents to access new technical qualifications, negatively affecting their employability, career progression, and the region's economic growth. It could also disadvantage the WMCA compared to other combined authorities that approved the amendment, particularly those neighbouring the WMCA, where residents could access the new technical qualifications.

Resolved:-

- (1) that approval is given to the making of a draft Order between West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and Department for Education (DfE) through a Statutory Instrument of Parliament to allow devolution of additional responsibilities and funding for new technical qualifications for both 16–19- year-olds and adults aged 19 plus;
- (2) that subject to (1) above, delegated authority is given to the Director of Children and Education Services in consultation with the Assistant Director for Legal and Assurance to agree to any minor consequential amendments should they arise as it relates.

Meeting ended at 3.56pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk

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