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| Council/Committee: | The Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board |
| Report Title | Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy; Addressing Youth Unemployment |
| Date of Meeting | 30 July 2025 |
| Report Author | Adele Smith – Programmes Manager, Employment and Skills |
| Lead Officer | Sally Giles – Executive Director Children and Education |
| Wards Affected | All Sandwell Wards |
| Appendices (if any) | Not applicable |

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report aims to provide an update on the effectiveness of the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy which was launched in September 2024. It will specifically focus on the rise in Youth Unemployment within the Borough and outline the provision and services that are in place to address the challenges faced by residents.
- 1.2 Council/Committee consideration and approval is requested to continue the delivery of programmes and services to achieve the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy targets by 2030.

2. Recommendations

The Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board is recommended to:-

- 2.1 Review the performance of the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy Key Performance Indicators to date.
- 2.2 Consider and comment on the package of programmes and services in place to support the performance of the Strategy Key Performance Indicators.

3. Proposals – Reasons for the recommendations

Background and Drivers

- 3.1 The Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-30 responds to the current Skills and Employment challenges in the borough including youth unemployment and low skills levels and sets our ambitions and a set of key actions and priorities to respond to the challenge. The scope of this Strategy is all age but there is a strong focus on youth unemployment.
- 3.2 As part of the Strategy several Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) were identified for to support us to monitor the progress of activity and ensure that we are meeting the needs of Sandwell residents and businesses.
- 3.3 Since the launch of the strategy there have been a number of national and global factors that have affected the progress that has been made to date. This includes the increase in National Insurance contributions by employers, increase in wages, tariffs and a fragile national and global economy.
- 3.4 The progress to date can be seen below:

| Target by 2030 | Strategy Launch Sept 2024 | Latest Data May 2025 | National Data May 2025 |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Increased attainment of 60% at the expected level or above in reading, writing and maths at KS2 | 56% | 59% | 61% |
| Increased attainment of 45% in English and Maths at Grade 5 or above at KS4 | 35% | 35% | 46% |
| Maintain the NEET and not known figure of 2.7% | 2.7% | 2.3% | 5.5% |
| Increase of Apprenticeship starts to 2870 per annum, recovering to pre pandemic levels | 2110 Starts 2022 | -2.8% - 2050 starts | +0.7% |
| Employment rate of 75% to close the gap with regional and national data | 68% | 67.3% | 75.5% |
| A reduction of Unemployment benefit claimants (16+) to 4.5% to close the gap with West Midlands | 5.6% | 7.3% | 4.1% |
| A reduction of Youth Unemployment benefit claimants (18-24) to 5.1% to close the gap with the national average | 9.5% | 10.4% | 5.5% |
| Decrease the percentage of residents with no qualifications to 7% to close the gap with WM | 11.8% | 13.9% | 6.7% |
| Increase the percentage of resident with level 3 qualifications to 58% to close the gap with WM | 47.9% | 51.5% | 67.9% |
| Increase the percentage of resident with level 4 qualifications to 38% to close the gap with WM | 31.2% | 29.6% | 47.6% |

- 3.5 There is good engagement of young people in education and attainment rates are gradually increasing to close the gap with the national average. The number of young people who are classified as NEET at 17 has decreased, with Sandwell being one of the best ranking Local Authorities in the country.

| | Not known | | In learning | | 16-17 year olds NEET | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| | % 16-17s NK including expired | % change over last 12 months | % 16-17s in learning | % change over last 12 months | % 16-17s NEET | % change over last 12 months |
| ENGLAND | 1.8% | 1.4% | 91.7% | 0.0% | 3.7% | 6.3% |
| WEST MIDLANDS | 1.7% | -19.2% | 92.0% | -0.2% | 3.7% | 11.9% |
| Birmingham | 1.8% | -22.7% | 93.3% | 0.4% | 3.9% | -1.1% |
| Dudley | 12.9% | 77.2% | 82.8% | -6.4% | 3.1% | 4.9% |
| Sandwell | 0.6% | -16.1% | 95.5% | 0.4% | 1.7% | -9.1% |
| Walsall | 1.0% | -48.8% | 93.7% | -0.1% | 3.3% | 37.6% |
| Wolverhampton | 0.6% | 4.4% | 95.2% | 0.3% | 3.0% | 4.2% |

- 3.6 The number of young people claiming benefits from 18 is significantly higher than the national average and indicates that there is a need to support young people with the transition to further/higher education, apprenticeships or employment at this point.

Policy Objectives

- 3.7 The Skills and Employment Strategy was developed in line with the Regional Employment Strategy and the Sandwell Place Based Strategy, both of which recognise the need for increased skills support leading to employment and the importance of increasing the proportion of our residents in employment to enable the economy to grow and thrive.
- 3.8 The Key performance indicators identified are aligned to The Get Britain Working White Paper, which sets a national target of 80% of 16–66-year-olds in work. The Strategy is also aligned to the West Midlands Mayors Youth Plan, providing tailored pathways to increase the number of 18–24-year-olds moving into positive destinations.

Delivery

- 3.9 There are a number of programmes and activities that are in place to support the achievement of our targets. These include:
- 3.10 Youth Trailblazer – A Government pilot programme aimed to target unemployed/inactive 18–21-year-olds. Sandwell MBC has been allocated £505,000 for 2025/26 to coordinate provision for young people across the borough and develop innovative activities to support and progress residents into a positive destination. A tracking system will be in place to identify those

that may have become NEET following education. This is an extension to the IO system used by Connexions to track young people following the transition from secondary education. The programme will also provide paid work placements with local businesses and tailored employability support.

- 3.11 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – An extension of funding for 2025/26 of £1.3 million to target the hardest to reach groups. The provision aims to engage and support economically inactive residents to move closer to education and employment outcomes. A project called Accelerate is delivered by SMBC which targets young people who have low confidence and/or mental health conditions to undertake activities such as outward bounds, music, art, mindfulness and peer support. Organisations from the Voluntary Sector have been commissioned to identify individuals who are hard to reach or need specialist community support.
- 3.12 Workwell – A programme specifically targeting individuals with a health condition to gain tailored employability support that takes their health into consideration. The programme runs from September 2024 to March 2025 and aims to support individuals with a dedicated advisor, to develop and achieve key actions that will move them onto the most suitable pathway of provision. In Sandwell the programme is being delivered by the NHS, SMBC, Sandwell Consortium and Ideal for all.
- 3.13 Connect to Work – A DWP programme to start in August 2025 for residents with health conditions and disabilities to gain intensive support and accessible provision. The programme offers 1-1 mentoring and tailored action plans to ensure all residents gain the support they need to progress towards employment and skills outcomes.
- 3.14 Adult Education Budget (AEB) - Targeted funding within Sandwell for skills provision for people aged 19+. Provision is tailored where possible to suit need and includes informal programmes and entry level courses up to level 7. The funding also provides funding for English as a Second Language (ESOL) which is crucial for the borough's large migrant population to access further training provision and employment opportunities.
- 3.15 Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) – A coordinated approach to school age careers, that incorporates local businesses and local labour market data to enable young people to make informed decisions about their future careers. The programme enables young people to gain experience of work through employer encounters, physical and virtual placements.

Sandwell Services

- 3.16 Sandwell has several services that specifically support Sandwell residents to gain support to progress with their employment and skills aspirations.
- 3.17 Employment and Skills team support – The team can support all residents to gain the skills needed to seek, gain and maintain employment. The team are based in 20 outreach venues across the borough, enabling support in the heart of the community. Targeted support is provided to vulnerable groups such as Care Experienced and Youth Justice. The team provide support to

businesses to recruit to apprenticeships/vacancies and works with residents to apply.

- 3.18 Specialist Employment Team – Supporting residents with disabilities and mental health conditions to access provision to support them towards employment. The team offer support to access job clubs, work placements, supported internships, inclusive apprenticeships and accessible employment. The team also work with local businesses to become disability confident and provide in work support where needed.
- 3.19 Connexions – Providing impartial careers information, advice and guidance to young people aged 13-19 (up to 25 with an EHCP) to enable them to transition into education, employment, or training (EET). They provide targeted careers support to vulnerable young people, ensure that young people are Participating in Learning, reduce young unemployment (%NEET) amongst 16/17-year-olds and to track their destinations (%Not/Known). Connexions have dedicated careers advisers who work with The Youth Offending Service, Leaving Care Team and the Elective Home Educated Team.
- 3.20 Sandwell Adult and Family Learning (SAFL) – Funded by the Adult Education Budget (AEB) to support residents aged 19+ to access skills provision with their local community. The courses delivered start at pre-entry level and cover a broad range of subject areas. The Sandwell New Horizons programme aims to focus on residents who need confidence and/or mental health support, to undertake supported activities to progress into mainstream provision.
- 3.21 Key Stakeholders – There are a wide range of key stakeholders committed to the achievement of the ambitions of the Strategy. The Sandwell Employment Partnership brings together Sandwell College, WMCA, Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust, SERCO, Black Country Housing Group, The National Careers Service and a range of community partners to collectively support the employment and skills agenda within the borough.

Recognition

- 3.22 Sandwell Council has been recognised for the employment and skills support that is provided to residents. In 2024 Sandwell MBC was awarded West Midlands Large Apprenticeship Employer of the Year.
- 3.23 In 2025 Sandwell MBC was recognised within the Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers, ranking 64th nationally.

Costs

- 3.24 The delivery of the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy is supported by a number of externally funded programmes. The Sandwell services are part funded by core budget.
- 3.25 The coordination of partners across the borough also enables individuals to benefit from a more seamless offer and increases the opportunities for individuals and pathways for progression, maximising funding streams.

Savings

- 3.26 Continuing the delivery of the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy will support more residents to gain the skills needed to move into positive destinations and in the long term, reduce the number of people claiming out of work benefits. This will also reduce the amount of financial support that is needed for council tax reductions, housing support and free school meals. Evidence shows that people in work are also more likely to have improved physical and mental health, saving funding for the NHS and public health.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The council could choose not to fund this area of work and utilise the funding for other priority areas. However, this would likely see a rise in associated costs e.g. Council tax reductions, free school meals.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 As part of the development of the Strategy, considerable consultation was carried out with residents, businesses and stakeholders to ensure the needs of the borough were fully understood. Work has been undertaken with internal services and officers to ensure the Strategy is aligned to related strategies and is contributing to plans across the directorates. Key stakeholders were involved in the identification of the Key Performance Indicators and are committed to supporting the delivery of services to collectively increase performance.
- 5.2 Consultation with stakeholders continues through the Sandwell Employment and Skills Partnership, where the monitoring of performance is shared and future actions are agreed.
- 5.3 Consultation will continue with residents and businesses over the life of the strategy to ensure that the priorities continue to meet the local need.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 There are no specific financial implications associated with this report.

7. Legal and Governance Implications

- 7.1 There are no legal or governance implications associated with the report. All externally funded programmes have detailed funding agreements which have been reviewed by legal before signing. Governance arrangements are in place to ensure contracts meet the legal obligations.

8. Risks

- 8.1 There are no risks associated with the report. All externally funded programmes are monitored and reporting to the funding bodies on a monthly/quarterly basis. If delivery is not maintained there is a risk that funding will need to be returned. Risk assessments are in place for all programmes to ensure that all risks are monitored.

9. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

- 9.1 The strategy has been developed in partnership with key stakeholders to ensure inclusivity of the strategy. Partners have played an active role in providing intelligence which has contributed to the development of the strategy, its ambitions and the Key Priority Actions.
- 9.2 Wide consultation has taken place with a variety of groups including SMBC departments, residents, voluntary sector organisations, educational establishments and key stakeholders. Resident groups have included active participation with representation from a range of communities, demographics and backgrounds.
- 9.3 An equality impact assessment (EIA) screening has been carried out which has been reviewed by the EDI team. As the outcome found that there are no adverse impacts on protected characteristics, a full EIA is not required.

10. Other Relevant Implications

- 10.1 It is recognised that low skills and unemployment can have an impact on the physical and mental health of our residents. All externally funded programmes have incorporated health and wellbeing support as part of the programme delivery. Workwell and Connect to Work are programmes that specifically support individuals with health conditions and disabilities to ensure that their needs are considered and supported as part of their employment pathway.

11. Background Documents

- 11.1 As part of the preparation of this report, the following documents/resources have been used.
- 11.2 The Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy 2024 – 2030
- 11.3 Nomis Web – Employment Data

12. How does this deliver the objectives of the Strategic Themes?

- 12.1 This report will support the delivery of the following Strategic Themes:
- 12.2 **Growing up in Sandwell** - The Strategy supports the transition of young people from Education to Employment
- 12.3 **Living in Sandwell** – Employment outcomes can provide health and wellbeing benefits to residents
- 12.4 **Healthy in Sandwell** – Employment has been proven to improve the resilience and mental health and wellbeing of individuals
- 12.5 **Thriving Economy in Sandwell** – The strategy aims to support businesses by upskilling residents to fill skills and recruitment gaps

- 12.6 **One Council One Team Approach** – This approach brings together internal stakeholders and is aligned to the wider indicators of the council plan

Relevance Check

Budget Reduction/Service Area:

Service Lead

Date:

In what ways does this Budget reduction have an impact on an outward facing service? How will the service feel different to your customers or potential customers?

N/A

If not, how does it impact on staff e.g. redundancies, pay grades, working conditions? Why are you confident that these staff changes will not affect the service that you provide?

N/A

Is a Customer Impact Assessment needed? No