

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

4 December 2025 at 6.02pm at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Dhatt (Vice- Chair in the Chair).

Councillors: Lewis (Chair) Crompton Jeffcoat Khan	Councillors: Kordala A Singh Ms Brown
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Also present: Councillor W Gill.

Officers: James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Ben Percival (Service Director – Environment and Public Protection), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead – Service Improvement) and Rhys Attwell (Interim Democratic Services Officer).

54/25 Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillors Mayo and Millard.

55/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared at the meeting.

56/25 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 4 September 2025 are confirmed as a correct record subject to the following amendment:

- 1) That the date of the meeting be changed from '3 July 2025' to '4 September 2025'.

57/25 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

Council and Voluntary/ Community Sector Relationship

The Board received an overview of the Council and its relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

During the budget setting process for the 2024/ 25 municipal year, the Council undertook to review the means in which it provided funding to voluntary and community sector organisations. The review had been conducted by an external organisation, Trueman Change, who had engaged with 130 organisations and had provided the council with a number of recommendations to improve its approach to grant funding.

The findings of the review were presented to Cabinet at its meeting in April 2025 and the Council had responded to the findings by:

- The production of Voluntary and Community Sector Annual Reports to improve transparency around how the VCS was funded by the Council.
 - Detailed within each annual report was the funding to individual organisations and the funding source, as well as a summary of the impact of the funding streams.
 - Annual reports for 2022/ 23 and 2023/ 24 municipal years had been produced and placed in the public domain, with the 2024/ 25 Annual Report due to be published imminently.
- The creation of a VCS Grants Board to strengthen the governance arrangements of grant programmes:
 - The Board aimed to provide corporate oversight to the process and ensure any grants issued or administered were aligned with the Council's strategic priorities and represented value for money.
 - The Board was chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive and its membership included commissioners from across the Council.
 - The Board was in the process of reviewing all new and existing grant programmes. 66 grants had been reviewed since its inception in March 2025, which had resulted in:
 - 19 programmes being commissioned through a procurement route;
 - 12 grant programmes receiving short- term extensions and 45 grants recommissioned and awarded on a direct contract basis;
 - 8 grant programmes approved to be commissioned through an open application process;
 - 3 grants were to be decommissioned as the outcomes were no longer aligned with the Council's strategic aims.

- The improvement of the Council's relationship with the sector via engagement with VCS organisations:
 - A Borough- wide vision was being developed in conjunction with partners to tackle long- term issues to improve outcomes for residents.
 - The Assistant Chief Executive has held meetings with representatives from both the Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Sandwell Consortium.
 - The Council had continued to invest in VCS infrastructure through commissioning SCVO to provide capacity to support over 1,000 organisations in Sandwell.

To ensure engagement with the VCS in the Borough continued to reach organisations varying in size and those which were not in receipt of Council funding (in addition to those who were), it was proposed that a summit would be held in Spring 2026. It was envisaged that at this summit both the Council's strategic priorities and the future funding envelope would be communicated to enable a range of partners to contribute to discussions.

It was acknowledged that during the 2024/ 25 municipal year, the council had awarded just under £10m of grant funding to VCS organisations who operated in Sandwell. Nearly 40% of this was funded from external sources and government grants, with 26% funded from the Public Health Grant and approximately 20% funded from the council's General Fund budget.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- Elected Members were not represented on the VCS Grants Board to ensure that there would be no conflicts of interests. This reflected best practice as identified by Trueman Change, with the responsible Cabinet Member maintaining oversight of the process.
- For services which the Council commissioned directly, contracts were in place which complied with the Procurement Regulations 2024 legislation.
- There was concern that some organisations which had historically received grant funding from the Council could foster reliance upon this funding stream. Where the activities of organisations were not aligned with the Council's strategic aims, organisations would be encouraged to seek alternative funding streams, or the Council could gradually reduce the funding provided to ensure VCS organisations could remain viable.
- Welfare rights services were provided by the Council, however some commissioned services provided more specialist advice which was independent from the Council's internal team,
- All grants which were due to end when the 2024/ 25 financial year culminated had been reviewed by the VCS Grants Board.
- Sandwell Consortium received grant funding to deliver specific projects, for which Consortium Members could bid to deliver services.

- Members may benefit from further understanding of SCVO and Sandwell Consortium via conducting Spotlight Sessions.
- It was acknowledged that due to the nature of the Borough that some duplication in provided services may occur, however most VCS organisations worked with different demographics and varying diverse groups.
- Officers in attendance undertook to share details of the three organisations for which grants were to be decommissioned with the Board.
- Engagement with the sector via soft market testing was conducted prior to issuing grants to VCS organisations, to ensure that the benefits of commissioning services through an open application process were considered, before any such decisions at VCS Grants Board level were made.
- Some specialist services could only be provided by a limited number of providers at present.
- Whilst the Council had retained the levels of funding compared to neighbouring authorities who had reduced VCS funding in recent years, in real terms due to inflationary costs this represented a decrease of purchasing power. However, it was acknowledged that due to budgetary constraints the Council only had a limited amount of funding which could be distributed amongst third sector organisations.
- Members noted that VCS organisations were also funded by external organisations, for example by the Black Country Integrated Care Board and the National Lottery Community Fund.
- VCS organisations were regularly reviewed by commissioning officers against monitored outcomes (including value for money) to ensure performance objectives were met.

Councillors in attendance placed on record their appreciation of the hard work and crucial efforts of those working for VCS organisations in Sandwell.

Resolved that the Board hold online Spotlight Sessions to enable scrutiny of value for money outcomes and organisational capacity for both Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations and Sandwell Consortium.

60/25

Work Programme

The Board noted its work programme for the 2025/ 6 municipal year.

The Service Director – Environment and Public Protection outlined that the Board may benefit from scrutinising the Play Area Strategy in a dedicated session, to incorporate policy development and engagement with the consultant appointed by the Council to support the development of the strategy.

Meeting ended at 7.42pm.
(Meeting adjourned between 7.25- 7.38pm).

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