

Cabinet

Report Title	Sandwell Aspirations
Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 14 January 2026
Report Author	Michelle Rihoy, Interim Corporate Policy Manager
Lead Officer	Assistant Chief Executive Executive Director – Finance and Transformation
Lead Cabinet Member(s)	Leader of the Council Councillor Kerrie Carmichael
Why is this a key decision?	To be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards of the Borough.
Wards Affected	(All Wards);
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Open
Is the report urgent?	No
Reasons for urgency (only where applicable)	
Appendices (if any)	

1. Executive Summary

1.1 In December 2024, Sandwell received £11.784m from the national Recovery Grant, allocated to council areas with greater need and demand for public services based on the indices of multiple deprivation. In approving the 2025/26 budget in February 2025 it was agreed that £11.5m of this funding would be directed toward approaches capable of producing visible improvements for residents while contributing to longer-term change. Over the past year, significant preparatory work has taken place in preparation. This report sets out the proposed approach, programme structure, stakeholder roles, timeline, and governance arrangements for delivery. The proposed programme, titled Sandwell Aspirations, is now ready to move into delivery, and approval is sought to proceed.

2. Recommendations

The Cabinet is recommended to:-

- 2.1 Endorse the analysis and evidence-led approach undertaken over the last year to design this approach to tackling deprivation in Sandwell.
- 2.2 Approve the two-tier delivery model for Sandwell Aspirations, comprising:
 - Tier 1 - Local Engagement and Visibility (Dec 2025–Mar 2026): member-nominated local audits leading to rapid environmental and community improvements.
 - Tier 2 - 5-Year Strategic Programme (2026–2031): a coordinated, borough-wide programme addressing all IMD domains alongside partners.
- 2.3 Approve the proposed governance arrangements including the establishment of the Sandwell Aspirations Board reporting to the Corporate Transformation Board, Strategic Leadership Team, and the Sandwell Together Partnership.
- 2.4 Endorse the discovery timeline, including Tier 1 audits commencing December 2025 and the launch of Tier 2 workstreams from April 2026.
- 2.5 Agree to provide delegated authority to the Senior Responsible Officers the Assistant Chief Executive and the Executive Director for Finance & Transformation (S.151 Officer), in conjunction with the Leader of the Council, to take decisions authorising the expenditure for individual projects with a value exceeding £1million, subject to compliance with the council's constitution, financial regulations, contract procedure rules, and any relevant statutory requirements.
- 2.6 Endorse continued engagement with partners, including Public Health, WMCA, NHS, Police, VCFSE, schools, further and higher education providers, and housing providers, to shape and deliver the programme.
- 2.7 Receive a progress update, including emerging findings from Tier 1 and proposed initial investments, in March 2026.

3. Proposals – Reasons for the recommendations

- 3.1 In December 2024, Sandwell received £11.784m from the national Recovery Grant, allocated to council areas with greater need and demand for public services based on the indices of multiple deprivation. In approving the 2025/26 budget in February 2025 it was agreed that £11.5m of this funding would be directed toward approaches capable of producing visible improvements for residents while contributing to longer-term change.
- 3.2 Members have been clear that the £11.5m Recovery Fund allocation must be used in a way that:
 - demonstrates visible progress for residents;
 - supports long-term improvement in deprivation indicators; and
 - is transparent, well-governed, and shaped with councillors.

3.3 Over the past year, significant preparatory work has taken place to determine how best to deploy the funding in a way that is evidence-led, aligned to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) domains, and capable of achieving sustainable impact. This report sets out the proposed approach, programme structure, stakeholder roles, timeline, and governance arrangements for delivery.

3.4 Sandwell remains one of the most deprived areas nationally, with 56% of neighbourhoods among the 20% most deprived in 2025, and 16% in the most deprived 10%. The programme design therefore emphasises both visible local improvements and coordinated work across the seven IMD domains, informed by case studies and national deprivation evidence.

3.5 The proposed programme, titled Sandwell Aspirations, is now ready to move into delivery, and approval is sought to proceed.

3.6 Analysis in 2025 showed that Sandwell has slightly improved its overall relative deprivation, but it is still the 19th most deprived Local Authority area in England. Case studies from other local authorities and internal discussions confirm that coordinated action across all seven IMD domains, rather than isolated initiatives, is required to “move the dial”.

3.7 The proposed approach reflects this evidence and is designed to balance member expectations for visible activity with a robust, long-term framework for systemic change.

3.8 Sandwell continues to face entrenched deprivation across income, employment, health, skills, housing, crime and the living environment. IMD analysis shows:

- Income deprivation: 9th most deprived nationally.
- Employment deprivation: 23rd most deprived nationally.
- Education, skills and training: 12th most deprived nationally.
- Health and disability: 34th most deprived nationally.
- Barriers to housing and services: 145th most deprived nationally.
- Living environment: 70th most deprived nationally.
- Crime: 39th most deprived nationally.

3.9 A structured, evidence-led programme has now been designed, including:

- Review of past Sandwell interventions.
- Analysis of national case studies.
- Stakeholder engagement.
- Governance and workstream design.
- Alignment with the Sandwell Together Partnership.

3.10 A Two-Tier Approach is proposed, comprising

3.10.1 **Tier 1: Local Engagement and Visibility (Dec 2025-Mar 2026).** A short-term programme enabling councillors to nominate specific neighbourhood areas requiring focused attention. Activities include mini-audits, local consultation, and commissioning of targeted environmental and community improvements.

3.10.2 **Tier 2: 5-Year Strategic Programme (2026-2031).** A borough-wide programme structured around IMD domains, developed through Sandwell Together Partnership workshops covering employment, economy, education, skills, housing, environment, crime and health. A full Theory of Change and outcomes-based programme will underpin delivery.

3.11 In addition to the above, consideration is being given to identifying additional actions that will enable the Council and partners to move at pace with targeted interventions that can make a significant impact in growing aspiration and economic output for the benefit of Sandwell residents.

4 Alternative Options Considered

4.1 The following alternative options have been considered and reviewed :-

4.1.1 **Option 1 - Single-domain focus (e.g., employment only).** This option was rejected due to evidence that IMD domains are interdependent and improvements require cross-cutting action.

4.1.2 **Option 2 - Distribution of funds through discrete departmental bids.** This option was rejected due to risk of fragmentation, duplication, and minimal long-term impact.

4.1.3 **Option 3 - Local grants programme only.** This option was rejected because while popular, it would not meaningfully shift deprivation indicators.

4.2 The recommended approach was selected because it combines short-term visibility with long-term strategic impact, supported by strong governance and evaluation.

5. Consultation

5.1 Consultation to date includes:

- Engagement with the Corporate Transformation Board
- Work with Public Health HDRC on evidence, data, and outcomes design
- Early engagement with West Midlands Combined Authority, NHS, VCFSE, and Neighbourhood Services.
- Discussions with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods & Communities on local priorities

5.2 A separate communication and engagement plan will be developed with the Sandwell Story team as part of programme mobilisation, including resident input into Tier 1 local audits and Sandwell Together Partnership workstream co-design.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 Within the 2025/26 budget, the Council approved the creation of an 'Aspiration Fund' with a value of £11.5m, to enable early testing of interventions aimed at improving deprivation outcomes.

6.2 Tier 1 Local Audits will require an allocation totalling £1.5m (£0.250m per town), to support neighbourhood audits and rapid commissioning. Tier 2 expenditure (totalling £10m) will be phased and linked to workstream proposals. Business cases, which will be subject to evaluation and delegated approval, will be constructed as specific proposals mature.

7. Legal and Governance Implications

7.1 The proposed programme does not create new statutory duties but supports the Council in meeting a range of statutory responsibilities regarding equality, housing, education, public health, and community safety, together with other non-statutory responsibilities

7.2 Any commissioned activity will require compliance with the Council's Financial Regulations, Procurement & Contract Procedure Rules as set out in the Constitution., subsidy control, data protection legislation, and standard contractual requirements.

7.3 The governance arrangements for the programme operate through a clear escalation and assurance framework. Delivery and thematic development are undertaken through multi-agency working groups, which report into the Sandwell Aspirations Board. The Sandwell aspirations Board maintains a two-way relationship with the Sandwell Together Partnership to ensure alignment with wider place-based priorities and partnership commitments.

7.4 The Sandwell Aspirations Governance Board reports into the Assistant Chief Executive (ACE) Portfolio Board, which provides oversight, challenge, and alignment with corporate priorities. The ACE Portfolio Board escalates matters requiring cross-organisational consideration to the Corporate Transformation Board. Ultimate decision-making authority, democratic and member accountability and scrutiny are retained by Cabinet and Scrutiny.

8. Risks

8.1 The following risks have been identified and addressed in the design of the programme:-

Risk 1: Political and Decision-Making

- **Description:** There is a risk that changes in political priorities, the upcoming all out local elections and restrictions during the Pre-Election Period may impact decision-making, delay approvals, or alter the scope of current work. This could affect programme delivery timelines and resource allocation.
- **Mitigation:** Maintain flexibility within programme plans and governance arrangements to adapt to potential shifts in political direction; ensure robust documentation of decisions taken prior to purdah; continue engagement with elected members and senior officers to manage expectations and maintain momentum within permitted guidelines

Risk 2: Misalignment with Strategic Priorities

- **Description:** There is a risk that programmes and projects may not align with agreed strategic priorities, leading to ineffective delivery and reduced impact.
- **Mitigation:** Governance arrangements through the Corporate Transformation Board (CTB) and building approach into directorate business planning to ensure alignment and progress monitoring.

Risk 3: Limited Impact on Deprivation

- **Description:** Programmes and projects may fail to deliver the desired impact on reducing deprivation.
- **Mitigation:** Use evidence-based interventions, agree metrics and methodology in advance, and establish links with the Health Data Research Collaborative (HDRC) to ensure quality and robust evaluation.

Risk 4: Delays in Spending Allocated Funding

- **Description:** Funding may not be spent in a timely manner, risking under-delivery or loss of allocated resources.
- **Mitigation:** Developing clear priorities, timelines, and governance with Sandwell Together Partnership workshops.

Risk 5: Effective Partnership Working

- **Description:** Sandwell Partnership relationship and appetite to create and deliver shared objectives
- **Mitigation:** Develop and agree shared objectives and priorities with partners through co-production; embed joint planning and decision-making within governance structures; maintain regular engagement and transparent communication to strengthen trust and sustain collaboration.

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

9.1 A full EQIA assessment will be completed for each project once identified through the local audits and Sandwell Together Partnership workshops to ensure due regard to impact on equalities.

10. Other Relevant Implications

10.1 **Workforce and HR implications:** due to the scale and complexity of the programme, it is likely to require a dedicated delivery-focused project manager and a Partnership Manager to support strategic relationships with the Sandwell Together Partners. The funding for these additional roles will likely need to come from the Aspiration fund – business case to be developed for anticipated recruitment from April 2026.

10.2 **Procurement implications:** It has been agreed that the approach adopted needs to be evidence-based and if the monitoring and evaluation data shows that approaches are not achieving anticipated impact, then the intention will be to 'fail quickly'. To facilitate this approach, there will need to be a review existing contracts and build milestones and exit clauses accordingly.

10.3 **Climate change implications:** The IMD explicitly focuses on EPCs, air quality, and private outdoor space for residential properties, therefore there is likely going to be some focus in improving these areas for residents, though the specifics of the approach will be further defined once the audits and workshops have been completed in April 2026.

10.4 **Social value implications:** There will be a review of the social value of the Council's supply chain (local recruitment clauses, for example) and seeking to work with partners in the private sector to further maximise existing social value offers for Sandwell residents.

10.5 **Health and wellbeing implications:** The IMD has a strong focus on mental health, air quality, morbidity, so there will likely be some focus in these areas – the specifics will be further defined in the audits and workshops.

10.6 **Crime and Disorder Act 1998 implications:** IMD focuses on 8 specific types of crime including: theft, burglary, violence, stalking and harassment, criminal damage, anti-social behaviour, public disorder and possession of weapons.

11. Background Documents

- 11.1 IMD2025
- 11.2 IMD2019
- 11.3 IMD2015
- 11.4 IMD2010
- 11.5 Case study presentation

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

Sandwell Aspirations will support all Strategic Themes of the Council Plan:

- Growing up in Sandwell
- Living in Sandwell
- Healthy in Sandwell
- Thriving Economy in Sandwell
- One Council One Team Approach

12.1 The wholistic and integrated approach of Sandwell Aspirations, working on all domains of the IMD at once means that the programme will likely impact and support all these areas.