



## Year End Review

### Chief Executive's Reflections

2020 has certainly been a year to remember for many reasons. As a Council we have responded to unprecedented challenge in every aspect of what we do and how we do it.

We have responded effectively to the emergency of the pandemic as one Council, establishing our business continuity rapidly and calmly. We have shown how we can mobilise flexibly and quickly. This is what I am most proud of. A true one council, one team response where departments have been irrelevant to the job we've needed to do. Thank you for this.

This goes for how we have worked with our partners too – we have pulled together as a whole place to support the people of Sandwell. Organisational boundaries between us have been invisible.

At the same time, we have continued service delivery where it was possible. I am so proud of our overall achievement and our front-line services, supporting our communities in times of crisis. To do this we have had to shift our services to a digital platform where possible, this has been astounding and impressive.

I'm very excited for the future development of our business model, building on the innovation we have achieved in the last nine months and using this as a springboard as we go into next year. I'm also confident our Reset and Recovery programme will support both Sandwell's and our organisation's recovery journey

I do recognise that this impressive response is taking its toll – on our workloads, our mental health and our wellbeing. It's vital that we recognise the importance of looking after each other in these difficult times. As a Council it's really important to me that we prioritise wellbeing as we move into the new year.

I know something that has worried staff across the Council is our budget position, it has been a tough year financially, responding to COVID and the loss of income for our services. Our robust financial position means we can deal with the short-term pressure of responding to the pandemic through using our reserves, but we will need to make structural changes in the medium to longer term in 2021/22. The loss of income is likely to affect future years due to the economic downturn and reduced income from council tax, increased cost of council tax reduction scheme, business rates arrears and increased demand for services.

Looking ahead to 2021 I want to build on our great achievements. Personally, I will be ensuring the senior management restructure is completed and embedded, I also want to ensure that our corporate plan is updated to reflect how the needs of our communities have evolved over the past 12 months.

Our transformation agenda has jumped forward and there's more to do on this, reconfiguring our building estate, implementing our workforce vision/operating model and the culture change this requires, continuing to transform local services and our technological transformation projects – oracle fusion and our technological modernisation programme.

Brexit is also on the horizon, we need to look ahead and make sure that we provide business with the right support at the right time.

## Responding to COVID – key achievements

### Our emergency response

- Sandwell's Local Outbreak Plan was highlighted as best practice example by the Department of Health
- Our Outbreak Response service operates seven days a week supporting schools, workplaces and care homes. Public Health specialists are always on-call, supported by a Council-wide team of staff and enabled by new telephony solutions
- The Outbreak Response in Sandwell's care homes has limited death rates to a level significantly lower than the regional and national averages
- Sandwell's contact tracing service was one of the first to be set up in the UK. This led the successful reach of new cases rising from 60% to around 90%. The service has achieved this by having the ability to speak a range of languages and not requiring members of the public to be connected to the internet
- With partners, delivered testing centres for Covid in a community swabbing service exclusive to Sandwell, with 100 tests available daily
- Sandwell led rapid creation of regional mortuary facility at Birmingham Airport, in team effort in split shifts and weekends between Registration, Legal and Finance; and with thirteen local authority areas, the police, the military and other key service providers
- Over 200 laptops distributed in first few weeks of lockdown to vulnerable children missing education and safe and well checks immediately put in place
- Adult social care handled PPE needs effectively: stock control, predicting demand, procurement systems and supply chains (including locally sourced) ensured local provider confidence
- Great support to care providers using daily surveys and updates from them, monitoring and managing the market, identifying pressure points, interpreting government guidance and fast response to support care delivery, particularly domiciliary care

### Supporting Sandwell's vulnerable people

- As part of the emergency response, a food distribution hub created at Tipton Sports Academy from 23 March was the first in the West Midlands and is seen as best practice in terms of its quick mobilisation, community connections and expansion to support other vulnerable groups within Sandwell. More than 15,000 parcels delivered with additional medications to isolated individuals, in both lockdowns, in partnership with the Albion Foundation
- Welfare calls to support 12,000 people that are clinically vulnerable. Proactively calling people and switching on emergency support in first and second lockdown
- Support provided for shielding and clinically extremely vulnerable children unable to attend school: food, supplies, play resources, education resources
- Additional support for vulnerable care leavers, including continued corporate parenting meetings with the Care Leavers' Forum and contact from West Bromwich Albion players
- Enhanced support offer to care homes – limiting number of deaths in Sandwell care homes
- Collective effort to administer Winter grant to the most vulnerable – huge efforts across council to respond
- Frequent Vulnerable Children's Group Meeting enhanced communication and partnership working between the council and the Children's Trust. Shared Business Continuity Plans and gap identification led to a coordinated response to safeguarding vulnerable children - included phone calls, attendance monitoring, food referrals, laptops and a communications strategy for return to school.
- Activity packs produced for families, including those in temporary or supported accommodation and in refuges.
- New arrangements ensured virtual visits to children in care, and those with child protection plans or children in need.
- Critical response service established to support the attendance of vulnerable children in early years settings and schools, including welfare checks and joint partnership visits.

## **Providing advice and financial support**

- Welfare Rights support helped 7,700 people, bringing in £17m into people's pockets
- £56m worth of business grants distributed to over 5,000 businesses
- Some 361 discretionary business grants (value £2,631,500) with targeted support for market traders.
- Environment health teams and trading standards teams assisted businesses with Covid restrictions and workplace safety as well as Think Sandwell webpage on business support
- Use of Emergency Active Travel Fund captured £290,000 of funding to support social distancing and improve access via cycling and walking
- Scheme introduced for local childcare businesses with sustainability funding
- Test and trace support payments made
- Council tax hardship payments of £1.6m paid from £4.5m fund
- Over 3,000 Council Tax reduction scheme new claims
- Infection Control Fund administered effectively
- Extensive support to schools including daily/weekly communication, with material to share with parents/carers, and emotional wellbeing and mental health resources for staff and students
- School Support Line from 7.15am daily advising on positive cases/self-isolation arrangements.

## **Business continuity**

- No services were completely stopped, despite challenges
- Frontline services continued providing direct care, with staff making considerable sacrifices in their lives to keep people safe
- Widespread willingness to work flexibly, in different ways and different hours and weekends, for example, multiple teamworking to deliver mortuary capacity; governance team providing rapid response to new legislation and guidance; and extensive volunteering with helplines, arranging deliveries
- 248,695 calls have been taken by the contact centre since March, continuing to take calls at increased volumes and deal with lots of different queries, despite front line offices being closed
- Staff commitment strongly welcomed in many public and user surveys and spontaneous feedback
- Reset and recovery process managing service restarts was done practically, safely and in conjunction with trade unions
- Moving services onto a digital platform: school admissions appeals, Connexions interviews and tailored services for young people to access post 16 and 18+ options
- Work with Family Court to trial and successfully implemented electronic bundling for childcare cases.
- Adjustments to reception areas, appointment rooms, coroners court, ceremony rooms and chapel layout to our chapels enabled critical personal contact in Registration Services
- Systems to ensure all key workers could continue to access childcare.

## **Innovation and good practice**

- Striking level of adaptation to huge Covid-imposed change: working from home, flexibility to change roles to keep people safe. For example, finance embraced working remotely, while devising business grants policy, and alongside Regeneration team distributing business grants quickly
- Fostered new ways of operating together with partners to enable timely discharge from hospital through whole-system approach
- Sandwell influenced national delivery models for shielding, infection control, and locally sourced PPE
- Continued development of ACEs awareness and training to ensure trauma-informed practice across Sandwell
- Connexions and Think Sandwell supported young people with September guarantee tailored to their aspirations
- Think Sandwell provided an up to date, all in one place, information source for local businesses to access information relevant to them.
- New digital resources for young people, notably online youth clubs, weekly agony aunt sessions, and Go Play sessions
- MS Teams Live deployed to ensure effective decision-making, operational management and engagement, such as holding staff conferences across the workforce

- Continued close engagement with Black Country and regional children's services to collaborate on Covid responses, for example, emergency cross-boundary arrangements for children, single system for contact visits, and court access arrangements
- Schools encouraged to support local communities through food banks, food collection and distribution of food parcels and primary schools also engaged with care homes.

### **Teamworking and partnerships**

- Effective Covid response relied on good partnership working across numerous sectors, for example, with the police and environmental enforcement officers working together with the courts and neighbouring local authorities to align approach to enforcement activities on infection control, breaching guidance or closing a business down, often in response to notified public concern. Similarly, twice-daily calls with health partners/hospitals to manage new Discharge to Assess process and establish capacity within care homes to admit Covid positive patients
- Extensive cross-council working demonstrated in a number of way such as providing welfare calls and support to the food hub. Willing redeployment and volunteering key to successfully delivering the right services at the right time
- Sit Rep and IMT meetings of police, health, fire and voluntary sector working closely together
- Adult social care pulled together as whole system with partners for example, in establishing the new discharge to assess system. Looking at way of operating together with partners to enable timely discharge from hospital
- Sandwell maintained good reputation with central government departments (particularly DfE) for example by engaging with government focus groups. We also sustained our relationship with Ofsted, hosting an HMI to work alongside us during the summer term
- Support to apprentices, working closely with providers and employers to ensure continuation/completion, tackle barriers faced; liaising with employers, ensuring Covid compliance. Backed by buddying system and induction for council apprentices
- The digital team pivotal in Covid response, for example supporting HR and housing in the role out of their electronic document management systems
- Finance advised on adjusting procurement rules to help staff work remotely, while legal and assurance pooled expertise to support new mortuary and food hub.

### **Community engagement**

- Keeness to revise ways of community engagement in face of Covid challenge
- Extensive community-based communication undertaken, with notable example of public health to target messages and information campaigns in areas with high levels of community transmission (Stay Safe in Sandwell)
- Monthly meetings with faith leaders to produce communications, which they helped to deliver (Imams in mosques readily made sacrifices during Eid by cancelling large celebration events)
- Young people's engagement work for the Town's Fund, ensuring youth voice was evident and helped shape the Town Investment Plans
- Detached Youth Work continued to engage young people during both lockdowns
- Over 500 young people were engaged in a Covid impact survey
- Care taken to co-design initiatives and approaches with the community, notably contact and trace service and work with care homes
- Developed a range of volunteer support services with Sandwell SCVO.

### **Governance, regulation and risk**

- Members portal went live in pilot phase, enabling councillors to manage casework and queries
- Constitutional provisions enacted for Emergency Committee to become the sole decision-making body so council could respond to emerging pressures, but with appropriate checks and balances in place
- Democratic and civic and member services worked collaboratively with ICT team to provide new equipment, and ongoing support and learning and development with elected members to secure effective remote meetings

- Finance managed changing COVID regulations and Oracle Fusion project
- Budget was managed well due to adequate reserves, and good monitoring by finance
- Continued to utilise the Apprenticeship Levy to minimise funds returning to central government
- Successfully implemented hundreds of Covid guidance/legislative changes across our statutory services. Staff adaptability was fantastic, and we have successfully addressed everything we've needed to
- Facilities management team closed down safely and securely council buildings and assets mitigating risk
- Effective governance, regulation and risk maintained SMBC reputation in exceptionally difficult environment.

## Summary of Covid Impact

As part of our Reset and Recovery process, evidence of the impact of the pandemic has been gathered over the last six months. This has been widely shared with staff, members and our partners in Sandwell. As the full impact of Covid develops, this evidence base will be updated and reviewed in order to drive our business planning going forward.

The headlines from this impact assessment work are:

### Community

- **On mental health** - **Direct** factors such as the loss of family and friends to the disease and **indirectly** related issues such as social isolation or financial insecurity can operate in combination; and lack of emotional and mental health support. Community and voluntary organisations (VCO) identify lack of emotional and mental health support, lack of access to daily provisions, safeguarding for vulnerable adults and the employment worries created by the crisis
- **Personal Health and Health and Social Care Services** - The pandemic has both **disrupted and changed the delivery of NHS and social care services**. There have been significant drops in A&E use and the health care needs of people with long-term conditions have been significantly impacted. Long-term conditions will have worsened for many people over the course of lockdown, with concerns about the impact of delayed cancer diagnoses and the knock-on effects as NHS services have resumed.
- **Food insecurity** - The number of adults who are food insecure is estimated to have quadrupled. Food banks have experienced a rapid increase in demand but alongside this have experienced reduced volunteer numbers. In Sandwell demand for food vouchers up 188% (358% in Smethwick). Over 15,000 food parcels were delivered to vulnerable families including those shielding
- **Digital exclusion** - Digital exclusion hinders benefit take-up, particularly the impact on elderly and/or isolated people, or jobseekers. Many people were unable to access services because of lack of equipment and/or knowledge on how to use it. The council distributed 1,586 laptops from DFE for children and young people with a Social Worker though some lacked broadband
- **Huge increase in uptake of universal credit** - Universal Credit claims doubled from February to July to 35,285 people
- **Delays in dealing with universal credit** – has led to financial hardship and household debt
- **Mounting household debt** - has also had direct impact on the local authority's financial position and its future ability to support people and places
- Social stress resulting from the above
- **Anti-social behaviour**- particularly fly-tipping as recycling centre was closed for a period, but also cases of noise and gang-related disturbance.
- **Disproportionate impact on BAME groups and women** - measurable impacts are both direct (such as mortality or weakened health) and indirect (such as job losses)
- **High impact on young people** – children and young people may be hit hardest by the social distancing and lockdown measures; including mental health, youth unemployment, jobs, inequalities in educational attainment and reduced access to services for vulnerable children and their families

- **Volunteering and the community sector** -there is evidence of increased civic participation in response to Covid and a positive impact on social cohesion. However, the Third sector faces widespread pressure – increased demand from users at the same time as closure/depletion of services in lockdown. Most have maintained service delivery by changing how they work, forcing innovation. Medium sized organisations most affected – a third had suspended services altogether.

## Economy

- KPMG predicts that the West Midlands region will feel the biggest impact of the pandemic in 2020 they forecast its economy will contract by just over 10 percent. This is because it is home to many automotive manufacturers, they make up nearly 6 percent of the local economy. This sector faces a severe downturn as a result of supply chain factors interrupting production and falling demand as consumers cut back spending
- The West Midlands Business Activity Index has decreased from 58.5 in September to 51.2 in October. Impacts from the second national lockdown will not yet be seen and November will be a challenging month for businesses across the UK.
- The West Midlands Growth Company have estimated that the pandemic will reduce the size of West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) region’s visitor economy by £9.4bn (= £7bn directly + £2.4bn indirectly) and cost the equivalent of 102,256 full-time jobs in 2020
- Across the WMCA (3 LEP) area, compared to March 2020 (117,590) the number of claimants has increased by 93,385 (+79.4% compared to +105.9% UK)
- **Unemployment** - in Sandwell more than doubled during the year to reach 19,280. By October 9.4% of working-age people were unemployed, above the regional level but lower than adjacent Birmingham and Wolverhampton. Youth (16-24) claimant rate has increased from 2,130 in March 2020 to 4,015 in October 2020.

## Organisation

- **Sickness Absence Sandwell Council** (isolations due to coronavirus and confirmed covid-19 cases have been excluded) - On whole the number of employees reporting sick each week since the lockdown began in March this year was lower compared to the same period last year.

## Employee Survey

- Overall the results are very positive, and we have a resilient workforce – this is especially true for those employees WFH and those WFH and a council location.
- No real difference in question scores for those who have shielded and those who have not, although mental health scores vary.
- Employees who work exclusively from a council location appear more disengaged then employees WFH and those WFH / council locations.
- Staff were clear about my priorities and what is expected of them (90%), know where to go to for support regarding their health, safety and wellbeing (88%) and were comfortable raising concerns with their line manager (88%).

## Conclusions

In short, the pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated longstanding inequalities in society. As we move to more normal conditions, the direct and wider impacts of the pandemic on individuals, households and communities will influence their capacity to recover.



## **Lessons learnt from our response to COVID**

### **Communication and Engagement**

- Learned about the importance of regular clear communications inside our organisation
- Importance of communications with our partner agencies – joining up our services and systems
- Reinforced the need to do something ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ communities and that the investment of time with people is always well spent
- Some business meetings can be held successfully remotely, and attendance has been shown to increase
- Members valued informal meetings with officers where they could share information and ideas.

### **Our workforce**

- Utilisation of skills that we didn’t realise we had in different parts of the organisation – we have a flexible, adaptable workforce
- How innovative we’ve been under pressure in a number of different ways
- Staff going above and beyond, their caring attitude, supporting each other to keep going through difficult times
- IT skills of everyone have developed
- Results of staff survey – whilst staff have adapted well to working at home most people would like to see a hybrid model where they have time in the office to come together with colleagues.

### **Our partners**

- Has proven that we have trust with our partners and this has grown during the pandemic – providers have kept people safe, voluntary sector stepping in to provide support
- Importance of local suppliers and businesses, the support they showed at a critical time to support the council and local communities
- Partnership forums have developed and matured.

### **Service Delivery**

- Reflected and challenged assumptions on how services are delivered. Learning with partners and how we can work together differently
- Developed services – provided the impetus to innovate and change
- Move towards digital and paperless working has advanced
- Homeworking is effective in delivering services
- We have to prioritise services for those areas that support the most vulnerable in the community, laptops and other equipment have been prioritised for Adults and Children’s service areas.

### **Our organisation**

- Corporately we need to rethink our operating model in the light of what has changed and what we have learned
- Place based SMT. Decisions for COVID benefitted from feeding in information and ideas from everyone and considering the wider impact, rather than just thinking about it from a narrow single service view, including legal, HR, financial and key external partners. We need to continue with this model and not work in individual silos, to produce holistic solutions and more robust governance
- How interconnected we all are as services. There is that common link and thread between our services and we do better, respond better when we do that jointly. This applies to partners and the voluntary sector as well
- We embrace change very well. New ways of working kept services going. We are able to do it even when we don’t know what the future holds.

# Delivering the Corporate Plan

## Best start in life for Children and Young People



THE BEST START IN  
LIFE FOR CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Great strides in developing and strengthening Children and Young People Strategic Commissioning Partnership – focus on visibility of vulnerable groups during the pandemic. Cultural shift, massive collaboration during unprecedented times
- Police and Schools Panel has delivered a programme of work to address youth violence and youth crime including a knife arch project and an agreed Weapons in Schools Protocol
- SHAPE Board has meant that children and young people’s engagement has gone from strength to strength. Now have a more strategic approach and participation has increased and social media platforms are reaching more young people
- Sandwell Children’s Safeguarding Partnership has managed a system that has ensured the safety of children and young people during the pandemic
- Strengthened regional and national partnerships with the youth sector
- Employment and Skills and Connexions supporting virtual careers delivery with Careers Enterprise Company into schools
- Winner of the acclaimed MJ Award for Innovation in Children’s Services
- DfE approval for the first music-focused free school in England in partnership with City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, to be located in West Bromwich
- Good Ofsted inspection judgement for SAFL
- Early Years Transformation Academy – fantastic partnership development bringing together multi agency approach to early years provision. Mapping of services, engagement with families, needs assessment and system redesign. Exemplar in multi-agency partnership working. Work is now consolidated into the Children and Young People Strategic Commissioning Partnership and is a priority for the STP
- Successful bid to DfE for Black Country Fostering Feasibility programme
- Extended offer for care leavers: 100% council tax exemption up to age 25; eligibility for Tier 1 housing priority
- Delivery of ACES awareness training via Artemis, and Trusted Adult Training towards Sandwell becoming a Trauma-informed place. Wide range of other training delivered to support the quality of the workforce including the rollout of the ‘Neglect Toolkit’
- 20% increase in children successfully placed for adoption compared to previous year
- Delivery of Supporting Families Against Youth Crime (iTrust) received excellent feedback from MHCLG when they visited early in the year
- Delivery of anti-bullying week programme of work in schools
- Successful Scrutiny process looked at youth facilities and has led to improved information for young people and a new digital approach
- New Employment and Skills Partnership forum established; developed a Skills Strategy for Sandwell
- The work of the Employment and Skills team led to Sandwell Council rated a top employer for apprentices, scoring a place in the top 70 employers of school leavers in the UK which is the largest national awards ceremony where winners are decided based entirely on feedback from apprentices. Sandwell Council has risen an impressive 14 places to rank 67th in the listings; up from 81st in 2019.
- The work of the Employment and Skills team led to Sandwell Council’s Apprenticeship scheme being awarded “Highly Commended” in the Regional Apprenticeship Awards 2020
- Online jobs and skills event 2020 held to allow residents to access information on employment, training and support around redundancy
- School Admission Appeals have been successfully completed virtually over the summer period, a great combined effort between the team and Democratic Services, using technology to great effect



- Shireland Technology Primary Free School, construction completed in August and opened to pupils this month, and all three secondary school capital projects at Bristnall Hall Academy, Q3 Academy Langley and West Bromwich Collegiate Academy (circa £20m) have started on site and making excellent progress
- Too many staff to mention from across the directorate have been involved in the shielding support, laptop work and making contact with vulnerable families for food and supplies and many other forms of support
- Our Youth Service has continued to deliver detached youth work and through this strengthened partnership work, delivered targeted youth support to vulnerable young people and was successful in obtaining funding to deliver the Dr Bike project, delivering 13 sessions, engaging 126 people and repairing 51 bikes
- STEPS is a Finalist in the MJ Awards for the 'Innovations in Children's services' category
- There has been a continual outpouring of thanks to School Improvement Advisers from schools, for the quick access to problem solving on issues as they have been raised, often at weekends
- Real-time, and on-line, activities for children, families and schools prepared and presented by Residential Education Centres staff since March. Centres refreshed; and improvements undertaken in-house. Support given to other service areas and Council Covid-response
- Interactive services for children and families delivered by culture & libraries
- Elective Home Education has seen a significant increase in numbers whilst at the same time being subject to a review by the Scrutiny Board who have determined that the relationship with the EHE community and the Sandwell EHE team is very good, very supportive an open to communication
- Sandwell play services team and public health partnered with Active Black Country to ensure that families in need in Sandwell had the opportunity to be physically active in any space they have during lockdown
- 1000 skipping ropes have been provided as part of Sandwell MBC's 'Family Packs of Play' and have been shared with several groups across Sandwell to be distributed to families.

## Priorities looking forward

- Continue to focus on early years and particularly the first 1000 days
- Support schools to ensure achievement and progress of children's academic learning and emotional wellbeing is improved
- Develop a coherent programme of support to ensure that young people aged 11-19 can constructively contribute to society and successfully transition into adulthood
- Ensure that vulnerable children are supported at the right time and in the right way
- Develop the maturity of relevant partnerships so that support and services for children, young people and their families can make an evidenced difference and use public resources effectively.

## People live well, age well



- A key achievement has been keeping people safe and maintaining wellbeing despite the pandemic. We have kept services going and met our statutory responsibilities requiring a relentless wave of workload and effort by staff
- There has been an acceleration of personalised care. People have been supported to achieve their outcomes in a personalised way – with greater emphasis on asset-based assessments, which ultimately means less reliance on council services such as day care. This represents a cultural shift in how care is approached
- Huge changes to legislation have occurred with days to respond and change our decision making. Even though we have been bombarded with change, we have risen to it and addressed everything we needed to

- The Council and our partners have pulled together as a whole system, for instance, through discharge to assess, where we have looked at ways of working together with partners to enable timely discharge and finding solutions to PPE together
- Our relationships with providers, health and social care generally have grown and developed and the voluntary sector role in keeping people safe and well has been significant
- We have continued to look at service improvement throughout the pandemic in a variety of ways – e.g. education and good practice – contract with university OT apprenticeship scheme. LD and autism programme with ASWA, social work training programme, incident learning pathway. Enabling the reregistering of social workers
- Continued to build Willow Gardens and Knowle integrated health centre
- We adapted our Move More Sandwell programme to encourage people to move more at home and allocated our fleet of 40 bicycles to frontline health workers to enable them to cycle rather than use public transport in the pandemic
- We have supported people to live and age well through the prescription services and the welfare calls that have been provided
- The work we have done with the voluntary sector enabled people to support each other through the food bank and the voluntary arrangement with SCPO
- We have been proactive in our engagement with rough sleepers and during the first lockdown we supported 21 rough sleepers into sustainable tenancies, ensuring they were provided with appropriate support to enable them to maintain a tenancy effectively
- Over 80 employees were redeployed at the food hub set up at Tipton Sports Academy at the end of March. Up until its closure at the end of July over 15,000 parcels were delivered to vulnerable individuals, families and children
- We have supported people to live and age well, the prescription services, the welfare calls, taking that on and delivering that.

## Priorities looking forward

- Recovery from Covid and its consequences. It has exposed what we already knew and widened and exacerbated inequality in terms of health, wellbeing and finance. There needs a focus on levelling up and supporting groups who have lost and suffered the most; which includes BAME groups and people with disabilities, both physical and mental
- We will have to refocus our offer. Move away from generic programmes like health checks and focus and target this to groups who experience worse outcomes. This needs to be done by collaborating as partners with the community.
- Liberty protection safeguarding
- Roll out of the Discharge to Assess model
- Implement the digital capabilities framework
- Play our part in the vaccination programme roll out.

## Strong Resilient Communities



- Supporting strong and resilient communities, the work we have done with the voluntary sector enabled people to support each other through the food bank and the voluntary arrangement with SCPO
- Our services have been especially busy for example, undertaking 62,000 repairs since April 2020, 25% increase in tonnage of waste processed and over 240,000 calls to the contact centre
- Since the start of the pandemic the welfare rights advice line has assisted over 7700 residents leading to over £17 million in monetary confirmed gains and a further £4.5 million in backdated or lump sum

payments directly into the pockets of our residents. Not only does this money help families and individuals directly, it also contributes to our community wealth

- Huge strides towards channel shift, moving services/payments online. Customers using other methods of payment to cash up significantly
- Successful response to homelessness during the pandemic. Great successes in housing rough sleepers and engaging those previously difficult to engage. Use of temporary accommodation lowest in two years
- Volunteering and the community sector - positive impacts on social and community networks. There is evidence of increased civic participation in response to Covid and a positive impact on social cohesion; 732 Sandwell residents signed up to the SCVO database, with over 400 actively deployed supporting around 1,000 individual residents, voluntary organisations and telephone befriending
- March 2020, Council declares a Climate Emergency
- October 2020, Full council ratifies the new Climate Change Strategy. Strategy sets clear target date for the council to become carbon neutral by 2030 and for the wider borough to become carbon neutral by 2041. Close partnership working established with the WMCA on climate change with our target dates for carbon neutrality (2041) aligned
- Several initiatives have started around the establishment of 'heat networks' and 'district heating'
- Support for several Sandwell businesses making significant progress in the development of a 'circular economy' linked to the construction of the Aquatics Centre as well as to community wealth building and ultimately helping Sandwell to reduce its carbon emissions
- Progress made in reducing the energy consumption of council buildings and schools, 5000 new trees planted – further 5000 planned for 2021
- Hugely successful Safer 6 campaign continued despite lockdown with a series of virtual events and workshops during September and October
- The council have been proactive in switching activity online including planning committee taking place online, libraries renting ebooks, app encouraging people to walk with their families, alternative Autumn celebrations through Discover Sandwell and the museums service.

## Priorities looking forward

- Continue with our work to prevent homelessness and sustain the improvements made this year.
- Agree and implement the Sandwell Valley Business Plan
- Establish what capital and revenue resources are needed to implement the Climate Change strategy. Action needs to start as soon as possible in 2021 to begin to lower the carbon emissions of the council, so that we can legitimately play our role in helping the rest of the borough to reduce its emissions.
- Urgent action is also required to help the borough reduce its emissions to meet its 2041 target date – current emission levels require significant levels of interventions to reduce the borough's dependence on fossil fuels.

## Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods



### Key achievements

- 62,000 repairs have been undertaken during the pandemic. Our gas servicing levels have exceeded 99.5%, gaining access to close to 21,000 properties despite the restrictions
- Continued to let empty properties during the pandemic, more than 1000 properties have been made ready for new tenants, whilst ensuring the highest levels of health & safety compliance

- Between the start of July and the end of the grass cutting season in October we cut all our 9 million square metres of grass, despite usually starting grass cutting at the beginning of April. We also maintained all 179 of our parks and open spaces during this period
- Our refuse collection has not stopped at all during the pandemic, with over 4.68 million domestic and recycling collections being made. All 3000 of our roads and streets have been visited by road sweepers and litter pickers
- Fire safety in our high and low-rise blocks is critical following the Hackitt report and we have adapted our processes to ensure we undertake regular fire safety inspections. Over 520 inspections have been carried out in high rise blocks and over 360 in low rise blocks
- Continued to deliver the Council House Build Programme To date 354 homes have been completed and are now occupied, 203 homes are approved and are in progress, and a further 79 homes are programmed for approval.
- As part of the Council House Build programme, to date £9,755,500 funding has been secured through Homes England Affordable Housing Programme and £6,603,000 funding has been secured through Homes England New Ways of Working Programme.
- A Masterplan has been commissioned for the Friar Park site which will see the development of around 750 homes on site which was partly a former sewage treatment works. A Joint Venture Agreement has been entered in to with the WMCA and a significant amount of funding has been secured.
- Works continue to progress housing at Brandhall alongside a new public park. Masterplan consultants are being commissioned to develop a vision and detailed masterplan.
- The Extra Care facility at Moor Lane in Rowley Regis is on site and due to complete mid-2021. This will provide 93 extra care units.
- This year new council homes have been completed on the Durham Estate (90 units) and Strathmore Road, Tipton (63 units) with several other sites under construction but not yet completed.
- Local Enterprise Partnership Funding has been secured in principle (£1.6m) to fund complex
- Continued to exceed national standards in relation to dealing with planning applications within statutory timeframes
- 1059 homes were granted planning permission in Sandwell between March 2019 and March 2020. 501 homes were completed during the same period.
- The review of the Black Country Plan continues with evidence gathering on-going. This will provide the policy framework for new housing in Sandwell and across the Black Country.
- A cross boundary Masterplan has been commissioned across the Smethwick and Birmingham Corridor to facilitate regeneration across the corridor but specifically around the Midlands Metropolitan University Hospital at Grove Lane. This could see a further 750 homes delivered around Grove Lane.
- Work has progressed on the options for the council to create a council owned Housing Delivery Vehicle – this could provide the council with an opportunity to provide greater housing choices to local people.
- The Council working with its partner organisation wrote to every resident in the Borough to offer its gas and electricity switching service. This resulted in uptake by 937 residents (up 2242% on 2019) and delivered saving of £225 per household (up 33% on previous year) supporting those in fuel poverty. This year the scheme only offered renewable energy sources, saving an estimated 736 tonnes of carbon.

### Priorities looking forward

- Continue to access regeneration funding to bring forward sites for housing and town centre redevelopment through working with our partners
- Continue to use the best funding solution to ensure council's capital is matched wherever possible with external funding sources.
- Develop the second Council House Build Programme.
- Incorporate more renewable energy measures into existing and the design of new-build Council homes, including modern methods of construction and heating.
- Work toward delivering the outcomes of the masterplans at Friar Park, Brand hall and Grove Lane.
- Maintain excellent standards in determining planning applications.

- Introduce Town Centre living in appropriate locations ensuring council developments maintain excellent standards in urban design.
- Determine the preferred option for any council owned Housing Delivery Vehicle.
- Continue to progress the review of the Black Country Plan to ensure the policy base is robust and meet the needs of Sandwell and the Black Country.

## A Strong Inclusive Economy



- The Inclusive Economy Deal and a Community Wealth Building action plan has been launched. We have established governance arrangements for community wealth building, establishing a Community Wealth and Economic Resilience Board and an Anchor Network with representatives from key organisations
- Under the Towns Fund Programme, through a partnership approach, we have developed and submitted 3 robust Town Investment Plans for £75m which contains 19 projects aimed at transforming Rowley Regis, Smethwick and West Bromwich, and bringing broader community wealth building, and climate change benefits across Sandwell
- As part of the Towns Fund Accelerated Programme, we have already secured £2.25m for 10 projects which are being delivered and will improve connectivity, green spaces and town centres by the end of March 2021
- Many of our major regeneration projects have continued to progress, with work continuing on projects within West Bromwich Town Centre, including repurposing Providence Place for educational uses securing a City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra school within the town.
- Work is on track to develop the Sandwell Aquatic Centre. All three swimming pools, including the 50m competition pool, are complete and the structural steelwork has started with the first three roof trusses now in place.
- Wednesbury Heritage Action Zone is progressing and the funding agreement has been entered into securing inwards investment for the Wednesbury Town Centre Conservation Area.
- The Bull Street Multi-Storey Car Park is under demolition using funding secured by the West Midlands Combined Authority this will make way for future transformational change.
- Through the Town's Fund major regeneration projects will be developed to improve connectivity for residents to our towns and greenspaces improving access to these facilities.
- The West Bromwich Gateway Project will seek to provide a modern market offer to the residents of Sandwell. Investment is underway in the outdoor market stalls.
- Our planning services have continued to provide a service during the pandemic, with 100% of major applications being dealt with within the 13-week timescale and 88% of minor applications within the 8-week timescale.
- Masterplans have been commissioned to drive forward the regeneration of our major sites at Brandhall and Friar Park to deliver housing to meet future needs.
- A Masterplan for West Bromwich is underway which will set out how the Town Centre can thrive in the future.
- Opportunities for the Council to develop a Heat Network have been progressed to the Detailed Project Development stage.

## Priorities looking forward

- Supporting businesses through Brexit and Covid, supporting economic recovery in Sandwell
- Embedding Anchor Network and Community Wealth Building across the activities of the council to secure greater benefits for local residents and businesses
- Continue to move forward at pace our big schemes at Friar Park, Brandhall and West Bromwich. These will provide opportunities for employment for local people and inclusive economy outcomes, as well as quality housing
- Ensure improvements to the highway network are facilitated to support the local economy and the movement of goods and people across the Borough
- Minimise barriers to employment through ensuring public transport choices are available to all
- Continue to maximise government funding opportunities as they aim to stimulate the economy
- Continue to work proactively with our partners at the Local Enterprise Partnership and West Midlands Combined Authority to secure additional funding for Sandwell regeneration projects
- Towns Fund - Over the next year, our priorities will be the completion of projects under the accelerated programme, and, subject to Government's approval of the Town Investment Plans, finalising the business cases and commencing project delivery
- Embedding different ways of delivering and the new operating model e.g. reprioritising our estate.

## A connected, accessible Sandwell



A CONNECTED  
AND ACCESSIBLE  
SANDWELL

- Delivered a suite of improvements to our cycling and walking network in line with our Sandwell Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. For example, 2410m of improvements along the Galton Bridge to Bromford Lane Corridor (SAN01), 1665m of improvements along the Tame Valley Towpath (SAN07), and 1350m of improvements from Patent Drive to Bannister Road in Wednesbury (SAN09).
- Safety of our road network is essential and repairs to potholes on our highways has seen an increase in performance on last year of over 6%. 98% of repairs have been undertaken within time limits.
- We have still engaged our local schools in Road Safety week this year. Our competition – “perfect parking” has seen many local schools getting busy designing signs and banners, with many of the fantastic creations being shared on our social media platforms.
- The Birchley Island major highways improvement scheme has been agreed with Highways England, and a funding application to the Department for Transport for Major Route Network funding has been submitted. This could see over £20m of funding being allocated to Sandwell.
- An e-scooter trial in West Bromwich will see Sandwell residents being able to try a new sustainable mode of transport within a defined trial area.
- The first phase of work to develop a transport interchange at Dudley Port has been commissioned this will look at how we can ensure an end to end journey using public transport integrating rail, metro and bus services.
- Sandwell are partners in the Transport for West Midlands Bike Share scheme which will see a cycle hire scheme being rolled out in Sandwell in 2021. This will provide more choice for local residents and encourage the use of cycles which is beneficial not only for resident's health but also air quality and climate change.
- Consulted on the Black Country Ultra Low Emissions Vehicle Strategy that will provide the evidence base for future investment in charging infrastructure supporting the move to new electric vehicles only by 2030
- The Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro Extension is underway. This is a £410m project delivering 11km of metro track. It will a sustainable travel option for residents travelling to Dudley and Brierley Hill for



employment. This is in addition to the successful Metro line between Birmingham, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton

- Working with Partners secured funding from Department for Transport to fund cross-city bus corridors.
- Funding has been confirmed to enable step-free access to Rolfe Street Station in Smethwick. These works are due to complete in time for the Commonwealth Games in 2022
- Phase one of Emergency Active Travel Fund interventions were delivered in response to Covid-19 to encourage people to cycle and walk rather than taking the bus or driving, and to provide more space on some high streets to enable better social distancing. This £296,000 of Department for Transport funding was conditional on being able to deliver interventions quickly
- Secured funding for Phase 2 Emergency Active Travel Funding.

## Priorities looking forward

- Deliver the Sandwell Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan ensuring a network is in place that enables residents to make positive choices in relation to how they make journeys
- Continue to develop and deliver projects that reduce barriers to the use of public transport and sustainable travel choices including working with Transport for West Midlands in relation to bus and metro provision and the Rail Alliance
- Ensure that the responsibilities of the Local Highways Authority delivered and continue to maintain standards in relation to highway condition
- Work with the Environment Agency in our role as Lead Local Flood Authority to adopt a Flood Risk Management Plan for 2021 to 2027
- Maximise government funding opportunities for infrastructure through working with our Partner organisations including the Black Country Transport Team and Transport for West Midlands
- Maintain and develop relationships with Midlands Connect to profile major transport interventions in Sandwell
- Continue to deliver our key transport infrastructure projects such as Birchley Island
- Deliver accelerated funding projects relating to connectivity as part of the Towns Fund.
- Ensure Sandwell is well placed to support the move towards Electric Vehicles by delivering key infrastructure requirements.

## One Council, One Team



### Key achievements

- The one Council, one Team approach has been moved forward considerably this year
- Workplace vision developments, including office rationalisation and refurbishment has moved on apace. The success of homeworking, together with wanting to safeguard council funding to deliver frontline services, has made us consider what office space we will need in the future. The future will be different, but we hope that it will be more balanced between office and home working
- Working from home accelerated exponentially with our workforce flexibility tested to the limit. Creative solutions have been developed across the council with IT and the digital team working with teams across the council to ensure that access to services is maintained and we continue to be able deliver wherever it is safe to do so. E.g. digital forms, raspberry pi
- Staff willingly being redeployed from their day jobs into various roles to support the response was outstanding
- Transformation agenda still on track, work underway on developing a new operating model for the Council

- Progress has been made in shifting transactional services online during the pandemic as a foundation for further transformation
- IT worked with Governance Services to develop a solution that enabled decision making, for instance, school appeals, to continue throughout the pandemic, ensuring we remained open and transparent.
- Led the region in establishing a regional mortuary
- Processing 5400 Business Support Grants and responding to support calls was a result of collaboration by Revenues and Benefits, Finance and the Business Growth Teams
- ICT services massive response to allow 90% of workforce to work effectively from home. March saw an additional 1000 calls to ICT service desk, but the service continued to cope
- We have held three virtual conferences for all council staff, each event has been attended by over 1700 members of staff ensuring we recover together as one council
- Nearly 50% of all Council staff completed the Employee Survey in August 2020 which has helped inform our support for staff
- HR responded quickly to update Council policies which has helped to keep the whole Council working throughout the year.
- Good constant communication via routes such as updating Q&As, helping to ensure that we provide the right support to staff at the right time
- Set up digital court hearings in children's and adults social care courts while responding to an increased work load receiving compliments from the children's court in the running of digital court bundles
- The Governance team have worked collaboratively to review the whole Firmstep process for Subject Access Requests and Freedom of Information requests. The new digital process is now in operation and the team have rolled out digital training to the whole council on this. The Governance team have also supported IT through IGB to commence a data cleanse of the whole council network.

## Priorities looking forward

- Establishing what the future operating model will look like
- Digital inclusion and skills, including implementation of the digital strategy
- Customer accessibility – how people access our services and how resilient people are to situations similar to what COVID has presented
- Consistent and clear communications both within teams and corporately. Externally we want to make sure that we get better at engaging and working with communities
- Delivering a reshaped corporate plan to reflect the impact from Covid 19 on our communities
- Building looking after each other's mental health into our daily practice
- Implementing EDMS and off-site printing so that the Council is a paperless workforce
- Unified communications. Replace the outdated telephony system with new contact centre technology
- Continue technology modernisation programme. Which would include Windows 10 and all Office products e.g. One drive
- Ensure that the Local Area Network refresh and Building Rationalisation programme work in conjunction with each other
- Focus on recovery financially because that underpins everything. Responding to issues of backlog of the work that we have had to put aside. Addressing those things and getting services back on an even keel
- Embedding the senior management restructure
- Continue responding to the different situations that arise due to the COVID pandemic
- Amend financial regulations so that they reflect the new working model of the Council
- Balancing the budget
- Deliver the Oracle fusion project.