

*DRAFT Letter to Rt Hon Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up,
Housing and Communities*



Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Council Leader – Cllr Kerrie Carmichael

As part of the government's support to our improvement journey, we welcomed Kim Bromley-Derry, Jim Taylor and their staff to Sandwell in March 2022.

To set out a clear direction for sustainable improvement, Council agreed a [single Improvement Plan](#) on 7 June 2022. This plan brought together the recommendations from the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge, Grant Thornton's Value for Money Governance Review and CIPFA's Financial Management Review, as well as the government's Statutory Directions. We now have a clear programme under six thematic headings that enable us to track our progress and the impact that these changes are having on our organisation.

Now 6 months on from the approval of the Improvement Plan, there is a tangible sense of stability in leadership and member and officer relationships are significantly improving. The improvement has been acknowledged by the LGA in their recent follow-up visit. Scrutiny and Audit Committees are working more effectively and remain committed to continuous improvement.

Key milestones have been reached including the recruitment of a new chief executive, consideration of a move to 4-yearly elections, revisions to the Council's constitution, approval of the scrutiny review and a suite of strategies. Support has also been commissioned and work is underway to assist us in developing a positive organisational culture.

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We now have a new SEND Transport framework in place which has delivered against the concerns in relation to service resilience and value for money which were raised in the Grant Thornton review and also through a Children and Education Scrutiny Review. Lessons learnt from previous procurements were embedded in the approach. The contract is now in full operation (September 2022) and we are operating as business as usual.

The council now has a much better grip on the key issues that were identified previously, and leadership oversight has been greatly improved by establishing a new performance management framework and the mechanisms to effectively manage issues. This includes ensuring we are delivering the priorities in the Corporate Plan to improve outcomes for our residents. Practical steps have been taken to improve communication at all levels of the council and this remains a focus for improvement.

We have been working to improve the quality of our partnership work with external organisations, and tangible improvements have been seen in a range of work areas. For example, the development of a shared outcomes framework and strategy between the Integrated Care System and the Health and Wellbeing Board, as well as NHS investment in key council programmes (such as the Sandwell Language Network) has been enabled by the Director of Public Health acting as a Senior Responsible Officer within the Integrated Care Partnership. Senior Officers and Members are proactively engaged with key regional and sub-regional bodies, the progress against which was acknowledged by the LGA in their recent follow-up visit.

This Summer, during the Commonwealth Games, Sandwell had its proud moment in the international spotlight and rose to the opportunity with aplomb. Host to 11 days of swimming and diving competition, the Sandwell Aquatic Centre had been delivered on time and within budget to a world class standard, despite the significant challenges that building during the pandemic posed. Sandwell was at the centre of positive media attention and the council was commended by those involved in the Games for managing logistics seamlessly around the Aquatic Centre. The profile of the Games and the excitement around it has served to build Sandwell's sense of pride and this is providing a base from which to [celebrate Sandwell's](#) achievements more generally.

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We have programme management and governance arrangements in place to keep us focused on delivering the actions within the Improvement Plan. We value external perspective and assurance and invited Grant Thornton, LGA and CIPFA to follow-up from their reviews undertaken in 2021 and early 2022 to review our progress against their areas of recommendation.

Accompanying this letter are the quarterly progress reports to Cabinet made in September and December 2022. They set out key achievements against the Improvement Plan, highlight any progress issues, and report on risks, resources and changes to the Improvement Plan.

We recognise that there is still work to do in putting the customer front and centre of our business, living our desired organisational culture, embedding our changes so they achieve the desired impact, and building continuous improvement into our normal business. This will be the focus in the next stage of our journey.

Importantly, the Council has the drive and determination to see through and embed the required improvements and has proven that collectively we have the capability and capacity to make effective change at pace.

We are immensely proud of the progress made in this short space of time and there continues to be a clear focus and determination to deliver what needs to improve.

Yours sincerely

DRAFT

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