

Report to Council

13 December 2022

Subject:	Sandwell Council Improvement Plan
Cabinet Member:	Leader of the Council, Cllr Kerrie Carmichael
Director:	Managing Director Commissioner, Kim Bromley-Derry
Key Decision:	No
Contact Officer:	Strategic Lead – Service Improvement, Kate Ashley kate1_ashley@sandwell.gov.uk Senior Lead Officer – Service Improvement, Rebecca Jenkins rebecca_jenkins@sandwell.gov.uk

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That Council receive a recommendation from Cabinet (subject to Cabinet's consideration on 7 December) that the Improvement Plan Progress Reports (included at Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) and the accompanying letter (included at Appendix 3) be submitted to the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities to form the Council's six-monthly update on progress against the Improvement Plan.
- 1.2 That Council note the significant progress made to deliver the actions within the Improvement Plan.

- 1.3 That Council note the findings from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Follow-up visit and that the council's response to the findings will be made in conjunction with the forthcoming findings from the Grant Thornton and CIPFA follow-up reviews, along with any additional recommendations from the Secretary of State.







2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 On 22 March 2022 the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced an intervention package and a set of Directions to ensure the council was able to comply with its best value duty under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999. These Directions were in-part influenced by the Grant Thornton report following their Value for Money Governance Review of December 2021.
- 2.2 A single Improvement Plan was agreed by Council on 7 June 2022.
- 2.3 Under the Statutory Directions, the council is required to report progress against the Improvement Plan to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities every six months. The next report is due for submission in December 2022.
- 2.4 Cabinet considers the progress of the Improvement Plan on a quarterly basis and will receive their next quarterly progress report on 7 December. The publication date for Council papers takes place prior to Cabinet's consideration of the quarterly progress report and therefore the Leader will provide an update to Council on Cabinet's recommendation to Council.
- 2.5 Significant progress has been made in delivering the actions contained within the Improvement Plan.
- 2.6 The council has invited Grant Thornton, the LGA and CIPFA to conduct follow-up reviews in Autumn 2022. The findings from the LGA have been received. The findings from Grant Thornton and CIPFA will be available in due course.

2.7 Once the findings from all three external reviews have been received, the council's response will be considered, along with any additional recommendations from the Secretary of State.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

3.1 Sandwell Council's Improvement Plan focuses on the governance arrangements of the council and areas of improvement across the organisation. The underpinning objective of the Improvement Plan is to ensure that the council is able to deliver on the aims and priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan. The deliverables set out in this Improvement Plan will achieve long-term sustainable improvements in how the council operates and is able to make effective decisions focused on improving outcomes for residents and experiences of service users. Therefore, this impacts on the council's ability to deliver all the objectives in the Corporate Plan.

	Best start in life for children and young people
	People live well and age well
	Strong resilient communities
	Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods
	A strong and inclusive economy
	A connected and accessible Sandwell

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 Background

- 4.1.1 A single Improvement Plan was agreed by Council on 7 June 2022 to address recommendations from a Value for Money Review into the council's governance arrangements, a CIPFA financial management review, an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, and Statutory Directions from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The single Improvement Plan replaced the Governance Review Improvement Plan which was approved by Council in January 2022.
- 4.1.2 To ensure that senior officers and members have oversight of delivery against the Improvement Plan, Council approved that progress will be monitored by Leadership Team monthly and reported to Cabinet quarterly. This will continue until all actions have been completed, or changes have been embedded into business as usual.
- 4.1.3 The Improvement Plan is intended to be a live document updated to take account of progress and relevant changes. The Improvement Plan report to Council in June 2022 set out that changes (which may include the addition of new workstreams or objectives, or the amendment of timescales for delivery of actions) will be tracked through programme management mechanisms and that Cabinet will retain oversight of changes through regular formal reporting.
- 4.1.4 A summary of changes is provided in the quarterly reports to Cabinet and provided in full as an appendix. This quarter, one of the changes within the plan has been to add a workstream around the Customer Journey. At their meeting on 22 September 2022, Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board commented on its absence from the Improvement Plan despite this being a focus of the Commissioners.
- 4.1.5 Cabinet considered the first quarterly update on progress of the Improvement Plan on 28 September 2022.
- 4.1.6 The second quarterly update on progress of the Improvement Plan is being considered by Cabinet on 7 December 2022 and is included at Appendix 1. This report sets out:
- Progress against each of the six Improvement Plan themes including an outline of key achievements this quarter, an overall status rating, and a summary of any issues

- Progress against the three statutory recommendations made by Grant Thornton in their Value for Money Governance Review
- An outline of the governance arrangements including the regular review of the Improvement Plan from Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and Scrutiny, and monthly monitoring from Leadership Team
- Findings from the LGA follow-up review visit in October 2022
- The external follow-up review visits from Grant Thornton, and CIPFA – the findings of which are due in forthcoming weeks
- An update on the use of one-off funding to progress improvement plan actions agreed by Council in June 2022.
- The current status of risks associated with the Improvement Plan
- Details of changes to the Improvement Plan as per the agreed change control process

4.1.7 The accompanying draft letter to the Secretary of State sets out:

- the significant progress made to deliver the actions within the Improvement Plan including in relation to key service issues raised in external reviews
- the achievement of key milestones including the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive and a decision taken by Council in relation to a 4-yearly election cycle
- that there is now a tangible sense of stability in leadership and member and officer relationships are significantly improving, which has been acknowledged in the recent LGA review
- acknowledgement of the amount of work ahead to continue the council's improvement, but that the council has the drive and determination to see through and embed the required improvements

4.2 External Assurance

4.2.1 External assurance continues to play a part in our improvement journey. The council has invited Grant Thornton, LGA and CIPA to monitor our progress in addressing the recommendations in their reviews. Grant Thornton and the LGA conducted their follow-up review activities over September and October 2022 and CIPFA are conducting their review in November 2022.

4.2.2 The feedback report from the LGA has been received and is attached at Appendix 4. The LGA have recognised the significant progress that has been made in a number of key areas to the good governance and management of the council. The LGA also stressed that the council is on a journey that will take time and there is still a long way to go to embed the improvements required.

4.2.3 The findings from the Grant Thornton and CIPFA follow-up reviews are expected to be received shortly.

4.3 Improvement Plan – Next Steps

4.3.1 There is still work to do in putting the customer front and centre of the council's 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.

4.3.2 A further update to the Improvement Plan will take place in early 2023 once the council has had the opportunity to reflect on the findings from Grant Thornton, LGA and CIPFA as a result of their follow-up visits, along with the outcomes of the culture listening exercise and any additional recommendations from the Secretary of State. As the Improvement Plan combined the recommendations from all three initial external reviews, the council's response to each return visit must be considered together. This will ensure that any revisions to the Improvement Plan are aligned and complementary, and will contribute to achieving the aim of sustained improvement.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 Alternative formats for reporting to the Secretary of State could be adopted, however the proposal to submit a covering letter along with the quarterly reports made to Cabinet makes use of existing reports. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities confirmed that this would be an acceptable format to them and contains the information that they require.

6 Implications

<p>Resources:</p>	<p>Resources to deliver the Improvement Plan have been allocated from within existing commitments in majority of cases. Where one-off funding is required to deliver improvements, this will either been funded from the Improvement and Capacity Fund or from earmarked reserves created from 2021/22 underspend position. Where funding is required for longer-term change, this will be incorporated into the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.</p> <p>There are no land or building implications of this report.</p>
<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<p>On 22 March 2022, The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities issued Directions under Section 15(5) and (6) of the Local Government Act 1999 (the 1999 Act) in order to ensure that the council can comply with the requirements of Part 1 of the 1999 Act. Failure to comply with these Directions may lead to further intervention measures for the council.</p> <p>One of the Directions included that the council should report progress to the Secretary of State on a six-monthly basis. This report outlines the contents of this six-monthly report.</p> <p>The delivery of the Improvement Plan and achievement of the desired outcomes will meet the remainder of the Directions.</p> <p>Ultimately, the changes made through the Improvement Plan will enable the council to effectively deliver its strategic priorities and ensure it is delivering value for money for Sandwell.</p>
<p>Risk:</p>	<p>If the Council fails to take appropriate action to meet the requirements set out in the government Direction, or the Commissioners appointed by the Secretary of State do not have sufficient confidence that</p>

	<p>appropriate actions are being taken to implement and sustain the required improvements, then the council risks not having appropriate arrangements in place to comply with its best value duty under Part 1 of the 1999 Act. This could lead to further government intervention, increased costs and damage to reputation.</p> <p>A risk register will be maintained for the duration of the Improvement Plan which will underpin the council's strategic risk relating to the council's Improvement Plan (59a 02/22). This is reported monthly to Leadership Team and quarterly to Cabinet.</p>
Equality:	<p>The successful delivery of this Improvement Plan will require the development and review of many of the council's policies and procedures. These changes will build in consideration of the impact on equalities throughout the development and will include an Equality Impact Assessment where appropriate.</p>
Health and Wellbeing:	<p>The underpinning objective of the Improvement Plan is to ensure the council is able to achieve the strategic priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan. These priorities focus on improving the health and wellbeing of our residents and tackling health inequalities in a multi-faceted way. Therefore, any improvements to the council's governance structures will strengthen the council's ability to deliver services that will improve the health and wellbeing of Sandwell.</p>
Social Value	<p>Within the Improvement Plan, the council is committed to developing its Social Value Policy in conjunction with the refresh of the Procurement & Contract Procedure Rules. Through strengthening our asks of contractors through this Social Value Policy and linking them to the Corporate Plan objectives, the council will be able to maximise its social value return</p>
Climate Change	<p>The underpinning objective of the Improvement Plan is to ensure the council is able to achieve the strategic priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan. 'Green in everything we do' is one of the Fairer Sandwell</p>

	principles running throughout the Corporate Plan. Any improvements to the council's governance structures will strengthen the council's ability to embed this principle and further the climate change agenda.
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7. Appendices

1. Improvement Plan Progress Report to Cabinet December 2022
2. Improvement Plan Progress Report to Cabinet September 2022
3. Draft letter to Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
4. LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review November 2022

8. Background Papers

- Approval of Sandwell Council Improvement Plan [Report to Council 7 June 2022](#)
- [Sandwell Council Improvement Plan](#)
- Quarterly Monitoring Reports to Cabinet:
 - [December 2022](#)
 - [September 2022](#)
- Improvement Plan Progress Reports:
 - To Audit and Risk Assurance Committee:
 - [November 2022](#)
 - [September 2022](#)
 - [June 2022](#)
 - To Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board
 - [November 2022](#)
 - [September 2022](#)