

Report to Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board

18 December 2023

Subject:	Background to the Levelling Up Partnership
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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide background information on Levelling Up Partnerships (LUP) including the process to develop the partnership, an overview of the LUP interventions, programme governance arrangements, and an overview of project delivery progress.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the WLUP Board note the information contained in this report.

3. Background

Background to Levelling Up Partnerships

- 3.1 In March 2023, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that Sandwell was one of 20 places to be invited to form a Levelling Up Partnership (LUP).
- 3.2 Levelling Up Partnerships are targeted interventions designed to identify practical, tangible actions to support priority places to 'level up' and to



help government develop a more holistic understanding of place. It is a programme within the Government's overall Levelling Up agenda which includes the Towns Fund Programme (£67.5m investment in Sandwell), the Levelling Up Fund (£58m investment in Sandwell), and Long Term Plan for Towns (£20m for Smethwick).

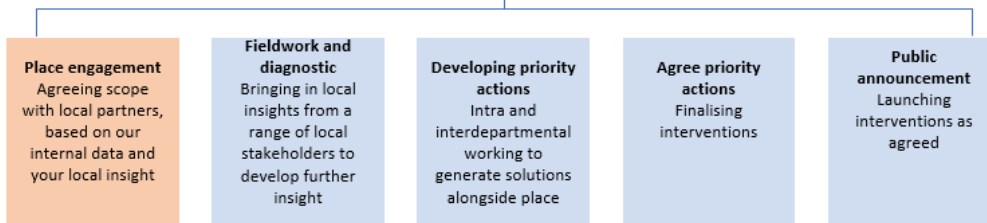
- 3.3 The twenty Levelling Up Partnership places were selected based on the following four indicators using a three-year average generally across January 2019 to December 2021:
- NVQ Level 3+ (% of total population)
 - Healthy Life Expectancy
 - Median Gross Weekly Pay (£)
 - Gross Value Added (GVA) per Hour Worked (ONS 2018 to 2020)
- 3.4 The priority list of twenty places were selected by the Government as they are all in the bottom quartile for three or more of the four indicators above. £400m capital funding has been set aside by the Government to support the 20 LUP areas. On average, each place could expect to secure £20m capital to be spent by March 2025.

Development of the Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership

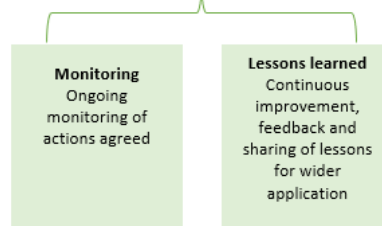
- 3.5 The development of a LUP between Government and Sandwell has been led by the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC). An initial deep dive was conducted including place engagement, field work and developing priority actions. The development of the LUP was set out in two phases.



The initial deep dive



Long-term partnership



3.6 DLUHC undertook engagement with local stakeholders to gain a qualitative understanding of the issues faced in Sandwell and the LUP team conducted around 100 hours of Sandwell stakeholder interviews, including local government, business leaders, academics, third sector and small business owners.

3.7 As part of the deep dive work, DLUHC produced an analytical pack which is provided at Appendix 1.



- 3.8 The initial deep dive activity included joint exploration between DLUHC and Cabinet Members of the target geographical area for Sandwell's LUP taking into account a range of factors including the indicators used to select Levelling Up Partnership areas, interventions that may require cross government support to successfully deliver positive outcomes, major opportunities for capital spend, LUP funding criteria and local insight. The geographical area agreed between Sandwell Council Cabinet and DLUHC is Wednesbury.
- 3.9 In September, the details of the Levelling Up Partnership (£20.4m) were formally announced by Government. This followed a set of Cabinet approvals in September to establish governance arrangements, approve the target geography as Wednesbury, and to agree the set of interventions.

Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Interventions

- 3.10 During the deep dive phase, a series of priority interventions have been discussed and agreed between Sandwell Council and DLUHC for the LUP. The interventions selected take into account the levelling up challenges for Wednesbury, the Council's strategic priorities, work already underway, the amount of capital funding available through the LUP and the ambitious two year delivery programme (to March 2025).
- 3.11 The interventions are set to compliment existing work including a set of public health programmes (focusing on life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, economic wellbeing and mental wellbeing of children) and the launch of Sandwell Family Hubs in 2023.
- 3.12 A summary of the LUP interventions agreed is provided below with further detail set out in appendix 2. Project delivery progress is set out in appendix 3 and further detail is included in individual project reports to the WLUP Board.

	LUP Funding	Project Summary
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Wednesbury Town Centre Masterplan	£250K	Building on HAZ improvements to consider how to further enhance the public realm in Wednesbury Town Centre through a masterplanning process. This funding includes LUP programme management costs
Community Safety Scheme	£0.5m	Build on partnership work to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour by increasing the deterrents to crime and anti-social behaviour in Wednesbury. This will include installing new and upgrading CCTV infrastructure in Wednesbury Town Centre and Friar Park, providing deployable cameras to tackle fly-tipping across Wednesbury, implementing a radio link scheme, and installing nuisance bike measures.
Wednesbury Town Centre Public Realm	£4.5m	Following the masterplanning process, the project will enable enhancements to the public realm and improvements to long standing derelict sites
Friar Park Urban Village	£11.5m	Fund land remediation viability gap to deliver Friar Park Urban Village Scheme enabling c.630 new homes.
Friar Park Millennium Centre	£2m	Extending the usable space within the existing community centre in Friar Park to meet the demands from extended community (as a result of proposed development of Friar Park Urban Village) and to enhance the skills delivery offer. Tackling the skills challenges in the Friar Park ward, current position of 32.6% residents with no qualifications compared to a national rate of 15%. Increasing higher level skills which are 11.1% at Level 4 and above than the national rate at 29.7% (Nomis 08/23)



Greenspaces Improvements	£1.65m	Enhancing 4 existing green spaces in Wednesbury to improve safety measures, quality scores, accessibility and provide additional activities.
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3.12 The proposed interventions will enable:

- 630 new homes (157 affordable)
- Land acquisition for future housing delivery
- New and upgraded CCTV and environmental cameras
- Nuisance bike measures
- Improvements to 4 green spaces
- An extended community centre offer in Friar Park
- Improved public realm

3.13 This will deliver on Levelling Up outcomes of:

- Boosting productivity, pay, jobs and living standards through increasing skills and attainment levels and enabling new housing
- Spreading opportunity and improving public services through tackling crime and ASB hotspots and increasing skills and attainment levels and enabling new housing delivery
- Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging through improving perceptions of safety and the quality of built environment and green spaces
- Empowering local leaders and communities through creating long term plans to revitalise Wednesbury Town Centre

Funding package and Financial Approvals

3.14 In September, the details of the Levelling Up Partnership were formally announced by Government.

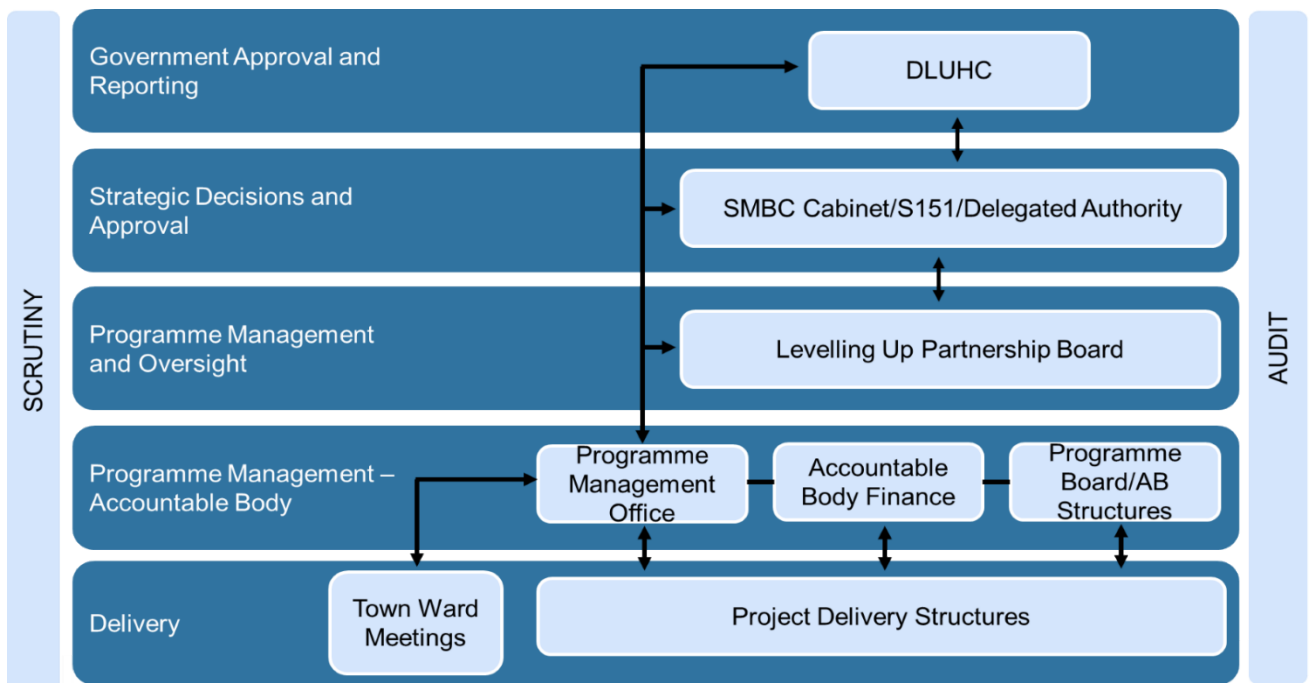
3.15 A grant determination letter was issued to the Council in October 2023 for the first financial allocation of £15m capital and £250K revenue. A second allocation of £5m capital and £50K revenue will be made at the start of next financial year. The grant determination letter sets out that spend must be made by March 2025 which presents a significant challenge for the council to deliver at pace.



3.16 The Council's S151 Officer is responsible for approving the commencement of project spend on the LUP projects in line with the grant determination letter and DLUHC's requirements. Each of the LUP projects will undergo an internal capital appraisal review to inform this decision. The first round of approvals was granted in November 2023, with the second round of capital appraisals due in early 2024. To manage the need to deliver at pace, pre-appraisal spend is being approved by the S151 Officer on a case by case basis.

Delivery and Governance arrangements

3.17 The governance model is set out as follows:



3.18 Sandwell Council will be responsible for the delivery of the LUP Programme following Sandwell Council's standard arrangements for procurement, project delivery and delegations. All of the proposed interventions will be led by the Council. A Programme Manager has been appointed to oversee and manage the LUP Programme.

3.19 The Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board has been established to bring partners together to oversee the programme and to:



- Develop a shared understanding of the Levelling up needs in Wednesbury and add to the evidence base (informing future plans for Wednesbury)
- Input to and steer the development of LUP interventions
- Act as critical-friend challenge through project delivery
- Agree project change requests (within agreed limits); and
- Review monitoring and evaluation of project impact

Terms of reference for the WLUP Board and Membership list are set out at Appendix 4 and 5.

3.20 A programme level risk register is in place and this is reviewed monthly. At project level, red project risks have been identified and reported to DLUHC. The project risk registers are being reviewed as part of the capital appraisal for each project. Risks are identified and assessed using a scoring matrix of risk severity and likelihood and presented as Red (significant), Amber (moderate), or Green (low).

3.21 There are currently 2 red programme risks to bring WLUP Board’s attention as follows:

Risk Title and Description	<p>Grant Conditions: Delivery Timeline & S151 project sign-off</p> <p>If programme delivery cannot be completed by 2024-25 financial year (March 2025) and/or there are concerns around project delivery from S151 assurance, there is a risk of grant clawback, reputational damage and missed opportunities to deliver the benefits of the programme</p>
Controls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking clarification from DLUHC around grant clawback position • Regular reporting on progress of project delivery and spend • Capital appraisal underway for all projects (phase 1 complete) • S151 sign-off of any spend needed in advance of capital appraisal
Risk expected to reduce	When clarification is received from DLUHC around the clawback position / contingency in place



Risk Title and Description	Delivery of Friar Park Urban Village Project Risk relates to delivery of project within March 2025 deadline due to risk of delays to obtaining EA licenses and/or delays to developer partner procurement process
Controls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early engagement with EA has been undertaken and consultants (technical experts) are being procured to support the engagement process. • Legal review of proposed approach has been undertaken • Full risk assessment to take place to understand issues from proposed approach • Capital appraisal review • Seeking clarification from DLUHC around grant clawback position • Contingency options being explored should March 2025 deadline be exceeded
Risk expected to reduce	When EA permitting process concluded and delivery partner is procured.

Appendices

1. Sandwell Levelling Up Partnership Analytical Pack
2. Sandwell Levelling Up Partnership Project Core Information
3. Summary of LUP Project Delivery
4. Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board Terms of Reference
5. Wednesbury Levelling Up Partnership Board Membership List

Background papers

[Levelling Up Partnerships Methodology Note](#)
[Sandwell Council Cabinet Report – Levelling Up Partnership 13 September 2023](#)

