

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

Monday 18 December 2023 at 6.03pm
In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

- Present:** Councillor Fenton (Chair),
Councillors K Allcock, Davies, Dhatt, and Khan.
- Also present:** Councillor Padda (Cabinet Member for Leisure and
Tourism) and Councillor Rollins (Cabinet Member for
Housing and Built Environment).
- Officers:** Ben Percival (Assistant Director Borough Economy
Contracts, Projects, Strategy & Policy), Matt Huggins
(Assistant Director Green Spaces, Green Services,
Events), Alice Davey (Director of Borough Economy),
Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer) and Alex
Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

68/23 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lewis,
Fisher, Maycock and Shaeen and from Ms Brown (co-opted
member).

69/23 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

70/23 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 31
August 2023, 12 September 2023, 26 September 2023

and 12 October be confirmed as correct records.72/23

Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

73/23

Sandwell Leisure Trust Fees and Charges - January 2024 implementation

The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism presented the item to the Board. Sandwell Leisure Trust (SLT) had retained charging discretion to set their own fees and charges. Despite this, SLT wished to set their charges in a transparent manner, in consultation with the Council.

Historically, charges had been uplifted in April, however the peak trading period in the New Year was generally when the industry applies an uplift, with an eager market looking to return to leisure facilities. Therefore, SLT intended to move the 2024 charges review to 1 January – in line with the wider leisure and fitness industry. Core membership charges had been retained to encourage retention.

It was also confirmed that any surplus revenue made by SLT would be returned to the Council. In the event that the price increase had an adverse effect on revenue, the Council would not underwrite any costs and close monitoring of financial considerations would take place on a quarterly basis.

Members were in agreement that the price changes were fair and reasonable, especially when compared to the private sector

74/23

Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Action Tracker

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

75/23

Work Programme 2023 - 24 and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board noted its Work Programme for 2023 - 24 and received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

As a result, Members requested that the fishing policy item be added to the work programme for consideration at a future meeting. It was also requested that the Board consider the “Rewilding Strategy” in due course.

Resolved that the fishing policy item within the Cabinet Forward Plan be considered by the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board for pre-decision scrutiny at a future meeting of the Board.

76/23

Exclusion of the Public and Press

Resolved that the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, relating to the financial and business affairs of any person, including the authority holding that information.

77/23

Sandwell Valley Master Plan and 10-Year Business Plan

In 2022, Cabinet identified the development of a 10-year master plan for Sandwell Valley as a key priority. As a result, a vast array of meetings, workshops, site visits, consultation and briefings had been undertaken to develop the master plan. Additionally, a business plan detailing financial models from 2024-2034 had been developed which covered Sandwell Valley Country Park, including Forge Mill Farm, with support from the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

Members agreed that Sandwell Valley was a major strategic asset for Sandwell which had real potential to become a regional attraction for the borough. One of the aims of the plan was to attract visitors from a wider catchment area,

especially when considering that almost 340k people lived within a 15-minute drive. There was significant room available for visitor growth from both inside and outside of Sandwell. It was noted that Sandwell Valley had not received much investment over the last several years and that if utilised properly, it was a key asset to build the visitor economy.

The plan aspired to provide an affordable day out for all people, regardless of financial background or position. The implementation of the plan would be spread out over several years with each phase focused on specific developments. The first phase of additions to Sandwell Valley included a heritage discover zone, an expanded Café offer, event venue for wedding hire, car parking facilities, wayfinding structures and a land train. The second phase would include the development of a water-sport centre and associated facilities. The third and final phase of the plan would see the creation of a “food education centre”. This centre would allow schools to visit in order to promote healthy eating. This was deemed particularly important in light of statistics that identified Sandwell has having the second highest rate of childhood obesity in England. Produce from the farm would be used to teach adults and children how to cook using fresh and healthy ingredients.

CIPFA had been consulted to investigate the prudence of the financial model and further risk mitigations were put in place including additional peer reviewers. A staffing restructure would be considered to ensure that variable costs were managed. If implemented, a “bank” of staff would be used to accommodate the different peaks and troughs throughout the year.

The masterplan was due for consideration by Cabinet in March 2024 and, if approved, works would begin to take place with an aim of completion by the end of Quarter 4 of 2024. A consultation exercise was underway until 26 January 2024.

Following a lengthy discussion, the following points were clarified:-

- non-financial optimisations had already been made;

- further weather proofing would be considered in addition to the already established education centre and play barn;
- a retractable roof would allow events and activities to be provided in all weathers;
- inflation and risk mitigation would be considered at each phase point and no further investment projects had been planned after the master plan had been completed;
- the masterplan would aim to get Sandwell Valley to a self-sustaining position;
- further leisure developments could be considered in the future;
- infrastructure improvements to already established land and roads would be more efficient than creating a new exit/entrance to the site;
- the plan aimed to establish Sandwell Valley as a leading facility in relation to animal welfare;
- permanent wayfinding signage would be installed;
- multi-use facilities would be considered so that usage could be considered year round and not just during seasonal peaks as seen within sailing;
- co-funding opportunities would be considered for some of the building usage within the valley;
- the heritage trail would focus on the heritage of the site including the priory and the sand well;
- the land train would be safe for use across the bridge and a full route of the trail would be prepared;
- consultation feedback had been considered when creating the plan and further consultation feedback would be reviewed also.

Members suggested that the sailing club site be expanded into a multi-use facility with a range of uses. Officers were also asked to consider introducing more benches to the site to enable parents to monitor their children from nearby, especially for those who may require seating.

Officers were thanked for their attendance and hard work in producing the plan.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism consider:-

- (1) the expansion of the sailing club into a multi-use facility to facilitate a wide range of activities;
- (2) the introduction of additional benches to enable parents to be able to monitor their children whilst they used play facilities.

Meeting ended at 7:52pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk