

Report to Cabinet

13 March 2024

Subject:	Sandwell Valley 10 Year Master Plan
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Housing and Built Environment, Councillor Laura Rollins
Director:	Director of Borough Economy, Alice Davey
Key Decision:	Yes – adoption of the 10 year master plan and delegated authority for spend decisions within the parameters of this report
Contact Officer:	Assistant Director, Borough Economy (Green Spaces, Visitor Services, Events) – Matthew Huggins; matthew_huggins@sandwell.gov.uk

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That approval is given to adopt the 10-year Master Plan and to:
- authorise the Cabinet Member for Housing and Built Environment and the Assistant Director for Borough Economy (Green Spaces, Visitor Services, Events)/Executive Director Place to proceed on a phased basis for the spend of capital;
 - approve the capital borrowing requirement for £7.856m to be released in the three phases set out in this plan.
- 1.2 That subject to a satisfactory strategic finance appraisal being undertaken, approval is given to three phases of delegated authority for release of the capital funds as follows:



- a. Phase One: April 2024 – March 2025 – Investment into infrastructure, Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, King George V Pavilion, Land Train, entrance and shop expansion at Forge Mill Farm, and the development of a nature conservation and heritage plan. Total capital investment for this phase: £3,332,033.00
- b. Phase Two: April 2025 – March 2026 – Investment into Swan Pool Water sports Centre and Café. Total capital investment for this phase: £2,774,024
- c. Phase Three: April 2026 – March 2027 – Investment into Forge Mill Farm Food Education Barn. Total capital investment for this phase: £1,750,000

2. Reason for Recommendations

- 2.1. This report and appendices provides a detailed overview of the 10-year Sandwell Valley Master Plan.
- 2.2. Sandwell Valley Country Park spans 1,800 acres of open countryside (designated as ‘Green Belt’ within the Sandwell Local Plan), and includes the following:
 - Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre (previously known as Sandwell Park Farm)
 - Victorian Gardens and Rabbit Village (as part of Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre)
 - Forge Mill Farm
 - Sandwell Showground used for large events of up to 20,000 people
 - Sandwell Valley Amusements (Children’s Funfair)
 - King George V Pavilion (KGP) – with changing room facilities and previously Sandwell Valley Cycle Hire
 - Mini-Golf, Foot-golf, and BMX Bike Pump Track
 - Adventure Playground and Children’s Play Area
 - Sandwell Valley High Ropes high roles



- Sandwell Valley Sailing Building, Swan Pool
- Sandwell Valley Urban Bike Track, linked Cycle Route 5 (opened in Sept 23)
- Brown's Farm (due for demolition)
- Five houses as staff accommodation
- The Sandwell
- Ice House Structure
- Priory Woods Local Nature Reserve
- Sots Hole Local Nature Reserve
- Various fields rented out for grazing, horse stables, and a model flying club
- Catering and Retail Outlets, including the Tea Rooms at Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, Adventure Cabin, Dartmouth Park Café, and various catering facilities at Forge Mill Farm.

2.3 Over the last 2 years a range of improvements have been implemented across Sandwell Valley. These are summarised in Appendix A.

2.4 This Master Plan for Sandwell Valley brings together these services to build on these improvements with the aim of making Sandwell Valley a destination of choice, as well as revenue targets as set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

2.5 The Master Plan for Sandwell Valley will work towards realising the potential of Sandwell Valley in the following way:

- a. Investing in Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, providing facilities for weddings, events and activities, an increased café offer, an outside heritage zone play area, and wet weather provision within the building.
- b. Investing in a new watersports provision and café at Swan Pool. This increases the natural supervision of Swan Pool through design, whilst providing modern facilities to the various water sports and swimming clubs using the site. The café will serve the thousands of visitors to Swan Pool each year, including the increased number of visitors for the recent Urban Bike Track at Sandwell Valley.
- c. Investing in a new food and education barn, increasing the offer at Forge Mill Farm for schools and visitors.



- d. Investing in infrastructure improvements, to address a lack of signage and connectivity across the site.
- e. Investing in a land train, to improve the connectivity across the site, between Dartmouth Park, Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, Swan Pool, and Forge Mill Farm.
- f. Improvements to the parking on site to decrease traffic issues, and to continue exploring options for transport improvements to the sites.
- g. Investment into the King George V Pavilion and associated facilities (mini golf, multi-sports area, foot golf, cycling hire).
- h. Developing a 10-year conservation and heritage plan for Sandwell Valley

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

The aim is to ensure the long-term viability of Sandwell Valley, whilst making this a sub-regional destination bringing more visitors from the region to Sandwell. This contributes to the Corporate Plan in the following way:

	<p>The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People The Master Plan offers children and young people the opportunity to experience interaction with rare breed animals, and access to events and activities in the holidays and at weekends. The education and outreach team also deliver a programme of school visits and out of school education activities. The new Swan Pool Watersports Facility will provide water based activities and learning for children and young people.</p>
	<p>People Live Well and Age Well Sandwell Valley Country Park provides an opportunity for physical activity that improves physical and mental health. Various groups use the country park for activities, including volunteer activities, and walking groups.</p>
	<p>Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods The Sandwell Valley estate provides a landmark visitor destination in Sandwell, improving the local neighbourhood as well as offering the Borough as a place to visit.</p>
	<p>A Strong and Inclusive Economy Events provide an opportunity for local businesses to benefit from increased visitor numbers to Sandwell. Sandwell Valley Master Plan provides investment into the borough, through</p>



	the development of new facilities that will bring additional revenue into Sandwell Valley.
	A Connected and Accessible Sandwell The improvements set out in this plan provide better connections in between the various sites, with new way finding, and bike e-charging and bike storage locations.

4 Context and Key Issues

Sandwell Valley Master Plan Overview

4.1 The political priorities identified in Cabinet Manifestos in 2022 were:

- a. To develop a 10-year master plan for Sandwell Valley.
- b. To develop Forge Mill Farm into a Centre of Excellence in Animal Welfare, Food Education, and Farming.

4.2 Prominent TLS, expert consultants in leisure and country parks were, appointed in Dec 2022 to work with the Council on the development of a Master Plan. The Master Plan Scoping document is attached in Appendix B.

4.3 Since then, a series of meetings and workshops have taken place in the development of the Master Plan to date. These include: two cabinet workshops, site walk arounds with the consultants and cabinet member, and three cabinet member / director briefings. This includes:

Key Meeting	Date
Consultation Initial Scoping Brief Session	19 th Jan 23
Sandwell Valley Scoping Masterplan – Cabinet Workshop	25 th Jan 23
Sandwell Valley Master Plan Update	5 th April 23
Sandwell Valley Newton Road Walkabout	21 st April 23
Pre-Cabinet Master Plan Update and Session with Cabinet Member	17 th May
Master planning session with Planned Lead at Sandwell	22 nd May 23
Sandwell Valley Scoping Masterplan – Cabinet Workshop	24 th May 23
Officer meeting with consultants on entrance / exit options	20 th August 23
Entrance and Exit Options Working Group Session	28 th Sept 23
Approval of timescale and key decision dates (completed)	25 ^h October, 2023



Financial model and business plan drafted based on Master Plan draft (Completed)	20 th November, 2023
Financial Model and Capital Requirements Testing with Capital Team (Completed)	20 th Nov – 27 th Nov, 2023
Capital Board presentation and decision (completed)	4 th Dec, 2023
Cabinet Member Working Group Session – Finance (completed)	7 th Dec 2023
Presentation to Leader’s meeting pre-consultation	13 th Dec 2023
Public consultation on Master Plan	14 th Dec 2023 – 7 th Feb 2024
Scrutiny Session	18 th Dec 2023

4.4 As part of stakeholder engagement, additional meetings have taken place with the following groups and individuals:

- a. Residents, Friends Groups and SANDNATS (Sandwell Naturalists) who live in the vicinity of Sandwell Valley (3rd Feb and 6th Feb 2024)
- b. Sailing Club, Swimming Club and other water sports groups (13th January)
- c. Planning Policy (30th January)
- d. Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust (6th Feb)
- e. RSPB Centre, Sandwell Valley (2nd Feb)

4.5 The public consultation held on Citizenspace (the Councils consultation portal) between 14th Dec 2023 and 7th Feb 2024 received 177 responses, with 176 of respondents having visited Sandwell Valley. The respondents to the consultation, including those in 3.2, were largely supportive of the proposals. A summary of responses and the actions taken is attached in Appendix D.

4.6 Following this consultation, the following updates have been made to the final master plan for Sandwell Valley:

- a. The addition of a dog training field, with secure fencing, for dog walkers to let their dogs off the lead (location to be determined).
- b. Improved disability access at Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, Swan Pool, and Forge Mill Farm.
- c. Additional clarity that Sandwell will work with stakeholders and partners to prepare a conservation and heritage management plan in 24/25.



4.7 The projected 10-year net budget for the master plan, including revenue, has been robustly tested with the support of CIPFA Cco. This has been adopted in the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan, including borrowing costs.

4.8 This includes phases stages of investment over three financial years. These are 24/25, 25/26, and 26/27.

4.9 The milestones within this plan are subject to approval given by Cabinet in March 2024, following public consultation and scrutiny of the Master Plan, with the major works to improve Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre in Q4 of 24/25 (including a downgrade in income for this quarter whilst work takes place).

4.10 To deliver the Master Plan commitments in its entirety would cost £7,856,057. This is broken down over three phases as follows:

Works	Summary	24/25	25/26	26/27
Signage and Interpretation Updates	To improve connectivity and accessibility across Sandwell Valley Country, and signposting to income units	£ 145,000.00		
Key Infrastructure Improvements	Car Parking Improvements; Drainage improvements to 4 fields; Grass protection for overflow car parks	£ 680,000.00		
Bike / Cycle Points	To improve connectivity and allow for greater use of cycling across Sandwell Valley	£ 35,000.00		
King George V Refurbishment	Essential maintenance works, and a general appearance uplift. This will increase the value of operator fees and commission to the Council.	£ 250,000.00		
Playzone Upgrade	Upgrading the current pitch to an all weather, multi-sports pitch to encourage and promote health	£ 100,000.00		
Mini Gold Upgrade	To match the level of mini-golf expected by customers, increasing operator fees and commission to the Council.	£ 80,000.00		
Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre Refurbishment	This is essential to make the Courtyard weatherproof, and increase capacity of the café and income units on site; improvements to the venue for weddings hire; repairs and maintenance	£1,252,033.00		
Dog Training Field	A secure and fenced area for dog walkers to take their dogs of the lead for walking and training	£ 50,000.00		
Conservation and Heritage Management Plan	This will allow work to take place with SANDNATS, BBC Wildlife, RSPB and other stakeholders to develop a 10 year conservation and heritage plan.	£ 20,000.00		
Heitage Discovery Zone	This will provide Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre with an educational and fun visitor experience, with one of the largest play areas linked to heritage in the region. This will result in increased footfall toward Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre.	£ 500,000.00		
Land Train	The zones are split by between 30 mins to 1 hour, and not easy to get from one side to the other. The addition of a land train will allow transport during peak times throughout the year – in a cost neutral way (where people pay a small fee for the trip).	£ 150,000.00		
New Watersports Centre and Café	The current 'Sailing Club' building is underused and not up to appropriate safety standards. This investment will allow a for a purpose built watersports centre and café, operated by the Council or an external operator.		£2,554,024.00	
Equipment Allowance for Watersports	This is to allow for investment into equipment for the watersports centre, providing access to opportunities for children and young people to learn how to sail, canoe, and use the water safely.		£ 150,000.00	
Forge Mill Farm Food Education Barn	Forge Mill Farm is currently expanding with a play and learning facility. Another building at Forge Mill Farm is cited for development as a Display and Food Education Centre to expand the education offer and visitor experience.			£1,750,000.00
Project Manager Role (over 2 years)	To manage the procurement and implementation of the plan.	£ 70,000.00	£ 70,000.00	
Totals		£3,332,033.00	£2,774,024.00	£1,750,000.00
TOTAL INVESTMENT		£7,856,057.00		



- 4.11 To deliver the above investment, and to ensure value for money, a project manager for 24/25 and 25/26 financial years will be appointed, funded within the Capital Borrowing.
- 4.12 Each phase will be subject to the following conditions, before the next phase is approved:
- The next phase is within the proposed budget, based on the latest costs.
 - Relevant approvals are given through planning, conservation, and heritage processes.
 - The Master Plan for Sandwell Valley will be included in the directorate service plans, with further detail on the implementation phases for that year.
- 4.13 The next stage of development in the Master Plan is to prepare a conservation and heritage management plan for Sandwell Valley.
- 4.14 There are significant social value impacts associated with the Master Plan, which are included in Appendix D of this plan.
- 4.15 The Master Plan develops opportunities for a variety of activity which will be completed concurrently to develop the vision of a vibrant site. This includes:
- Sandwell Valley Amusements (due for retender in 2024)
 - Cycle Hire and Foot Golf (due for retender in 2024)
 - New Café at Forge Mill Farm (due to open in the Summer of 2024)
- 4.16 Further partnerships with external operators will be considered as we progress with the Master Plan, with further potential partnerships in catering, events, and weddings.
- 4.17 The following provides a summary of how the master plan aligns with the income streams and outlines the growth potential for each:

Income Stream	Description	Strategy	Growth Potential
Admissions (SVVC & FMF)	Charges for admissions to SVVC	Improved visitor experience; small	Post 26/27 financial year potential to full



	activities, FMF, and ticketed events (i.e. fireworks)	annual increments in fees to meet benchmarks; new winter offer, including indoor play and learning facilities.	capacity for admissions; new visitor experiences at SVVC; new indoor play and learning centre charges; increase in ticketed events.
Catering and Retail	Catering and retail units at SVVC, FMF, LWH, events and other green spaces	Operating model and additional catering units to achieve economies of scale and consistency in quality; sales points at peak visitor locations; Price points and offers for all visitor demographics	Additional catering units at other peak locations and council venues; catering provision to venue hire across Council; post 26/27 financial year potential to full capacity for catering units
Visitor Services Site Events (inc. SVVC, FMF, LWH)	Visitor events that are held at destination sites (i.e. cinema, music, comedy, experiences)	Deliver an annual programme of events and premium experiences at visitor services locations to increase income from non-peak days and evenings.	Post 26/27 financial year potential to full capacity for evening events; increase in premium experiences (i.e. farmer experience days); inclusion of other Council venues in offer
Weddings	Wedding receptions and parties (and other celebrations) at visitor service sites	Offer affordable wedding reception packages at our destination sites.	Addition of new wedding venue locations; post 26/27 financial year potential to full capacity;
Birthdays	Themed birthday party packages for children at Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre and Forge Mill Farm	Offer affordable birthday party packages for children of various ages, with optional add ons.	Post 26/27 financial year potential to full capacity; premium party packages; additional venues (i.e. museums)
Venue Hire	Hire of locations, rooms, and facilities for meetings, conferences, training, special events, and externally run events.	Utilisation of new venue hire software, a new website for venues and venue hire, and a targeted package of offers for venue hire.	Post 26/27 financial year potential to full capacity for venue hire; development of facilities for larger conferences and training events; inclusion of other Council venues in package
Education and Outreach	School visits linked to the national curriculum in a range of subjects Inc. farming, animal welfare, food production, forestry, wildlife	Target schools within the West Midlands Combined Authority; start with programmes in farming and animal welfare, and increase programmes offer each year.	Overnight school packages; out of school hours programmes and activities; post 26/27 financial year potential to full capacity for education and outreach.
Contracts and Rental	Contracts for concessions (i.e.	Increase rental and contract values to	Master scoping for Sandwell Valley



	Sandwell Valley Amusements, Land Train) and rental of land and property.	market benchmarks; tender new contract opportunities (i.e. pedalos, bikes);	Country Park and estate to explore growth potential for further contracts and rental of land and property.
Car Parking Income	Car parking income from Sandwell Valley and Forge Mill car parks already in place with charges.	Additional car park at Forge Mill Farm with c.70 new spaces, and increase utilisation of other car parks through design changes; increase in visitors resulting in increase in parking each year.	Potential for increase in car parking charges (which are currently lower than benchmarked country parks).

4.18 The validation and testing of the financial model and 10-year financial estimates for Sandwell Valley have been worked through with external assurance from CIPFA Cco, built up from first principles and detail inputs and outputs.

5. Alternative Options

- 5.1 It is proposed for Cabinet to adopt the full master plan. The investment amount of £7.856m, delivered in a staged way over three financial years. This investment has been approved by Cabinet as part of the Capital Plan, within the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- 5.2 The option to not invest in Sandwell Valley at any of those levels would impact the net budget position, remaining at c.£700k. The do-nothing option would also leave Sandwell Valley Visitor and Swan Pool Sailing Centre in its current condition.

6. Implications

Resources:	The Master Plan includes £7.856m allocated within the Council's capital programme, and as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
Legal and Governance:	As part of the process of developing this Master Plan, Cabinet Members have been consulted through three Cabinet Workshops, and an addition three sub group meetings. Planning policy, highways, and the heritage



	officer have also been consulted on these plans and have raised no objections.
Risk:	<p>The risk of not undertaking any investment into Sandwell Valley is that we are unable to achieve the political priorities outlined at the start of this paper, and we will remain at c.700k net budget with limited opportunities for significant income growth. A full appraisal of this investment has taken place. Officers have also worked with specialist consultants (CIPFA CCo for Finance and business plan) and Prominent TLS (for Sandwell Valley Master Plan), and all assumptions have tested and validated as prudent by these consultants.</p> <p>The delivery of the Master Plan across three phases provides additional assurance and governance around deliverables and spend.</p> <p>We will work with external partners to continue benchmarking against established Country Parks with similar facilities and offering.</p>
Equality:	The infrastructure, cycling, and land train improvements will allow improved accessibility to Sandwell Valley Country Park and connect the zones. Refurbishments will also ensure disability accessible facilities at Swan Pool Water sports Centre, Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre, and Forge Mill Farm.
Health and Wellbeing:	The health benefits include additional visitors using the walkways and biking routes, cycling facilities, and securing the long term future of Sandwell Valley.
Social Value:	A social value impact assessment is included in appendix D but includes increased education and school visits, increase in the opportunities for physical activity and water sports, and a sub-regional destination at the heart of Sandwell.
Climate Change:	Improving Sandwell Valley Country Park as a sub-regional destination and moving to a surplus position allows for the Council to maintain the conservation elements of the Sandwell Valley Estate.
Corporate Parenting:	The plan includes free access to paid facilities for children in care and care leavers.



7. Milestones

Procurement, Preparation																		
Delivery																		
Works	Summary	24/25	25/26	26/27	24/25				25/26				26/27					
					Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		
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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Recent Improvements

Appendix B: Master Plan Scoping Document

Appendix C: Master Plan Social Value Impacts

Appendix D: Master Plan Consultation Summary

