



Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Council Leader – Cllr Kerrie Carmichael

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State
Department for Levelling Up,
Housing and Communities
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

My Ref:

KC/JLP

Please ask for:

Kerrie Carmichael

Telephone Number:

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Date:

19 June 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

A year on from the approval of our Improvement Plan, we are proud to look back over our achievements. We have successfully embarked upon whole-scale organisational change at the same time as delivering on our Corporate Plan commitments. I am delighted that the Secretary of State for Education has commenced the process to end intervention in Children's Services.

We recognise that there is more work ahead on our improvement journey. The long-standing service issues raised by external reviews in 2021 have now either been addressed or are well-progressed with robust delivery plans in place. This has enabled the council to shift focus to longer-term planning.

Over the past six months we have continued to deliver at pace. Some of our achievements since December are summarised below, arranged by the themes of our Improvement Plan.

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Organisational Culture

In terms of our organisational culture, we have been delighted to welcome our new Chief Executive, Shokat Lal, who took up post in February 2023. Recruitment is now underway for an Assistant Chief Executive who will oversee many of the service areas that make up the 'engine room' of the local authority, helping to shape our culture and how we transform ourselves as an organisation.

The launch of our One Team Framework (organisational values and behaviours) this Spring marked a significant milestone and the start of the next phase of our organisational culture change programme. The framework is a result of staff engagement, facilitated by an internal network of Culture Champions. The five new organisational values and associated behaviours set out an ambition to be one team 'united and working together with a shared purpose of achieving great results' that is customer focused, inclusive, ambitious, and accountable.

The impact of our 'One Team' approach can be seen through work such as our preparations for voter ID in the May 2023 elections. Teams from across the council were brought together (including electoral services, communications, adult social care, libraries, pest control and revenues and benefits) with the VCS to develop our approach and then to help share messages. The VCS also supported digitally excluded residents to complete the online application. Through our 'One Team' approach we achieved one of the highest figures in the country for issuing voter authority certificates.

We have made significant strides in the relationship between Members and Officers which was acknowledged by our external reviewers. Along with training and support, a range of meetings are in place to facilitate a healthy and regular dialogue which includes meetings with Group Leaders and Chief Whips, and cross-party working groups. The strength of the relationship has enabled the council to move forward on implementing difficult decisions such as the development of Brandhall, re-setting the relationship with Sandwell Leisure Trust and implementing a chargeable garden waste scheme.

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Over the next six months we are focusing on embedding the One Team Framework with learning and development for senior leaders and managers, a refreshed staff appraisal process, and the launch of an employee recognition scheme. The updated Member Development Programme and new Member induction programme will also be delivered to further cement the positive working culture between Members and Officers.

Corporate Oversight and Strategic Direction

Since our letter to you in December 2022, we received the reports from Grant Thornton, LGA (Local Government Association) and CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) from their follow-up reviews conducted in Autumn 2022. We were pleased that they recognised our clear progress. We have reflected on the further areas of recommendation to support our continuous improvement, and we have embedded actions to respond in our Improvement Plan and business plans.

Our performance management framework is maturing. Performance information and insight, including the results of consultation and engagement, is being used by Senior Leadership to set strategic direction and respond to issues. This approach has led to action being prioritised for example on the customer journey and targeted work to improve our response rates on Subject Access Requests (SARs) and Freedom of Information requests (FOIs).

As a result of this focus, SAR and FOI response rates have significantly improved and have been brought closer to target during the year. We have also reduced the number of Corporate Plan actions with significant progress issues. The performance management framework is also informing scrutiny work planning such as scrutiny's focus on customer journey work and the cost of living programme.

Since December we have put in place a framework for resident engagement along with a commission for delivery of regular resident surveys and budget consultation for the next three years. An evidence bundle, which included performance information and the outcomes from

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resident's consultation, has informed our refreshed business plans and Corporate Plan for 2023 onwards.

We are taking time to reflect and learn. We have recently completed a lessons learnt exercise on Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) transport procurement which is informing the council's overall approach to procurement. We sought out and have reflected on lessons learnt from a neighbouring LA around their implementation of Oracle Fusion and have assured ourselves that our approach is robust and that we have mitigations in place to avoid issues they encountered. We are also pursuing a joint lessons learnt exercise with Grant Thornton around the closure of our financial accounts.

Over the next six months, our refreshed Corporate Plan and Business Plans along with a newly developed set of service standards will continue to develop our insight and grow our performance culture. This will be supported by and intrinsically linked to how we embed the One Team framework. We have paved the way for our improvement activity to be monitored within our performance management framework through the refresh of our Corporate Plan. This will enable us to move away from a stand-alone improvement plan in forthcoming months, whilst retaining the assurance mechanisms to manage progress and performance.

In relation to financial strategy and management, our financial management improvements are demonstrated by the increase in our CIPFA rating from 2* to 3*. We continue to focus on developing financial acumen and skills through up-skilling budget holders and embedding a finance business partnering approach. Our approach to budget setting is embedded with conversations across Leadership Team and we have started the next budget setting cycle. We have an agreed budget in place that supports our Corporate Plan priorities and an agreed Medium-Term Financial Strategy. We have identified transformation programmes to bridge the budget gap in the medium term.

Transformation activity is taking place across the council including the Oracle Programme, a review of business support arrangements and financial services business process reviews. Resources from across the

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council have been brought together to consolidate resources. With the support of Local Partnerships, we are developing a Corporate Programme Management Office and approach to provide a strong corporate centre that enables transformation and project delivery across the organisation.

We recognise that we have a lot of work to do on our Customer Journey and see it as a corporate priority, establishing a robust framework, resources and performance improvement programme that should see visible improvements for customers, MPs and Councillors during 2023/24. The programme has a dedicated project manager and team and is being overseen by the Customer Journey Programme Board. Scrutiny are actively involved in shaping this work.

The Customer Journey Programme is ambitious and multi-faceted. Not only are we developing a Customer Experience Strategy, the programme also includes procuring a new telephony system, reviewing current technology and our customer processes so that they are responsive and efficient. We have also established a pilot Community Hub model for face-to-face contact for those who are digitally excluded or otherwise struggling to engage with the council and are reviewing our Contact Centres model, with regular reporting to senior leadership to monitor impact and inform future decisions on wider implementation. The programme will make the necessary improvements to our customer service to ensure our residents experience a seamless service when they need to contact us.

Now that the long-standing service issues raised by Grant Thornton in their 2021 Value for Money Governance Review have either been addressed or have a robust delivery plan in place, Leadership Team has been increasingly focusing on strategic matters using 'priority focus' sessions as a means for collective work across Cabinet and Senior Leaders. This approach is demonstrated by our work on the cost of living crisis. We convened a Cost of Living Emergency Summit in March 2023, bringing together more than sixty public, private and voluntary sector partners to coordinate our efforts to support our community through this crisis. The summit was full of energy and commitment from across all our partners to problem solve and

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collaborate and resulted in a series of partnership wide commitments and asks.

We enter the new municipal year with Cabinet that reflects the stability and continuity of the administration. We are focussed on working effectively together in the coming months to build on the improvements set out in the report.

Decision Making

As we reported to you in December, our constitution has been fully refreshed. Since December, our attention has turned to further embedding the constitutional changes. Over the next six months, our learning and development activities will continue and will be strengthened by the roll out of the One Team Framework.

We've continued to make key decisions focusing on long term planning such as approval of:

- the Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan in February, which includes flexibility to amend the plan subject to results of stock condition surveys
- the Friar Park Masterplan in March. This has set the strategic direction for the development of the Friar Park Urban Village based on public consultation and impact assessments

We are developing a set of new measures as part of the performance management framework to provide us with further insight into the quality of the decision-making process and drive our continuous improvement.

We are proud of the improvements that have taken place within Audit and Scrutiny Committees. Members and Officers have worked together to ensure that these functions are working effectively and holding the council to account. The Committees are well-managed and have focused work programmes and meetings. We are continuously improving and learning and are using feedback gained from Members and Officers of their experiences of meetings.

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The Scrutiny review on the Impact of Lockdown on Children & Families reported to Cabinet in February 2023, included wide-ranging and significant recommendations to improve the service/approach to improve outcomes for children and their families. Scrutiny took an outcomes-focused approach to considering SEND transport with effective challenge provided on the wider issues of the service rather than procurement.

Partnerships and Relationships, Procurement and Commercial

We are continuing to prioritise our work with partners. At a regional and sub-regional level regular attendance and participation is in place, for example, with the WMCA (West Midlands Combined Authority) Board, the CA Economic Growth Board, CA Housing and Regeneration Board and the ABCA (Association of Black Country Authorities) Leaders. This participation has meant that the council has secured support from the Mayor and all Met Leaders to the agreed allocation of £2million from the Commonwealth Games 2022 budget underspend of £70million to fund increased utilities costs for the Sandwell Aquatic Centre.

I am pleased to be leading the Inclusive Communities Portfolio for the WMCA which will include developing an inclusive communities strategy for the CA, progress participation and coproduction through the Young CA and the Faith Strategy Participation Group, and will oversee delivery of the Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Funding.

The council has also fully participated in the negotiations and discussions on the proposals for a West Midlands Devolution Deal with Government and formal decisions will be taken on this in Autumn 2023. We are excited to be developing proposals for a Levelling Up Partnership with Government to secure further regeneration in Sandwell.

In a Sandwell context, relationships with partners continue to mature. Our recent cost of living summit is one example along with our joint work on Early Help which is bearing fruit. Of families who received multi-agency early help, 76.2% were not referred back to Early Help services or Children's Social Care within 12 months.

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Key major contracts are being managed across the council and the corporate performance management framework includes regular reporting on major contracts, with a focus on service outcomes. We are developing a corporate contract management approach and are rolling out training to those responsible for contracts to ensure a consistent level of knowledge and practice.

Accompanying this letter is our Improvement Plan Annual Report June 2023. This report is a summary of our progress on our improvement journey including key milestones achieved, evidence of impact, and next steps. Our quarterly progress reports to Cabinet made in March and June 2023 are also attached which provide a greater level of detail around progress issues, risks, resources and changes to the Improvement Plan.

Our key areas of focus over forthcoming months are driving our plans around organisational culture, customer journey, transformation and delivering the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

We enter the year ahead with pride in our achievements and a commitment to continue to work as One Team to drive the council's improvement.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Kerrie Carmichael
Council Leader

c.c. Kim Bromley-Derry, Commissioner
Jim Taylor, Commissioner
Shokat Lal, Chief Executive

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