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Second year of council tax freeze

Council tax bills in Sandwell are set to be frozen for the second year running.

Households can look forward to a further year of no rise in their bills as part of a council spending budget for the 2012/13 financial year. As the Herald was going to print, the budget was being sent to a full meeting of the council on 6 March. It involves total day-to-day spending for the year on council services of around £279 million. This amounts to about £18 million less than in the current year because of a combination of cuts in Government grant and the effects of inflation.

Councillor Steve Eling, Sandwell’s deputy leader and Cabinet member for strategic resources, said: “It is a robust budget which balances the council’s books as we have to do by law. “We have had to make some difficult decisions on savings but have been able to do so without closing down services. As a low-tax council, we were also determined to avoid any unnecessary rise in council tax at a time when families across Sandwell are feeling the pinch.”

He added: “At the same time the budget maintains investment in priority areas. We are radically changing the way we collect household waste, for example, to boost the amounts we send for recycling and composting – and save millions of pounds that would otherwise be spent on landfill taxes. “We are also securing investment to bring in new jobs, and two new leisure centres planned for Tipton and West Bromwich are on track. “We are continuing to maximise savings on our land and property holdings so that we can focus on delivering quality public services without spreading the jam too thinly.”

Children’s safeguarding is getting better – says Ofsted

A drive to improve the safeguarding of vulnerable children in Sandwell is paying off, according to a Government watchdog.

Ofsted rates the local authority’s safeguarding performance and capacity to improve further as “adequate” – and council bosses have pledged to maintain the momentum. The verdict comes after the council made far-reaching changes to children’s social care following an “inadequate” rating for safeguarding two years ago.

In their latest report, the inspectors say: “Sandwell children’s services have made satisfactory progress across almost all areas of their improvement plan since the Government issued an improvement notice following Ofsted’s safeguarding and looked after children inspection of November 2009, and the trajectory of progress is largely positive.”

Cabinet member for children and families Councillor Bob Badham said he was encouraged by the report but recognised there was more to do. He said: “The whole culture of children’s social care in Sandwell has changed. The child is at the centre of everything we do. “I am pleased Ofsted is confident we can continue along this road. Our ambition is to become an excellent service within an excellent authority.

“We have put firm foundations in place – despite challenges such as a big rise in child referrals, which has been part of a national trend. We have made a good start but we will not be complacent as we seek to further raise performance.”

In Sandwell, 335 children and young people have child protection plans, a further 1,370 are children in need and 559 children and young people are in the care of the council.

The service is led by corporate director, People, Barbara Peacock who joined the council in June 2010, and service director Helen Smith who joined last year.

Ofsted’s full report is available on its website at www.ofsted.gov.uk

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For general council enquiries please contact Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council on 0845 358 2200 or email: contact@sandwell.gov.uk

When you have finished with your herald please recycle it.
Record-breaking decathlete Thompson, the BT London 2012 Ambassador, joined council leaders and schoolchildren for the opening of the town’s first major office development for more than 30 years.

Olympic legend Daley Thompson has officially opened the new Providence Place office development in West Bromwich.

Record-breaking decathlete Thompson, the BT London 2012 Ambassador, joined council leaders and schoolchildren for the opening of the town’s first major office development for more than 30 years.

Olympic legend Daley Thompson has officially opened the new Providence Place office development in West Bromwich.

Award-winning 1 Providence Place is a key part of BT’s ongoing partnership with the council, bringing new investment and jobs to Sandwell.

Thompson also launched a competition for local schools, with tickets to the London 2012 Paralympics up for grabs. Winners will be announced in June to coincide with the Olympic Torch passing through Sandwell.

Daley said: “This is a fantastic milestone for Sandwell, and coming in London 2012 year makes it even more special.”

Council leader Councillor Darren Cooper said: “Working in partnership to attract inward investment is key to our regeneration programme, and the opening of this flagship BT building is at the very heart of that.”

Around 900 people will be based in the four-storey business centre, including 400 employees of Transform Sandwell, the BT council partnership delivering services to the local community.

BT has also chosen to base its new 300-strong customer service centre at the building — and it will also be the new base of BT Expedite, which provides specialist technology services to major retailers, as part of plans to expand a 110-strong team.

Gavin Patterson, BT Board member and chief executive of BT’s Retail division, said: “These state-of-the-art offices are a giant leap forward for the West Midlands, creating much needed jobs and prosperity at a time of economic uncertainty.

“They show what can be achieved when the public and private sectors work together in partnership.”

The business centre is part of the £75 million Providence Place development at the junction of the A41 Expressway and Cronehills Linkway.

It is central to West Bromwich’s regeneration, which includes plans for new shops and restaurants, a swimming pool, cinema, college, better transport links and improved green spaces.

On your marks -- Daley Thompson with Sandwell schoolchildren, watched by BT's Gavin Patterson and Sandwell's Mayor, Councillor Joyce Underhill.

Legend Daley
opens Providence Place

Great people, Great place, Great prospects, Great performance
Healthy Start for Sandwell

Sandwell Primary Care Trust (PCT) and Asda Supermarket in Cape Hill, Smethwick, have joined forces to offer free vitamins to mums-to-be and new mums on low incomes.

As part of the national Healthy Start campaign, eligible women registered for the scheme can pick up their free vitamins from the Cape Hill Asda Pharmacy along with their weekly shop.

To celebrate the supermarket becoming a new collection point, a promotional day there included tips from early years food and nutrition and breast feeding advisors on healthy eating for the family – complete with nutritional food tasters and mini-shop tours.

Dr Jenny Chen, Consultant in Public Health, said: “This was an informative and fun day where mums-to-be, new mums and mums with small children were able to find out about the Healthy Start Scheme.

“We are really pleased Asda Cape Hill is working with us to provide a convenient location for mums to pick up their vitamins.”

David Gallier-Harris, Pharmacy Manager, said: “Asda Pharmacy is pleased to be involved with this important initiative.

*Serving and being at the heart of our local community has always been important to Asda.

*Healthy Start allows us to ensure the most vulnerable groups of our community get the best possible start*

Healthy Start not only gives free vitamins but also provides vouchers towards buying milk, plain fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables, or infant formula milk.

Vouchers can be used at local shops and supermarkets and with milkmen registered to take part.

To find out more about the Healthy Start scheme – or to check whether you are entitled – either:

• speak to your health visitor, community midwife or children’s centre staff
• visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk and download an application form
• or call 0845 607 6823.

Asda Pharmacy managers David Gallier-Harris and Seema Rani with free vitamin tablets and drops available through the Healthy Start Scheme.

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How to get free milk, fruit, veg and vitamins

Healthy Start is here to help you give your baby the very best start in life!

If you’re pregnant or have a child under four and you’re claiming benefits, you could get vouchers to spend on milk and plain fresh or frozen fruit and veg* absolutely free!

Join Healthy Start and we’ll send you vouchers in the post that you can use at local shops and supermarkets. We’ll also send you a coupon that you can swap for free vitamins, to help make sure that you and your baby get important nutrients you need.

Do I qualify?

You qualify for the Healthy Start scheme if you are at least 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under four years old AND you or your family get any one of the following:

- Income support or
- Income based Job Seeker’s Allowance or
- Income related Employment and Support Allowance or
- Child Tax Credit (but not Working Tax Credit unless your family is receiving Working Tax Credit run-on only**) AND an annual family income of £16,190 or less in 2012/13.

You also qualify if you are under 18 and pregnant, even if you don’t get any of the above benefits or tax credits.

How to get your vouchers?

Download an application at www.healthystart.nhs.uk call 0845 607 6823 or ask your midwife/health visitor or children’s centre for one.

Where to use them

You can use them at local shops, supermarkets, some market stalls and even from your milkman. To find your nearest participating shop go to www.healthystart.nhs.uk or call 0845 607 6823.

*You can’t spend your vouchers on any plain fresh and frozen fruit and veg which has added salt, fat, sugar or any other ingredients.

**Working Tax Credit run-on is the Working Tax Credit you receive in the 4 weeks immediately after you have stopped working for 16 hours or more per week.

Sandwell Primary Care Trust

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Landmark college opens in Sandwell

With the London Olympics and Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, 2012 promises to be a landmark year – and also sees the unveiling of West Bromwich’s latest landmark building.

The striking £77 million Sandwell College Central Campus opened at the end of February. It is the most modern college of further education in the UK.

Once students and staff move in for the spring term, it will provide a wide range of courses and apprenticeships for young people and adults from across the borough.

As well as purpose-built construction workshops, engineering laboratories, fashion and photography studios and a mock-up aircraft cabin, the building boasts a four-court sports hall, fitness suite and multi-gym, a training dental surgery, dance studio and 170-seater theatre.

Central Campus will also feature a sixth form as part of its vision to become a flagship place of learning for A-Level and vocational education in the region.

In the heart of West Bromwich, the college is just one of many new exciting developments in the town.

See www.sandwell.ac.uk for more details on Central Campus or call the course hotline on 0800 622 006.

• Other West Bromwich projects include new shops, a cinema, swimming pool and modern housing.

It is expected the pool complex – off Moor Street and Bromford Lane and including a 25m main pool, teaching pool, four-court sports hall, 100-station gym and refreshment area – will open in 2014.

Sandwell is also a step closer to the first of two new swimming pools after contractor Willmott Dixon began work on an £8.1m complex at the junction of Alexandra Road and Thursfield Road, Tipton.

Due to open early next year, it will boast as a minimum a 25m six-lane main pool, learner pool, changing village, dance studio and gym.

New look for Sandwell Register Office

Sandwell’s Register Office is now an even prettier setting for weddings and civil partnership ceremonies.

Highfields – the Grade II listed building off West Bromwich High Street that is home to the office – has had a makeover inside and out.

The larger Sandwell Suite, which can hold up to 85 guests, now has a new look after being fully redecorated. Highfields’ exterior was repainted and the grounds improved last year.

Ceremonies in the refurbished Sandwell Suite start from £143.50 on a weekday. The smaller Highfields Room, which holds up to 45 guests, is just £43.50.

A statutory notice fee of £67 also applies to all ceremonies.

For more details go to www.sandwell.gov.uk/registeroffice or call 0121 569 2480.

Liz Mabley MBE

We’re very sad to report that Sandwell has lost a great community ambassador – and a valued friend and colleague to many.

Liz Mabley MBE died following a short illness in December 2011.

Liz taught at Devonshire Road and Corbett Street primary schools, Smethwick, in the early 1970s.

She went on to be a founder member of our Community Links team and helped establish the Sandwell Partnership.

She was awarded the MBE in 2001.

Liz was a regular face at community events and meetings across the borough.

Although she retired from the council in 2009, she continued to work with groups including Changing Our Lives, an organisation that supports people with learning disabilities to speak up for their rights. She also supported Blind Dave Heeley on his Top2Toe challenge for Macmillan Cancer Support.

Liz is sadly missed by friends, colleagues and the many people in Sandwell whose lives she touched with her work.
Spreading the recycling message!

Youngsters across Sandwell are learning all about the benefits of recycling thanks to a special classroom on four wheels.

The Eco Bus is visiting every school in the borough to teach children about their local environment and spread the word about why it’s important to recycle. Students have the chance to take part in workshops on recycling, litter picking, planting, composting and renewable energy when the bus pulls up at their school.

It began its tour of Sandwell schools in November and will have visited them all by the end of 2012.

The council and its waste partner Serco are behind the initiative, which is being managed and delivered by local charity Tipton Litter Watch. The aim is to educate the younger generation and help them realise the importance of recycling, helping the borough to achieve long-term aims of boosting recycling rates and sending less to landfill.

Earlier this year Sandwell finished delivering household bins and food recycling containers to all homes in the borough with kerbside collections. Residents now have weekly collections for domestic rubbish, recycling, and food waste.

Councillor Derek Rowley, Sandwell’s Cabinet member for neighbourhood services, said: “We want people young and old across Sandwell to understand the benefits of recycling. The new collection services allow residents to save money, reduce the food they throw away and do their bit for the environment. I’m sure the Eco Bus means children will be encouraging their parents to do even more.”

Poetry competition - why you love your library

Children and adults in Great Barr are being invited to put their thoughts into verse in a poetry competition later this year.

It is taking place at Great Barr and Hamstead libraries and both adults and children are being asked to compose poems saying why they love both libraries.

There is a prize of £25 for both the adult and child sections. All entries must be in by June 30 and they can be submitted to either of the libraries.
Plea for Arts Festival volunteers

Dozens of volunteers are wanted to help run an arts festival when it takes to the streets of Sandwell in the summer. Organisers want to sign up around 30 people for the third annual Sandwell Arts Festival over two weekends in July.

Their duties will range from helping to set up events to stewarding and answering queries from members of the public.

Sandwell Council arts service manager Garry Morris said: “This will be a great chance for people to gain supervised, hands-on experience of an arts event.

“We will be holding interviews for the posts in the summer. This year we will be staging more events across the six towns of Sandwell and we need the help of local communities to ensure our success.”

The posts are unpaid but volunteers can claim expenses.

To register your interest in becoming a volunteer contact Garry Morris on 0121 569 4710 or email him at Garry_Morris@sandwell.gov.uk

The council has again teamed up with local arts organisations to present top creative talent from the borough and beyond for the festival, this year called Right Up My Street.

Most of the events will be free to attend. Details will be included in a festival brochure on the council’s website over the summer.

Festival partners include Multistory, Black Country Touring, The Public, Sandwell Third Age Arts and Sandwell Primary Care Trust.

Put a spring in your step with SLT

Residents wanting to keep fit and stay in shape now have over 160 fitness classes to choose from at leisure centres across Sandwell.

A range of new fitness classes has been launched at Sandwell Leisure Trust sites.

They include the new dance fitness sensation, Bokwa, and the ultimate group training session, Team Extreme. And SLT’s popular Les Mills classes are being relaunched at the end of March.

New moves, routines and music will be introduced to Body Pump, Body Combat and Body Balance.

SLT’s Catherine Barrett said: “If your New Year’s resolution to keep fit and get in shape is now just a distant memory, spring is a great time to restart your fitness regime.

"With summer on the horizon, classes are a great way to stay motivated and really make a difference to your fitness, health and body shape.”

Fitness classes are available at centres in Smethwick, Langley, Cradley Heath, Rowley Regis, Wednesbury and Tipton.

Customers can now join SLT’s all-inclusive membership scheme online, saving 50% off their first payment.

The latest timetable is available at www.slt-leisure.co.uk or by calling 0845 659 4815. Alternatively, download the SLT smart phone App from the App Store.
A major clean-up campaign is taking place in Sandwell, spearheaded by the council and its waste partner Serco.

Operation Clean Sweep is an intensive campaign to target grime hot spots and clear away litter, fly tipped rubbish, graffiti and dog mess. The aim is to remove additional debris from the winter months.

Operation Clean Sweep involves dedicated street cleaning teams putting in extra work - above and beyond their usual cleaning schedules - in all of Sandwell's six towns. The campaign started in February and runs throughout March. It builds on the success of the award-winning annual Big Spring Clean, which will also be running again this year.

Councillor Derek Rowley, the council’s cabinet member for neighbourhood services, said: “We have planned ahead for this as we know this is a time of year when areas need an extra deep clean.

“It’s a boost for our normal street cleaning work because we know the way the area looks is one of our residents’ top priorities.

“Our waste partner Serco is carrying out its normal cleaning duties across the borough throughout, and is doing an extra deep clean in areas where residents have told us there are most problems.

*Winter months, with darker nights and mornings, can be a peak period for people leaving dog mess and dropping litter, so this is the best time of the year to channel work into these ‘hot spots’ to ensure they are looking their best for the springtime. We are also able to clear trapped rubbish from shrubs more easily while they are not in leaf.*

Jason Holtom, general manager for Serco, said: “We are absolutely behind this campaign as it’s an opportunity to help areas that people have told us are prone to litter, fly tipping and graffiti.

“It’s a valuable contribution to the ongoing work that we do around street cleansing across the borough.”

For more information, visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/cleansweep

Sandwell’s Operation Clean Sweep gets under way.

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The Big Spring Clean is back!

One of Sandwell’s most popular campaigns is coming back for another year.

The Big Spring Clean will run from April to July to help keep Sandwell sparkling.

During the last six years, more than 19,000 volunteers, including those from schools, community groups and local businesses, have signed up to take part in the campaign.

The Big Spring Clean gives people in the borough the chance to make a difference to their local area. As well as litter picking, the campaign has run a number of other activities including planting, painting and landscaping.

And thanks to the enthusiasm and commitment shown to the Big Spring Clean by Sandwell’s residents, the council and its waste partner Serco have brought it back yet again.

To get involved in this year’s Big Spring Clean, please email bigspringclean.sandwell@serco.com

For more information visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/bigspringclean

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Mark our Scorecard Today! www.sandwell.gov.uk/mycouncil
Sandwell Council wardens have chalked up a massive increase in dog mess fines in response to residents’ concerns.

They have issued nearly seven times as many fines over the past 10 months as in the same period the previous year. Between April 1 2011 and January 31 2012, wardens have fined 104 people, up from 15 in the same period last year.

Fines have been handed out in each of the borough’s six towns.

West Bromwich .................. 31
Tipton .............................. 21
Smethwick ....................... 15
Wednesbury ...................... 14
Oldbury ............................ 14
Rowley Regis .................... 9

For dog fouling offences, wardens issue a £75 fine, which is reduced to £50 if paid within 10 days.

Councillor Derek Rowley, Sandwell Council’s cabinet member for neighbourhood services, said: “Dog fouling is a big concern for Sandwell residents, who keep asking us to do more about it.

“Wardens have stepped up their action and I welcome this dramatic increase in fines.”

Councillor Rowley added: “I want to stress that the vast majority of dog owners are responsible – this is shown by the 77 tonnes of dog mess we collected from our dog fouling bins last year.

“But sadly a small number are not, and they are putting people’s health at risk, particularly children who play in parks and on grass. Apart from the health concerns, dog mess is also a real nuisance, it makes the area look untidy and it unfairly gives all those responsible dog owners a bad name.”

To report dog fouling, call Sandwell Council on 0845 359 7501 or email contact@sandwell.gov.uk

To find out more about our high profile dog fouling campaign, and to download our posters, visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/dogfouling

Keeping your borough clean...

We know that all residents want to see clean and attractive streets across Sandwell.

As part of our new waste partnership with Serco, we’re able to do more to keep the borough’s streets cleaner than ever before.

We’re dedicated to keeping the following areas as clean as possible to meet the needs of our residents.

Where you shop...
• Litter picking in town centres every day
• Bins emptied daily in town centres
• Regular litter picking - ranging from daily to at least once a week – at smaller shopping areas
• Bins emptied 2-3 times a week at smaller shopping areas

Where you play...
• Play areas litter picked regularly, ranging from weekly to fortnightly
• Parks litter picked every week
• Regular bin collections in all parks

Where you live...
• All residential areas across the borough are targeted by litter pickers and mechanical sweeper machines on a five week cycle. Pavements and roads, including the channels between the kerbside and roads, are tidied as part of this process. They are also maintained by litter pickers every two or three weeks
• Public bins emptied regularly, ranging from weekly to fortnightly

Where you drive...
• All main roads across the borough cleaned regularly – ranging between once a week and fortnightly depending on the build up of litter levels

Where you work...
• Industrial areas also get the same treatment as residential areas every five weeks
People in Sandwell have a new way to find the help they need.

The council has launched a directory featuring details of more than 900 local care and community organisations.

Information Point is a database, available by computer, which will make it easier for residents to reach a range of organisations from the private, public, community and voluntary sectors.

It will help put residents in touch with the services they need -- from arranging social care support for adults to finding a new community group to join.

It is the first time information on such a wide range of community and care services has been made available in a single, up-to-date database.

Councillor Ann Jaron, Sandwell’s cabinet member for adult social care, said it was an excellent resource for families and individuals of all ages who relied on the support of community and care organisations.

She said: "It is a handy way to find services that can help people be more active, find a new hobby, join a lunch club, find a support group, cope with a long term condition or get extra help in the home."

The directory is part of the Sandwell Council website. Users can search it in a number of ways, including:

• selecting different categories
• an A-Z list
• and an advanced search option for keywords such as a town, postcode or the support required.

People without a computer can visit their local Sandwell library to use Information Point.

To take a look at the directory, visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/informationpoint.
Don’t be bored this Easter

With the Easter holidays just around the corner, Sandwell is planning a host of fun activities for young people and families.

Search the www.justyouth.org.uk website all year round for things for 11 to 19-year-olds to do across Sandwell – including youth clubs, sports sessions and visits from the Youth Bus.

Our leisure centres have holiday camps running during the holidays. Visit www.slt-leisure.co.uk to find out more.

We’ve got the free adventure playground at Sandwell Valley – it’s the biggest playground in the borough – and the park farm there will be open every day.

The High Ropes aerial adventure course at Sandwell Valley also makes the country park a great day out.

And don’t forget Sandwell’s parks, including skate parks at Lightwoods Park in Bearwood and Brunswick Park in Wednesbury.

There are always lots of fun things to do at our libraries and museums, and at The Public, West Bromwich.

You can also check out the What’s On guide on the back of the Herald and keep an eye out for information on the Easter holiday fun at www.sandwell.gov.uk/holidays

Young people in Sandwell can check out youth activities at www.justyouth.org.uk

Are you on Facebook?

We are! Here’s what people say about the Sandwell Facebook page and why they ‘like’ it...

I love it! It provides lots of really informative stuff

I think that it provides useful information and keeps residents informed and shows that the council are trying to engage with residents.

Very useful information given out without asking for it. Keep up the good work.

I like the speedy updates and day-to-day information about events.

Great to read comments from like minded people!

Get answers to questions without having to ring the council.

www.facebook.com/sandwellcouncil

Gold achievers

Four young achievers from Sandwell are celebrating after scooping their Duke of Edinburgh gold award.

Shahid Hussain, Abdul Wahid and Kobi Miah picked up certificates from the Duke at St James’ Palace in London.

Azar Hussain also successfully completed the course but was unable to attend on the day.

The group are members of the Bangladeshi Youth Club, based at the North Smethwick Resource Centre, run and funded by Sandwell Council’s young people’s services.

Reading volunteers plea

Primary schools in Sandwell are looking for volunteers to help pupils develop reading skills.

Volunteers will need to complete application and simple medical forms and a CRB disclosure application. There is no cost to the volunteer.

For more information please contact Joanne Corkery on 0121 569 2344 or email joanne_corkery@sandwell.gov.uk

Stop vehicle crime

Safety chiefs in Sandwell have stepped up their fight against vehicle crime – and motorists can check they are doing all they can to help.

Get advice at the Safer Motors website - www.west-midlands.police.uk/safermotors

Top five tips for protecting your vehicle are:

• Fit an alarm or immobiliser
• Your garage is for your car – use it!
• Get all glass surfaces security-etched
• Lock your vehicle when driving and each time you leave it
• Never leave valuables in the glove box as this is the first place thieves look.

Please report vehicle crime to police by calling 101. Always call 999 in an emergency.

Volunteer drivers appeal

Volunteer drivers are needed to take Sandwell children and young people to school and other activities. This is very worthwhile work and would mean a lot to the youngsters and their families.

If you are interested and are aged 21 or over, with a full, clean driving licence and your own car, please get in touch.

For more details contact 07825 781896 or visit: www.sandwell.gov.uk
GCSE performance is best ever

Sandwell is riding higher than ever in national league tables after young people in our schools chalked up record GCSE results.

The borough is now above the national average of 81 per cent of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above. This means that -- after 2011’s exams -- Sandwell moved up from 99th to 47th out of 152 local authorities for the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A* to C passes.

And at five or more A* to C passes including English and Maths the borough jumped nine places from 147th to 138th. Most improved school in Sandwell is St Michael’s C of E High in Rowley Regis, where results at five or more A*-C grades, including English and maths, rose by 18 points to 48%.

Other big improvers for five or more A*-C grades including English and Maths the borough’s £125 million Building Schools for the Future programme.

Councillor Badham said: “Since 2002 there has been year-on-year improvement in our results which shows that everyone is pulling all the stops to offer our young people the best possible start in life.

“I would urge local businesses and industries to take on school leavers after these excellent results and give them a good start on the career ladder.”

He added: “We are among the most improved local authorities in the country. These are firm foundations for success. But we can’t stand still. There is still a long way to go to ensure every pupil achieves their full potential, but we are on the right road.”

The GCSE success follows on from Sandwell primary school pupils achieving some of the country’s most improved results for maths and English, making the borough the fourth most improved area nationally for 11-year-olds reaching the expected level in Key Stage 2 tests.

Vote for Sandwell’s top books

From action-packed adventures to tales of shopping mania, there is something for everyone to enjoy in a competition to find Sandwell’s favourite books.

Bestselling thriller writer RJ Ellory launched the Sandwell Big Read 2012 at Bleakhouse Library in Oldbury on National Libraries Day.

People can vote for their favourite books from shortlists for adults and children and young people. The winners will be announced in June. The books are all bestsellers, top-issuing library books or books nominated by library reading groups.

More information is available at www.sandwell.gov.uk/bigread

People can vote in a library or online.

Mr Ellory said: “Supporting the Sandwell Big Read is a great opportunity to put some great books in a lot of hands.”

The Big Read will run across all libraries with a special focus on Bleakhouse and Smethwick, both recently revamped with support from Big Lottery Fund.

Children and families Cabinet member Councillor Bob Badham said: “There are some wonderful books to vote for.

“I would encourage people to go to their local library and take advantage of the many services it offers.”

The shortlisted books are:

**Adults:**

- **Room** by Emma Donoghue
- **Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic** by Sophie Kinsella
- **The Hand that First Held Mine** by Maggie O’Farrell
- **The Help** by Kathryn Stockett
- **The Snow Child** by Eowyn Ivey
- **Wolf of the Plains** by Conn Iggulden
- **A Thousand Splendid Suns** by Khaled Hosseini
- **A Study in Scarlet** by Arthur Conan Doyle
- **61 Hours** by Lee Child
- **Anniversary Man** by Roger Ellory
- **Faceless Killers, An Inspector Wallander mystery** by Henning Mankell
- **Little Face** by Sophie Hannah

**Children & young people:**

- **Flip** by Martyn Bedford
- **Graveyard Book** by Neil Gaiman
- **Scopia Rising** by Anthony Horowitz
- **Shadow Wave** by Robert Muchamore
- **Angel Cake** by Cathy Cassidy
- **Lily Alone** by Jacqueline Wilson
- **Chitty Chitty Bang Bang** by Roald Dahl
- **Matilda** by Roald Dahl
- **The Highway Rat** by Julia Donaldson
- **Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic** by Sophie Kinsella
- **Room** by Emma Donoghue

Office moves

A number of council offices are moving this year to save cash and boost efficiency.

Services at Lodge Road, West Bromwich – which include housing benefit, council tax benefit, council tax enquiries and cashier services – are now at 104-5 King’s Square, High Street, West Bromwich B70 7NN.

For more information visit www.sandwell.gov.uk
New bungalows free up larger homes

New bungalows on a West Bromwich estate are giving homes to elderly people so larger houses are freed up for local families.

Four bungalows have been built in Holmes Close, Hamstead, in partnership with Black Country Housing Group and builders Mansell PLC. They are the first part of housing improvements for the nearby Durham Estate and Cabinet member for housing, Councillor Simon Hackett, said they were the first of their kind to be built in Sandwell to the highest sustainability standards, significantly cutting running costs.

The new tenants are delighted with their new homes and have released under-occupied family homes which are in short supply. Councillor Hackett said: “I fully support the development of more bungalows for older people to free up homes for families. “This will be adopted for housing schemes planned in other parts of Sandwell.”

A Durham implementation group (DIG) – a partnership of officers from Sandwell Council, Sandwell Homes, local councillors and community representatives – has overseen development of the Holmes Close bungalows.

Black Country Housing’s Development Manager, Rebecca Stevens, said they had been eagerly awaited. “The new tenants are able to move into homes that have been built to high quality and design standards, and also advanced environmental standards that will mean lower running costs and energy bills for residents,” she added.

“Helping tenants to reduce their impact on the environment, these bungalows are the first of their kind to be built to Sustainability Code level five in the borough and we hope this development will be the first of many.”

Flowers for a new home (from left to right): Sandra Spencer, Chief Executive of Black Country Housing Group; Daniel Summers of Mansell PLC; new tenant Margaret Flaherty; and Cabinet member for housing Councillor Simon Hackett.

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Flowers for a new home (from left to right): Sandra Spencer, Chief Executive of Black Country Housing Group; Daniel Summers of Mansell PLC; new tenant Margaret Flaherty; and Cabinet member for housing Councillor Simon Hackett.

2012 local elections take place on Thursday May 3 – and here are a few tips to make sure your right to vote goes smoothly:

• Polling stations will be open from 7am to 10pm.

Everyone eligible to vote will get a polling card through the post between 23 March and 2 April.

• You need to be on the electoral register to be able to vote.

If you’re not sure whether you are, or want to know where your polling station is, contact the council’s elections office on 0121 569 9244.

First-time voters, in particular, should make sure they use the right to vote.

If your 18th birthday falls on, or before, 3 May 2012, make sure you are registered. Application forms to register can be downloaded from www.aboutmyvote.com or phone 0121 569 3244. Last day to register is 18 April.

You should check your polling card carefully for where to go and vote. After recent changes to polling districts, you may find that your polling station has changed.

• If you cannot get to your polling station, you can apply to vote by post. Applications must be in by 18 April.

• Call the elections office or visit www.sandwell.gov.uk for further help with, or details of, voting arrangements in 2012.

Tips for local elections

Prize Puzzles

Crossword

Across
1. Safe as ______ (6)
2. Towards the back (6)
9. Posh clothes (7)
10. Not the same (5)
11. As ditchwater (4)
12. We used to call zebra crossings this kind of beacon (7)
14. Opposite of somebody (6)
16. United Nations body (6)
19. He or she knows all about it (7)
21. Require (4)
23. These are nice to eat (5)
24. "_______" on 34th Street (7)
25. Strongly ask (6)
26. Wooden cottage (6)

Down
1. Deception (4)
2. Opposite of plumb (7)
3. Join up (5)
5. Enlarged (7)
6. Characteristic spirit (5)
7. This person tells a story (8)
8. Big spots (5)
13. Maintained (8)
15. “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” writer’s real name (7)
17. Patten (7)
18. Long walk (5)
20. Used in jabs (5)
21. Opposite of south (5)
22. Bird’s home (4)

Sudoku

Fill the grid so that every column, row and 3 X 3 box has the numbers 1 to 9.

Wordsearch

Find the following words concealed in the grid:

Olympics
Children
Budget
Guide
Sudoku
Great Place
News
Paper

Win £25 in Sainsbury’s vouchers

Send your answers – with your name, address and daytime telephone number – to The Editor, Sandwell Herald, Communications Unit, Sandwell Council House, Freeth Street, Oldbury B69 3DE by 27 April 2012. First correct entry for each puzzle out of the hat wins the prize. The editor’s decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.

Lucky voucher winners from puzzles in the last Herald are:
• Crossword, Mrs H Evans, Tividale.
• Sudoku, Miss H Field, Cradley Heath.
• Wordsearch, Mrs V Leadbetter, Cradley Heath.
Sandwell’s 72 councillors are here to represent you.

They hold regular ‘surgeries’ where you can go to discuss council-related issues. Ring 0121 569 3129 or 0121 569 3044 to get details of exactly when and where. You can also ring these numbers if you are unsure who your councillors are.

You can also contact councillors through their website: www.councillor.info/sandwell
Sandwell will mark the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee by taking part in a worldwide beacon lighting ceremony in June.

Thousands of beacons will be lit around the world on Monday 4 June to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II’s 60-year reign.

Sandwell’s beacon will be lit around 10pm on the Rowley Hills – our highest point – to allow people across the borough to share in the occasion.

Sandwell’s Mayor will attend the ceremony.

There is a long tradition of lighting beacons for big royal occasions, observed for the Queen’s Silver and Golden Jubilees in 1977 and 2002. Beacons were also lit in 1897 for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the first British monarch to reign for 60 years.

Sandwell’s Multi-Faith Network is holding a big jubilee funday with music and dance at the Multi-Faith Centre, Potters Lane, Wednesbury, on Saturday 2 June. Everyone is welcome from 10am-3pm.

Event co-ordinator Harmohinder Singh Bhatia said: “We wanted an event where all our diverse communities could come together to celebrate the jubilee and recognise the Queen’s role as monarch and head of the Commonwealth.”

The council’s museums service will be staging an exhibition of 1950s coronation souvenirs, and libraries will be holding their own events.

Meanwhile, staff at historic Oak House are looking to find local people who met the monarch 35 years ago when she visited West Bromwich. The council is looking to put on a small display at the house for this year’s jubilee.

Anyone who has any memories or photographs of the occasion is asked to contact the Oak House Museum on 0121 553 0759 or email them to museumarts_tourism@sandwell.gov.uk

To keep up to date with Diamond Jubilee celebrations in Sandwell, visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/jubilee
**What’s On in Sandwell**

**Wednesday 21 March**
Talk on Vesta Tilley
Council House, Oldbury
Talk, slides and music by Sandra Tyrell.
Time: 7pm arrival for 7:30pm start
Price: £2
For info: 0121 558 1857

**Sunday 25 March**
Sainsbury’s Sport Relief Mile
Sandwell Valley, West Bromwich
Sandwell Leisure Trust is organising this national fundraising event for adults and children. Whether you do it, 3 or 6 miles – as a family team, with your mates or against the clock – you’ll have a fantastic time when you go the distance. Come along and join in the fun at the beautiful Sandwell Valley Country Park. Book early to secure your place!
Time: 11am
Prices: £6 adults; £3 for children; £15 for family of four
For info: 0121 506 4980;
Sport’s Relief General Enquiry: 0207 820 2000
www.slt-leisure.co.uk

**Sunday 1 April**
Learn golf in a day
Warley Woods Golf Course, Lighthouses Hill
Come and learn the basics to begin playing the game of golf. Greg will cover putting, chipping, swinging and wood play.
Time: 10am – 1.45pm
Price: £25
For info: 0121 429 2440;
e-mail: golfshop@warleywoods.org.uk

**Sunday 1 April**
Easter Family Eggstavaganza
Sandwell Park Farm, West Bromwich
Easter Egg Hunt with a map – you’ll have a fantastic time when you go the distance. There is also a face painting, arts and crafts, and other activities such as an Easter Egg Hunt with a map and a roll for adults this year. For info: 0121 558 4783

**Monday 9 April**
Annual Easter Egg Roll
Warley Woods
Take part in the competition to roll your (hard boiled) egg as far as you can. There is also a painted egg competition and an Easter trail through the woods (includes a roll for adults this year). Meeting point: upper St Mary’s Entrance to the park on Barclay Road, Smethwick.
Time: 11am – 1pm
Price: £1 per entry
For info: 0121 420 1061;
www.warleywoods.org.uk;
e-mail: admin@warleywoods.org.uk

**Thursday 12 April**
An evening with bestselling author Sophie Hannah
Bleakhouse Library, Oldbury
An evening with Sophie Hannah, bestselling thriller writer – an event for the Sandwell Big Read 2012.
Time: 7pm – 8.30pm
Price: £3;
concessionary price: £1.50
For info: 0121 422 2798;
www.sandwell.gov.uk/libraries;
e-mail: bleakhouse_library@sandwell.gov.uk

**Saturday 21 April**
St George’s Day Celebrations
Manor House Museum, West Bromwich
Come along and join in the celebrations. Lots to see and do including re-enactors, falconry, music and craft activities. You can even have a go on the human wrecking ball! The Moorland allotment tearooms will be open, serving delicious food.
Time: 12 noon – 4pm
Price: FREE (there may be a small charge for some activities)
For info: 0121 556 0683

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**Wednesday 2 May**
Valuation Day
Manor House Museum, West Bromwich
Come along and get your items or antiques valued with Fielding’s Auctioneers. Who knows what you have lying around the house? There may be long queues….
Time: 10am – 2.30pm
(last admission 2pm)
Price: £1 per item
For info: 0121 558 0683

**Thursday 2 May**
History Story Sharing
The Pavilion, 101 Lightwoods Hill, Wednesbury
Come and find out about Warley Woods’ Oral History Project and listen to some of the stories we have recorded so far. Bring your own photos and stories about Warley Woods to share with us.
Time: 7.30pm
Price: FREE
For info: 0121 420 1061;
www.warleywoods.org.uk;
e-mail: admin@warleywoods.org.uk

**Tuesday 22 May to Friday 25 May**
Play, “Cut and Run”
by Peter Horsler
All Saint’s Church, West Bromwich
Hilarious comedy set in a doctor’s surgery in the present day. Dr Glow, an unselfish and naïve young doctor, is alarmed to learn that his NHS clinic has been hired out to Dr Boxclever, a private consultant.
For more information, visit www.the-public.com or call 0121 533 7161.
The Public, New Street, West Bromwich, B70 7PG

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**Sandwell Historic Vehicle Show**
Sandwell Showground, Salters Lane, West Bromwich
Through the ages, exhibiting classic, vintage and contemporary cars, motorcycles, lorries, buses, and military vehicles. There will also be a furthur giant inflatables and a craft for kids to have a go at. There will also be a market stalls and children’s activities. For info: 0121 429 2440;
e-mail: golfshop@warleywoods.org.uk

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**The Public**

**The Art of Architecture Exhibition**
Open Wed – Sun, until 20 May
Free entry, suitable for all ages

**Get Active and Dance 3 with Cultural Dance Fest (Dance Festival)**
Saturday 24 March & Saturday 25 March, 10am 6pm, £5 weekend pass or £3 per day, suitable for all ages

**The Laughing Sole – featuring Isy Suttie**
First Wednesday of the month, starts 4 April, 8.30pm, £8 advance, £9.50 door, suitable for 18+
The UK’s number one Kings of Leon tribute act. Support from Vault of Eagles.

**Now We Are (Music Festival)**
Saturday 7 April & Sunday 8 April, 1pm - 2am. Weekend tickets £15, Day tickets £10, free entry for children under 5, suitable for all ages

**Easter Holiday Activities**
Monday 2 April – Saturday 14 April
Join in the exciting workshops from creating and building your own model city and making fun animations to exploring micro world photography and much more. Don’t miss the comedy children’s theatre production ‘Tweeddy’s – Lost Property on 5 April.

**Half-Term Activities**
Monday 4 June – Saturday 9 June
Join in the fun-filled activities and workshops for the whole family.

**The Foundry Group Presents: Big Daddy V Giant Haystacks**
Friday 11 May, starts 7.45pm, £10 (£8 concession), suitable for ages 15+
A British Heavyweight Champion Comedy.

**Saturday Art Club**
Every Saturday, 10am-1pm, £3, suitable for ages 4+

**The Public Art Class**
Saturdays (fortnightly), 11am-2.30pm, £4, suitable for ages 16+

For more information, visit www.the-public.com or call 0121 533 7161.

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**What’s On...**

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