

Elevating our voice

**Sandwell Children &
Young People's
Engagement Strategy**

2026 - 2029



What is Elevating Our Voice?

Elevating Our Voice is about us – children and young people in Sandwell – having a real say in the decisions that affect our lives.

Adults in the council, partners and local services want to hear from us because we are the future of Sandwell. They want to understand our needs and make sure we help shape the services, policies, and support provided for us.

This strategy is a promise that:

- Our voices will be listened to.
- Our ideas will help change things.
- Our experiences will influence how services are designed.

By involving us, Sandwell can make sure our rights are being respected:

- Listen to our views. We have the right to share what we think (Articles 12 & 13).
- Help Sandwell become child-friendly by teaching us our rights and ensuring they are fulfilled (Articles 4 & 42).
- Build trust with us. Give us information that is clear, honest and useful (Article 17).
- Make services better. Ask us what we need so things are designed to actually help us.
- Help us get involved by providing more opportunities for us (Article 15).
- Make life better for everyone. When we are listened to, the whole community benefits.



How We Created the Strategy



Over 12 months, around 50 of us aged 10 to 19 took part in workshops to help design this strategy. We came from youth forums, schools, youth clubs, and from cared-for and care-experienced backgrounds.

Adults who support our voice being heard in Sandwell, like youth forum leads, school council teachers and child-voice champions, also took part.

Together, we:

- Decided what the strategy should include.
- Agreed how we should be involved.
- Discussed what “success” looks like.
- Designed what the strategy should look and feel like

Our Vision

“Sandwell will be a place where every child and young person will have the opportunity for their voice to be heard, respected, and makes a difference. Young voices shaping change.”

This means:

- Everyone Gets a Chance to Take Part - All of us, no matter what our background, age, needs or ability, can share views in ways that work for us.
- Our Views Count - Adults listen to us and use what we say to help shape decisions, services and policies.
- We Work Together - We don't just get asked for opinions, we work together with adults to come up with ideas, make decisions and create change.
- We Shape the Future - By involving a wide range of us, Sandwell can make better fairer decisions that deliver what we actually need.

Sandwell - What the Numbers Say About Us

Sandwell consists of six towns, Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Wednesbury, West Bromwich and Tipton. It is one of the most deprived borough's ranking 19th out of 296 areas



353,860 people
93,294 aged 0-18 (2024)



930 home-schooled
(DfE 2025/26)



39.9% are Christian
26.1% have no religion
(Census 2021)



880 are young carers
aged 5 to 17
1,635 are aged 18 to 24
(Census 2021)



1,365 aged 16-24 identify
as lesbian, gay, bisexual
or other sexual orientation
(Census 2021)



52% of young people are White
26.3% Asian
8.7% Black/African/Caribbean
8.6% other ethnic backgrounds
4.3% mixed ethnicities
(Census 2021)



93 Primary Schools
22 Secondary Schools
9 Special Schools and
Alternative Provisions



92 per **10,000** (816)
children are currently
in care (DfE 2025)



8,997 get special educational
needs (SEN) support
5,104 have an Education,
Health and Care Plan (EHCP)

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192 (1.9%) of 16-17 year olds not in education, employment or training (often called NEET) (DfE 025)



866 aged 16-24 asked the council for help because they were homeless (2023/24)



37.7% of families with children under 16 are on low incomes (compared to **22.1%** in England) (2022/23)



179.6 per 100,000 aged 10-17 entered the youth justice system for the first time in 2024



74.9 per 100,000 aged 0-17 were admitted to hospital due to mental health disorders (2023/24)



192.3 per 100,000 10-24 year olds were admitted to hospital for self-harm (2022/23)



Teenage pregnancy rate for under 18s is **0.61%** higher than England average of 0.56% (2022/23)

What Participation Means to us



Adults use different words when discussing our involvement:

- Consulting — adults ask us for views to help them understand something better.
- Co-producing — adults work together with us from start to finish.
- Participating — we actively take part in our communities.

To us, participation means:

- Having a voice.
- Having opportunities to get involved.
- Making sure all of us from different backgrounds are represented.
- Seeing our ideas turn into real action.
- Being heard equally.

How Participation Works in Sandwell

The SHAPE Programme helps make sure we are listened to. SHAPE stands for Staying Safe, Being Healthy, Enjoying and Achieving, Making a Positive Contribution, and Economic Wellbeing. It is run by a group of local partners who come together to form the SHAPE Strategic Board.

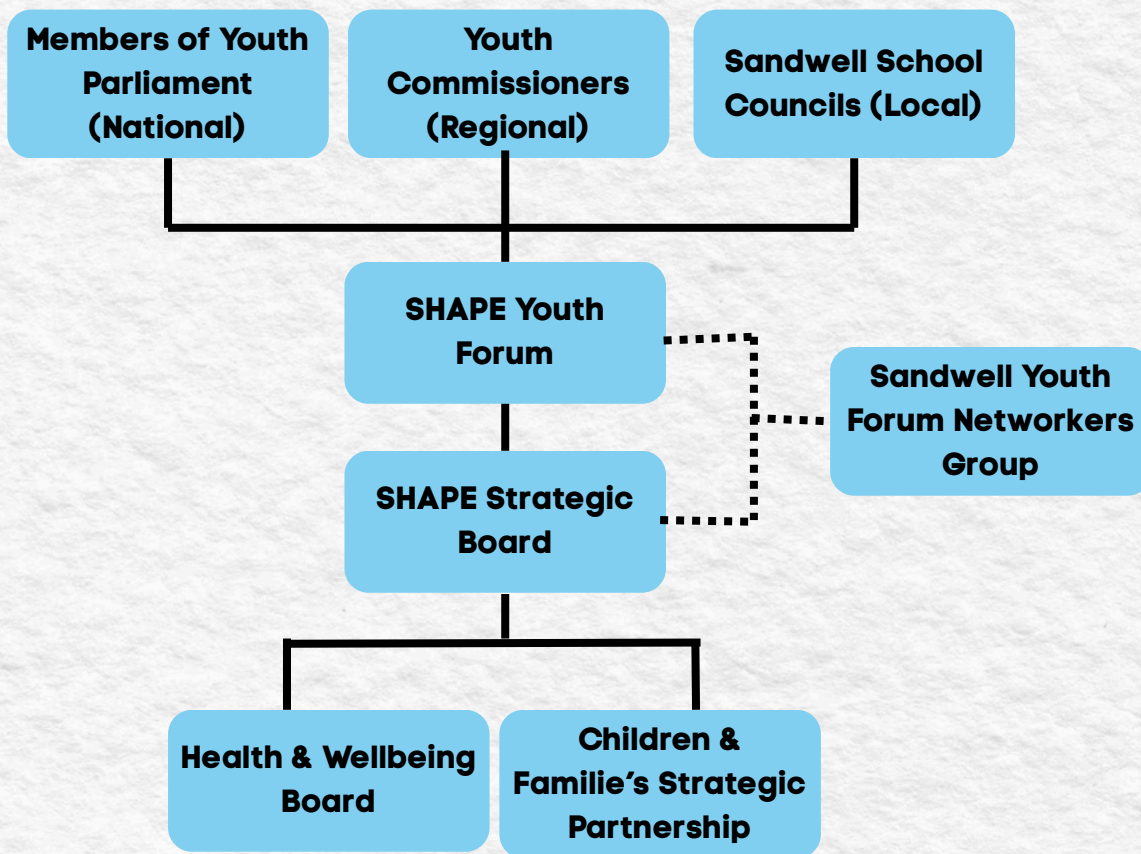
The SHAPE Youth Forum includes two Members of Youth Parliament, two Youth Commissioners, and young people from school councils aged 11 and above. They speak up for all us in Sandwell and beyond.

There are lots of other forums/groups where we can share ideas and help make decisions. You can find them at: justyouth.org.uk/join-a-youth-forum-2.

Sandwell Youth Forum Networkers Group are adults from across the borough who support us to have our voices heard. They meet every six weeks to share ideas and help more of us to get involved.



What Participation Looks like



How We Want Adults to Work With Us - The 5 “I” Principles

We have developed 5 “I” principles for adults to follow. The principles are our way of asking you to respect our rights and make sure you think about us in everything you do, every day.

Inform - Keep us updated. Be honest, open and clear about decisions and services that affect us.

Involve - Make sure everyone can take part, especially those who don’t usually get involved.

Invest - Put time, money and effort into things that matter to us, our activities, education, local areas and our families.

Influence - Let our voices lead to real change. Focus on positive ideas and make sure actions follow.

Impact - Show us the difference our voices make. Make us feel empowered, included, and aware of our rights.



Participation Standards



In Sandwell, adults should follow four key standards, based on the Lundy Model. Space and voice, allows us to express our views and audience and influence will ensure our views make a difference.

Space

- Provide safe and inclusive spaces for us
- Ensure we have the necessary support to participate
- Create judgement-free environments.
- Offer different ways to take part, online and in person.

Voice

- Let us speak freely without fear.
- Give everyone enough time to share our views..
- Allow expression through play, art, movement, behaviour and choices
- Work with adults who have built trusted relationships with us and can gather our voices.



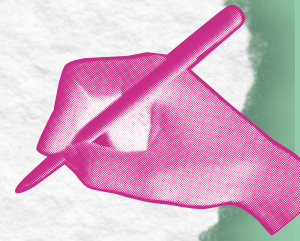
Audience

- Adults must listen with respect and without bias.
- Adults shouldn't influence what we say.
- Those listening should be diverse and inclusive
- Adults are knowledgeable in interpreting a range of communication methods.
- Parents/carers included in the process

Influence

- Our views must be taken seriously.
- Adults should act on our ideas where possible.
- If something can't be done, they should explain why.
- Show how our feedback has shaped environments, routines and spaces
- Keep involving us throughout the process.

“Elevating Our Voice” Our Model of Participation

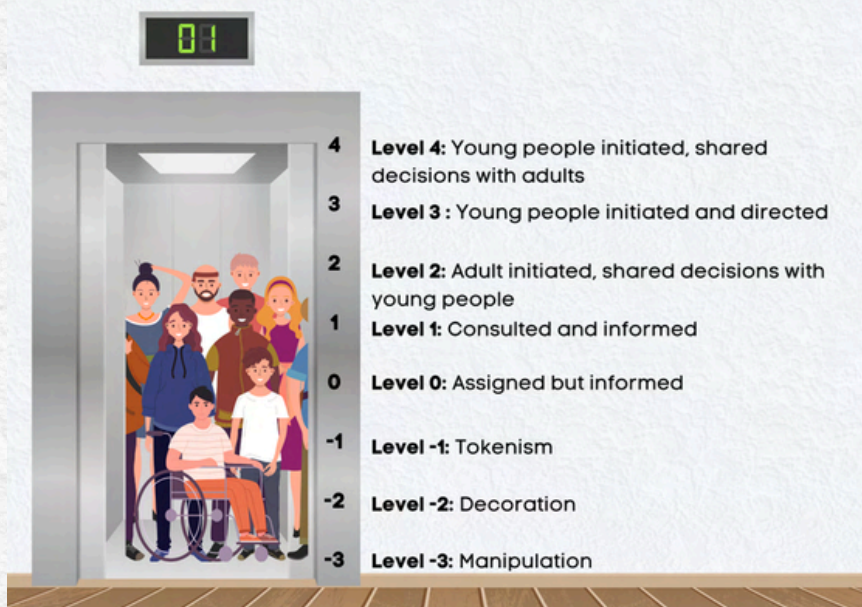


Why We Created Our Own Model

We wanted a model that reflects how young people in Sandwell want to take part.

So, we created our own version of participation, “**Elevating Our Voice**” inspired by Hart’s Ladder of Participation, which explains what real participation looks like, and what isn’t real participation.

- Levels – 1 to -3 represents non-participation (what we don’t want)
- Levels 0 to 4 represents real participation (what we do want)



We said the model should be flexible. Not everything has to be led by young people, some things (like legal policies or safeguarding procedures) must be adult-led. But we should always be involved when the outcome affects us.

How the Model Works

In our Elevating Our Voice model, you can move up or down the levels depending on the project. If adults get “stuck on a level, they can ask for support from “maintenance”, like the SHAPE Team or youth voice champions, to help them move to better youth participation.



Level of Participation Examples



Level 1 – Consultative (Adults ask us for our views)

Adults lead the work but listen to us to help understand what we think, what we need, and how something should be designed.

Examples:

- Surveys with us
- Asking for opinions on poster designs
- Getting our views about a new venue or space for us

Level 2 – Collaborative (We work together as partners)

Adults start the idea, but we help shape it. We have more power, more influence, and more chances to lead parts of the work.

Examples:

- Co-designing an arts project about social or environmental issues
- We share survey results with school leaders so changes happen
- School fundraising activities planned by both students and teachers

Level 3 and 4 – Child-Led (We lead, adults support)

We take the lead, make decisions, and run projects that matter to us. Adults provide support when needed (especially for safety), but we are in control.

Examples:

- We decide a wellbeing garden is needed in school, apply for funding and create it
- Planning the school prom
- Sandwell's Youth Commissioner developing the idea of Police Cadets
- Changing play spaces and choosing activities we like



Training and Skills - What We Need & What Adults Need

To make participation meaningful, we all may need certain training or skills.



Young people	Adults	Everyone
Learning different ways to express our voice	Understanding what motivates us	Communication skills
Public speaking	Team-building skills	Relationship building
Building Confidence	Presenting ideas respectfully	Presentation and facilitation skills
Leadership Skills	Being approachable & relatable	Social skills
Social action and campaigning	Ensuring venues and resources meet our needs	Grammar and vocabulary
Digital communication	Workingg effectively with those of us with SEND	Listening skills
Financial literacy	Awareness of a wide variety of engagement methods	Respecting differences
Advertising and promoting campaigns	Building safe relationships and understanding trauma-informed practice	Using artificial intelligence (AI) in helpful ways
	Creative and play-based activities	Understanding our rights
		Understanding what is and what isn't participation

How We Want Adults to Communicate and Give Feedback



Adults should use methods we actually use and understand, like:

- Social media
- The Just Youth website (www.justyouth.org.uk)
- SHAPE Youth Forum
- Other youth forums
- Schools and school councils
- Youth clubs
- Colleges and Sixth Forms
- Play Services
- Libraries, parks, leisure centres and other public spaces

We want regular updates in places where we spend time – online and offline.

Links to other useful documents

Elevating Our Voice connects with other important strategies in Sandwell that also focus on us.

These include:

- Sandwell Co-production Charter
(<https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/commissioning/commitment-co-production-sandwell>)
- Working Together Strategy
(<https://sandwellvoice.co.uk/working-together/>)
- SEND Co-production Charter
- Corporate Parenting Strategy
(<https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/childcare-early-years/corporate-parenting-strategy>)
- Sandwell Children & Families Strategy
- Sandwell Child Friendly Action Plan

These documents all support the same aim: making sure our voices are heard, respected and acted on.



How will we know we are making a difference?



Success isn't just about involving us, it's about proving our voices make a difference.

To show this, Sandwell Council will look at things like:

- How many of us take part
- What changes happen because of what we say
- Whether we get regular updates and feedback
- How many of us sit on decision-making groups and boards
- How well the Elevating Our Voice Action Plan is delivered

How We Will Achieve Successful Participation

To make Elevating Our Voice work across Sandwell, adults need to follow the principles, models and ideas we created together.

Here's how they will do that – and how each part links back to the strategy

1. Making Sure All Services Listen to Us

Linked to: Our Vision, 5 "I" Principles (Inform, Involve), Elevating Youth Voice Model (all levels)

Adults in every service will involve us in decisions by:

- Using our model to choose the right level (Consultative, Collaborative or Child-Led)
- Keeping us informed and involving us from the start before decisions are made
- Showing how our ideas shaped plans
- Services engage with us within decision-making

This helps Sandwell achieve our vision of "Young Voices Shaping Change".



2. Strengthening the Voice of Underrepresented Groups

Linked to: Youth Forums, Our Vision, Lundy Model (Space & Audience), Elevating Youth Voice (Level 3–4)

Adults will help grow and support:

- Existing forums across Sandwell ensure we gain leadership and development skills, increase confidence and represent all of us in Sandwell.
- The growth and expansion of youth forums across six towns in Sandwell
- A network of adult child and youth voice champions developed
- Under-represented groups are including vulnerable groups, young carers, care-experienced and faith communities
- SEND young people have the right support for their needs
- Cultural, language and identity are respected

This gives us more chances to be part of advisory boards, interviews and decision-making, especially Levels 2, 3 and 4 of the Elevating Our Voice model.

3. Giving Adults the Right Tools to Involve Us

Linked to: Participation Methods, the 5 “I” Principles (Invest), Lundy Model and the Elevating Our Voice Model

Adults will:

- Use tools and resources for all age groups, including those that find it harder to participate and get involved
- Be trained to use child-friendly language in communication, co-production, ensuring a safe and inclusive environment to support our needs.
- Use fun and creative approaches which work best for us

This means every service knows how to involve us safely, fairly and in the right way. Adults who are Children and Young People’s Voice Champions in Sandwell will support others to keep standards high. This gives us space and freedom to share our voice in ways that feel natural.



4. Giving Us Proper Feedback

Linked to: Lundy Model (Influence), 5 "I" Principles (Inform, Influence)

We want to know:

- What we said
- What adults did with it
- What changed because of our ideas
- What cannot be changed
- What happens next
- What can we do if we are not happy with the decisions made

Adults will give feedback in child-friendly ways: visuals, videos, social media, posters or summaries.

5. Checking What's Working (and What Isn't)

Linked to: Success Measures, Elevating Youth Voice Action Plan, Lundy Model (Influence)

Adults will use:

- Key performance indicators and Elevating our Voice Action Plan
- Learn from our feedback, through the SHAPE Survey, child friendly activities, consultation activities and events
- Case studies
- Impact assessments
- Reporting on progress through annual reports

This helps services improve how they support our voice and ensures our influence is real.



6. Making Our Voice Something That Lasts

Linked to: Our Vision, Participation Outcomes, 5 "I" Principles (Invest, Impact)

Adults will make sure our voice continues long-term by:

- Committing long-term resources
- Supporting Child and Youth Ambassadors and leadership roles
- Making participation part of business-as-usual
- Commitment to become a child-friendly Sandwell.

This helps create a future where all of us feel valued, seen and heard.

7. Celebrating Our Impact

Linked to: Our Vision (Young Voices Shaping Change), Participation Outcomes

Adults will celebrate our contributions by:

- Sharing stories on Just Youth, Go Play and Child Friendly websites as well as social media communications
- Recognition events and awards to recognise our active participation and involvement
- Showcasing our art, videos and recommendations

This shows the real impact our voices have made.



What Success Means for Us



When participation is done properly, we should in Sandwell should see:

- **Better services** - Services that fit what we need and want.
- **Better support for SEND** - More inclusive services that respond to those of us with special educational needs and disabilities.
- **Stronger communities** - we feel like we belong, can contribute and can make a difference.
- **Feeling valued** - Knowing our voices matter and are listened to.
- **Better decisions** - Policies and plans that are based on real experiences and evidence from us.
- **Reduced inequalities** - Making sure groups who are often unheard, like those of us who have disabilities, are care-experienced, and minority groups, get their voices amplified.
- **Better safeguarding and wellbeing** - When adults understand our needs early, they can support us sooner and more effectively.
- **Long-term benefits** - Early engagement saves time and money because co-designed services have better results and higher satisfaction.

Outcomes we will Achieve

Meaningful participation ensures:

- We are confident, expressive and know our voice matters
- Better-designed school environments
- Stronger relationships between us, our families and professionals who work with us
- Inclusive services that reflect our needs and preferences
- Early identification of support needs (social, emotional, educational)
- A strong foundation for long-term civic participation

Embedding our voices early supports the whole-life journey of participation across Sandwell.



Thank you

Thank you to all the children and young people who worked with adults to develop our strategy. Those involved were:



SHAPE Youth Forum



Sandwell Youth Service



NHS Youth Space



Wood Green Academy



Forum for Independent Young Adults (FIYA)



Unmute Us

Schools from West Bromwich Learning Community

