

# WEST MIDLANDS COUNCILS

Serving local authorities across  
the West Midlands



Update 2011

# West Midlands Councils supports, represents and promotes the interests of the local authorities in the West Midlands and the communities they serve

## Our Services

West Midlands Councils provides a range of services to councils and other public and private sector clients, including:-

- **Employer Services** HR advice, specialist consultancy and bespoke developmental support including executive appraisals, performance coaching, mediation, disciplinary investigations and interim management.
- **WMjobs.co.uk** our leading edge, on-line, end-to-end recruitment system.
- Talent management and development through the **West Midlands Coaching Pool; Accelerate** and **Catalyst** development programmes; and **WM360** services.
- **West Midlands European Service** helping organisations access European Funding to support economic growth, innovation, research and investment.
- **Newsletters, briefings** and **seminars** providing informed synopsis and commentary on significant national and local government policy developments.
- **Facilitated “safe-space”** for local authorities to work collaboratively on specific key issues.
- Modern **training and meeting facilities** and **serviced office space** at our Partnership Centre in Birmingham.



We face a year ahead which will include change, challenge and opportunity for local government. An organisation that offers space for authorities to discuss and take collective action is essential and whilst the name may have changed to West Midlands Councils the need to work together has not. In the West Midlands we have a fifty year history of collaborative local government working on the big issues and challenges. Further opportunities to work with our national and neighbouring colleagues and strengthen our voice in London are fast developing.

Being an Elected Member and Leader in local government is a privilege and an opportunity to make a positive difference to the communities who elected me. My authority, Staffordshire County Council has been a member of West Midlands Councils and its predecessor bodies for many years because we see very clear benefits for our communities of working with and learning from other local authorities.

Whilst West Midlands Councils is led by politicians, politics doesn't dominate our agenda – it never has done. Instead, the organisation focuses on the big issues and the belief that influence, savings and efficiencies can be achieved when effort, knowledge, intelligence and know-how is shared for the greater good. This isn't altruism, it's common sense that in these cash strapped times we should be working even closer together.

Individual authorities have their own priorities and challenges, but many of these are shared with neighbouring authorities or sub regions. On the issues that matter West Midlands authorities choose to work collaboratively through West Midlands Councils to articulate these shared priorities and challenges, and champion the West Midlands.

I believe that West Midlands Councils is uniquely positioned to provide a rallying point to secure a strong and coherent voice for local government and promote the West Midlands on a national and international stage.

We will continue to work on the principle that if there is no champion for the 'bit in the middle of the country' then there is a danger that the 'articulate south' or the 'organised north' gets all the prizes. There is real strength in numbers and unity and I believe we owe it to our communities to speak up for the West Midlands and the cities, towns and villages within it – if we don't, then who will?

**Councillor Philip Atkins**  
**Chairman of West Midlands Councils**  
**Leader, Staffordshire County Council**

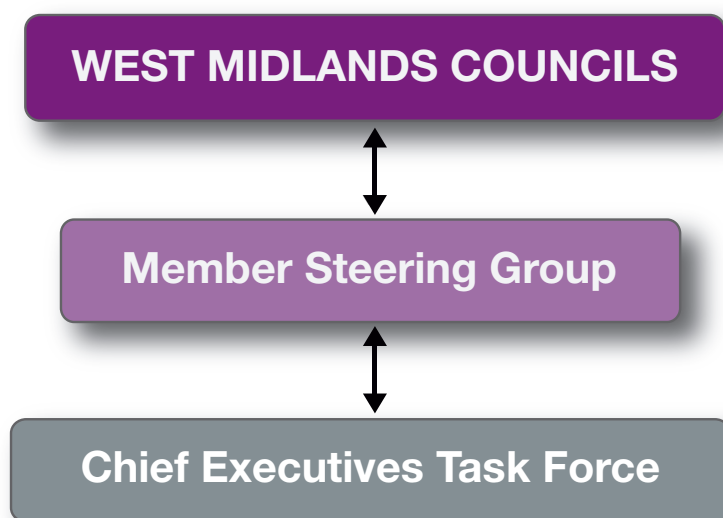
# Introducing West Midlands Councils

From the days of the West Midlands Forum, going back some 50 years, councils in the West Midlands have been coming together to tackle big shared issues and important cross boundary matters.

West Midlands Councils is the latest manifestation of this desire and need to work together. Belonging to and run by its members, West Midlands Councils supports, represents and promotes the collective interests of councils and the communities they serve. As such it aims to provide:

- a resource to enable, facilitate and co-ordinate regional, sub regional and local activity where collective working will add value.
- value added services to member organisations in support of organisational development and improvement activities.
- a focus for local authority activity and engagement to deliver against priorities set by West Midlands Councils.

Being member-led means putting the councils in charge, and the Leaders of all 33 councils in the West Midlands represent their councils on the Full Council. Advising the Full Council is a Member Steering Group made up from representatives from the three main political parties and a Leader from each of six sub-regional groupings: Birmingham; Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire. The Black Country; Worcestershire; Herefordshire, Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire; and Staffordshire and Stoke.



At officer level, a Chief Executives Task Force provides the advice to the leaders and politicians on technical matters of strategic importance.

Operationally, Staffordshire County Council is the host employer for West Midlands Councils staff, with its Chief Executive responsible for its overall running.

Although only created in the summer of 2010 as a direct response by the councils of the West Midlands to the new Government's agenda, West Midlands Councils is the latest in a long lineage of collective working. Unlike its immediate

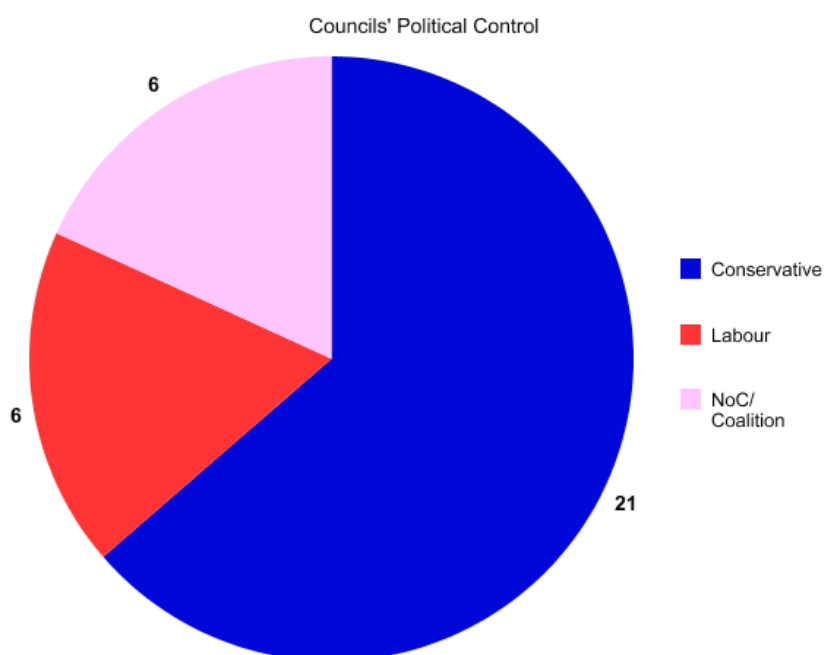
predecessors, the West Midlands Leaders Board and the West Midlands Local Government Association who received Government funding for activities associated with the defunct Regional Assembly, today's much smaller West Midlands Councils is wholly funded by member subscriptions and earned income.

## Politics and Collective Working

Collectively, councils across the West Midlands have long recognised the importance of collaborative working and the value of having a collective voice at a national level for the communities they serve.

This approach has been strongly supported over the years despite the varied shifts in the balance of political control, locally and across the West Midlands. As in previous years, this May's elections saw the kaleidoscope of control shift again. With the shire counties of Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire plus Shropshire sitting it out, there were inevitable changes to the political make up within the District, Metropolitan and Unitary councils that did have elections, although few councils actually changed hands.

Overall, the political make up of the West Midlands is 21 Conservative councils, six Labour and six with no overall control or coalitions.



As in the past, despite the changing colours of the political landscape, the challenges that cross council boundaries and affect the sector as a whole continue to demand a positive and meaningful dialogue. Indeed, more than ever in the current climate, both politicians and officers recognise the value of a safe space to think and work together. Essentially, that is why the councils in the West Midlands have chosen to work together.

Importantly, West Midlands Councils also provides a democratic framework owned by the councils themselves. This enables leading councillors from across the different authorities and

areas of interest to come together to network, debate, learn from each other and when they feel appropriate, come to collective decisions in their shared interests.

As such West Midlands Councils plays a key role in keeping councils involved and connected to each other. It also has a key role in connecting councils collectively to the outside world. The Chairman, for example, represents West Midlands Councils on the national LGA's Executive Committee, a position he holds due to his Chairmanship, while West Midlands Councils is also the nominating body for a range of external appointments such as the West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust Board of Governors and the LGA Inland Flood Risk Management Group.

More broadly, West Midlands Councils provides a shared home for a number of externally funded council facing projects and other partnerships such as Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands and the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership.

Councillors, Chief Executives and a wide range of officers from across all 33 councils in the West Midlands are supported by a Strategic Co-ordination Unit and an Employer Services Team who provide a wide range of flexible and bespoke activities and services.

## Strategic Co-ordination Unit

A fundamental part of the support provided by the Unit is its broad-based knowledge of the issues and policies affecting councils. This can be used in a flexible way to support councils whether they are acting as corporate organisations, policy-makers, in facilitating partnerships, or as direct deliverers of services. This support draws on the information and intelligence from across the sector and from the extensive and long-standing contacts and networks which the Unit has access to.

Using its experience and flexibility, the much slimmed down Unit is able to assist councils on relevant issues acting as a sounding board, providing informal advice or acting as expert witness on a range of policy and partnership related issues. It also acts as a conduit between the key free standing officer networks such as the Planning Officers Group and the Economic Development Officers Group, and West Midlands Council's Chief Executives Task Force and ultimately, the Member Steering Group and Leader level Full Council, helping keep the local government family connected on policy matters.

The Unit also maintains relationships with other organisations such as Sustainability West Midlands (SWM), Birmingham Science City as well as key individuals in the Government departments still present in the West Midlands including the Department of Health and the Cabinet Office.

A unique feature of West Midlands Councils is its ability to offer a shared safe space for discussion and neutral officer support owned by the councils which is dedicated to helping groups of councils to come together to get the best collective and individual outcomes.

As an example, councils are currently using this facilitated safe space for both councillors and officers to support their Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) work. To this end West Midlands Councils brought together council leaders and the LEPs' private sector chairmen for the first time. West Midlands Councils also continues to provide a neutral venue and light touch support for the officers leading the LEP work to meet regularly and discuss issues between themselves and when appropriate with relevant outside bodies.

Keeping up to speed on the fast changing world of local government is a real challenge. Giving leaders and senior officers informed synopsis and commentary on significant policy proposals and the changes affecting councils is consequently an important role for the Unit. West Midlands Council's Keeping in Touch Newsletter is the main tool for disseminating this information. During the first six months of 2011 there were 18 editions of Keeping in Touch each circulated to around 450 councillors and senior officers who share it with countless other officers and partner organisations.

Some of the major changes affecting councils require more in-depth support such as through the leadership seminars for leaders and senior councillors. Successful events in 2011 covered councils' new public health duties, the changes to the planning system and the implications of elected Police Commissioners. A forward looking programme is in place and revised regularly to reflect councillors' needs and emerging policy developments. The support given to the Chairman on the Local Government Association's Executive also comes from the Strategic Co-ordination Unit.

Importantly, when requested by Leaders or Chief Executives, the Unit also remains ready to engage with central Government and other partners on behalf of the collective interest of the councils in the West Midlands, and has, as an example been actively influencing the future targeting and operation of European Structural Funds.

With a full legislative programme in the coming Parliamentary year there will continue to be demand to support councils across the West Midlands by offering a neutral forum, a capacity for the critical appraisal and an overview of the proposals and changes affecting our councils.

The Strategic Co-ordination Unit incorporates the West Midlands European Service, European Social Fund Co-ordination and hosts the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership within its broad remit.

## **West Midlands European Service**

The European offer has been reshaped and its business base restructured to meet the priorities of members with its focus firmly on securing European funding opportunities for West Midlands' organisations. To make this happen the work done by the offices at the Partnership Centre in Birmingham and Brussels have been integrated into a single seamless service.

The Brussels office is also rising to the challenge of moving from the old subscription based model to a new fee charging one, working to some stretching income targets. Responding swiftly to this new business model, the office now hosts six organisations via service level agreements and in December last year the University of Birmingham launched its virtual office with a visit from the British Ambassador to Belgium and key speakers from the European Commission. The Brussels team continues to support West Midlands based colleagues by providing intelligence and early alerts about new funding streams and works closely with colleagues in Birmingham.

At the same time, the Birmingham office continues to support the development of bids for non-structural funds which require transnational partners. The Service's expert European Advisors have already assisted 576 proposals (worth €90.8 million to the region) to submission, 42% or 244 of these projects being successful to the tune of bringing €17.15 million to the West Midlands. In addition, 2,000 individuals have been trained by the Service and 49 SMEs have received detailed support, directly benefiting councils, partner organisations and the wider economy.

The current Birmingham based support programme runs until December 2011 and is funded by European Regional Development Fund, Advantage West Midlands as well as West Midlands Councils. Work is underway to extend the service by developing a new programme which would continue to bring new money into the West Midlands until March 2014.

A European Advisory Panel has also been set up bringing together councils and other organisations in the West Midlands with a shared interest in maximising the amount of money coming into the region. Already, this has developed links with other regional, European-focused, service providers and developed and co-ordinated West Midlands' responses to European Commission consultations on the future of Cohesion Policy and research and innovation funding. In line with this proactive approach, West Midlands Councils has also taken a leading role in shaping the new Local Management Committee (formerly the Performance Monitoring Committee) required by the EU to oversee the European Regional Development Fund and secure strong leadership from councils and Local Enterprise Partnerships.

## **ESF Co-ordination**

The European Social Fund (ESF) supports activities to tackle worklessness and help disadvantaged people who need specific support to gain employment. Funded by the European Social Fund via the Skills Funding Agency a small team is financed until the end of July to help co-ordinate councils' activities in accessing and shaping how £200 million worth of ESF is used in the region to meet local and sub-regional needs and circumstances.

The Co-ordination work initially supported councils in the West Midlands' unique Co-Financing Board arrangements between local authorities and the Skills Funding Agency for the development and delivery of a shared Co-Financing Plan. With the changes the new Government has introduced for the

way ESF is managed in the UK the focus is now on improving the flow of information and facilitating engagement with the service providers. Discussions are underway as to how this role will be carried out and resourced in the future.

## **West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership**

For over 13 years West Midlands Councils and its predecessor organisations have hosted the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership which has Home Office funding in place until March 2012.

The Partnership has a significant role with corporate partners at a West Midlands and national level in leading and enabling the development of effective operational and strategic responses to the needs of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants. In particular, the Partnership has made a significant contribution to the transfer of asylum seekers from local authority accommodation and supported the private sector during the recent "Transition Programme".

The Partnership continues to respond to requests from partners, national agencies and Government for information regarding migration and immigration matters and has developed detailed submissions to Government consultation documents.

During the last 12 months work has also been undertaken within the Regional Migrant Health Group to improve the collation and analysis of health data which can identify migrant populations. The Partnership is working with the Regional Public Health Observatory to provide a clear methodology for using and analysing migrant data sources in order to improve service provision.

Regular electronic bulletins provide policy updates alongside other important information. The Partnership is also working to increase the delivery of the refugee and migrant employment, training and education agenda in the West Midlands, with a view to improving the understanding of public and private employers of the 'right to work' of refugees and other migrants in the UK.

## **Employers Services**

The Employers Services arm of West Midlands Councils continues to respond to the changing financial and service environment facing councils. A team of four staff provide the longstanding Regional Employers Organisation role, working alongside our People and Leadership Team, who provide a range of programmes and services on a wholly commercial basis, operating as a trading unit but continuing to focus upon and work closely with local authorities and other public sector partners.

### **Core and Consultancy Services**

The Core and Consultancy Services team are effectively a shared service providing a range of cost effective support and services across the HR and training fields to meet councils' specific needs. The Service provides employment advice and support to councils in their role as employers. This includes giving high-level advice to support HR managers, Chief Executives and councillors as well as carrying out major projects such as the implementation of pay and grading reviews for individual councils, investigations and support on senior management reviews. During 2010/11 we also provided or facilitated over 120 days of bespoke training.

Expertise is fundamental to this, underpinning the Team's specialist HR and employment law advice on complex cases; its ability to act as a sounding board for the councils' HR community; and its independent and trusted advice to senior managers and councillors. This expertise is provided 'on demand' as support to officers and councillors.

Meeting the demand for these services has meant dealing with over 500 employment related queries during the last 12 months through our e-mail / telephone helpline and 'on site' support. These vary from short telephone advice to one or more days support 'on site'. Since extending the service this year to include teachers' terms and conditions, over 50% of all enquires now come from single tier and county councils. Member organisations are also kept up to speed through weekly HR Bulletins covering the latest developments on case law and wider employment issues targeted to the local government family. The Service also provides a networking and information sharing service for the HR community to benchmark activity, and share problem resolution and complex or sensitive information on a confidential basis.

Another facet of the Service is to represent the councils of the West Midlands with national employers, at the National Association of Regional Employers, and in relation to EU employment law issues. Within the West Midlands the Service co-ordinates meetings of HR practitioners; Workforce Planning, Learning and Development; and Member Development Networks. This has included leading region-wide groups to explore co-ordinated activity to develop and deliver a review of employment terms and conditions which deliver both savings and service flexibility.

In addition, the Team provides a conciliation and arbitration facility as Provincial Employers Secretary where authorities and unions are in dispute at a local level, whilst also maintaining positive working relationships with regional trade union colleagues.

## **People and Leadership Services**

In 2010, the successful People and Leadership Team returned to the Employers Services after three years under the banner of IEWM (Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands) where it was able to use over £1 million of Government funding to develop and consolidate its portfolio of services.

The People and Leadership Services support councils and partner public sector organisations to reduce costs and improve their services. The range of solutions on offer, are focused around: Achievement Based Development - to strengthen the management and leadership skills of employees and councillors; and Efficiency Based Resourcing - to get the right people in the right place for the organisation, faster and at a reduced cost.

## **WMJobs**

WMJobs is a leading-edge, web-based 'end to end' recruitment, redeployment and talent management service. Now with 23 partner councils, many are using it as a full replacement for their local systems. Getting over 7 million 'hits' per month, the WMJobs website is being further developed to provide a fully online Criminal Records Bureau service through a partnership with Capita and online psychometric testing through a partnership with a leading private sector provider (SHL). A redeployment website module has also been developed giving priority access to vacancies for 'at risk' employees, including a bespoke 'micro-site' providing information, support and guidance.

## **Accelerate and Catalyst**

Accelerate and Catalyst are two successful management development programmes. Over 200 managers completed programmes in 2010/11, with further sessions underway and targets for a further 200 delegates by the end of 2011.

## Regional Coaching Pool

The Regional Coaching Pool continues to provide an integrated service for participating councils. Through the Coaching Pool, supervision and support has been provided to over 100 trained coaches, 12 coach champions working within the 20 partner organisations and over 70 line managers attending Coaching Skills Gyms. In addition, more than 250 managers have received bespoke 360 degree feedback reports, and over 50 employees have been trained to deliver feedback on 360 degree reports, reducing the need for external consultancy.

## Core Skills For Members

During 2010/11, IEWM funding enabled the 'Core Skills for Members' programme to reach over 230 councillors through locally tailored development. Some 21 councils made commitments to achieve the West Midlands Member Development Charter, of which five were successfully accredited in 2010.

## Return On Investment

During 2011 we will undertake a thorough evaluation to evidence the return on investment, to ensure we are on track to help councils make over £3million in efficiency savings by 2014. Not only that, but expanding take-up of the service will generate revenue for West Midlands Councils, helping to subsidise further service provision and keep down subscription rates for councils.

All in all for 2010/11 the Service brought in £260,000 from individual service and contract fees and IEWM funding such as the £68,000 for the Core Skills for Members, sponsorship and commercial activities. Of this the Service exceeded its earnings targets with £172,000 from the equivalent to 500 days of consultancy. With the new slimmed down structure, the Service still aims to generate some £100,000 in 2011/12.

The Team expects to develop a wider commercial offer as part of a single employers' service. For more information see [www.wmcouncils.gov.uk/services](http://www.wmcouncils.gov.uk/services)

## Corporate and Business Services

This small team provides a range of corporate and business services to internal and external clients, as well as supporting the Strategic Co-ordination Unit and Employers Services Team. The Corporate Team manages the Partnership Centre facilities and is responsible for providing business and financial support to co-locating partners and those hiring West Midlands Councils' facilities, as well as providing financial management and administrative support to the projects hosted by West Midlands Councils. In 2010-11 these services contributed over £330,000 of income. Even though the occupancy of the Partnership Centre has been considerably reduced over the past year, the Team still has a target to generate over £136,000 of income in 2011-12.

Many of the organisations co-locating at the Partnership Centre have also undergone significant change, resulting in reduced occupancy levels in 2011. However, the Centre is still home to Business Voice WM, Improvement & Efficiency WM, WM Strategic Migration Partnership and more recently the WM Regional Youth Work Unit. The Centre continues to operate as a West Midlands hub, offering an affordable and flexible base to small organisations or regionally based projects.

These reductions in staff, co-locatees and general work programmes have created an opportunity for West Midlands Councils to now offer its modern training and meeting facilities for hire. Councils

are using the Partnership Centre as a preferred venue in Birmingham, and the Centre is now being promoted to a wide range of other organisations.

The annual subscription for Corporate and Associate Partners allows organisations such as West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service, parish and town councils, housing associations to keep up to date with local government policy and practice, and to access our wider range of services at discounted member rates.

[www.wmcouncils.gov.uk/thepartnershipcentre](http://www.wmcouncils.gov.uk/thepartnershipcentre)

## The Year Just Gone



Local Government has always risen to the challenges faced by the communities we serve, and this last year has had its fair share. Set against a backdrop of severe financial constraints, rising unemployment and low economic growth, local authorities have worked hard to maintain high quality services for their communities and citizens.

Despite significant change and rationalisation, West Midlands Councils continues to provide a focus for local government activity on behalf of its constituent member councils. This is through its much valued Employers Services Team providing tailored HR advice, support and commercially focused services, and the Strategic Co-ordination Unit a source of intelligence, support and discussion space for local authorities to come together to look ahead to and consider important legislative changes and critical issues of the day, and which also provides a unique European Service to secure EU funds for the West Midlands.

From 2011 Staffordshire County Council became the host employer for staff of West Midlands Councils, who remain based at the Partnership Centre in Quay Place in Birmingham. When the lease expires in 2013 it will be possible to reshape the organisation further and secure more financial savings by relocating the core team. Until then, the Partnership Centre continues to provide modern meeting and training facilities and serviced accommodation for organisations requiring a cost effective base from which to operate.

Leading Elected Members continue to commit their valuable time to reshape and direct their organisation. I would also like to record my gratitude to the remaining staff who continued to deliver to the highest standards over the last 12 months against a backdrop of substantial organisational downsizing and cost cutting, all necessary to secure West Midlands Councils future. Credit also goes to those staff that left the organisation during this process, as they too played a significant part in making the organisation the respected and valued local government body it is today.

**Paul Sheehan**  
**Chair of the WMC Chief Executives Task Force**  
**Chief Executive, Walsall MBC**

## West Midlands Councils Partnership Centre

offering modern meeting facilities in the heart of Birmingham



We have a range of air-conditioned meeting rooms, all benefitting from natural daylight and wi-fi capability. We are fully accessible to the disabled with on site disabled parking and induction loop available in room 1. All our rooms can

be set up and equipped to suit a variety of training and meeting needs, making it the clear choice for any type of event.



### An ideal location

Our fees represent excellent value for money for a city centre venue; we are in walking distance of Birmingham New Street and Snow Hill stations and within easy reach of the motorway network.

Parking on site is limited but there is on street parking and NCP car parks nearby. We also have on site cycle parking.

You are welcome to come and view our facilities and meet our team. We look forward to helping make your event a success.

**W:** [www.wmcouncils.gov.uk/thepartnershipcentre](http://www.wmcouncils.gov.uk/thepartnershipcentre)

**E:** [venue@wmcouncils.gov.uk](mailto:venue@wmcouncils.gov.uk)

## Where do I get more information?

**T:** 0121 678 1010

**F:** 0121 678 1049

**E:** [info@wmcouncils.gov.uk](mailto:info@wmcouncils.gov.uk)

**W:** [www.wmcouncils.gov.uk](http://www.wmcouncils.gov.uk)

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