Adoption of Housing Strategy Statement  
(Forward Plan Reference No. HO22)

Sandwell’s  
Housing Strategy Statement  
2012 - 2022
Introduction

Sandwell Council has a strong and unrelenting commitment to continuous improvement in housing conditions and housing services. There are now more affordable homes being built to buy, part buy and rent. More homes are now refurbished together with a quicker turnaround of empty Council properties. Despite the Government cutting the Decent Homes Programme the Council remains committed to improving all Council homes in the borough. The Housing Options Service continues to prevent households from becoming homeless in increasing numbers, whilst the number of accredited landlords and properties in the private rented sector continues to increase in number.

Despite all these positive advances there can however be no doubting that we face challenging times, particularly if we are to build further on the progress that we have already made. In all its dimensions the current financial climate now means that we have to operate in new and more innovative ways if we are to achieve our strategic objectives. However in light of these challenges I remain confident that the strong bond that has grown between our partners will ensure that our joint resources are used to maximum affect. Between us we can continue to share skills and expertise to enable the successful delivery of coordinated housing services to both support the housing and wider social and economic ambitions of the borough.

Councillor Simon Hackett
Cabinet Member for Housing
1. A changing environment for Housing

Since the adoption of the previous Housing Strategy (2008) there has been significant change in both national policy and economic conditions. Under the Localism Agenda, Council’s are determining more locally what their individual needs and priorities are. The findings of the Sandwell Housing Needs Survey (refreshed in 2010) demonstrate that there is an increasing shortage of all housing in the borough, especially affordable housing. The central challenge of addressing the mismatch between the supply and demand for homes in some of our communities and ensuring that there is the right mix of type for now and in the future remains.

Through its Housing Options Service, the Council has been very successful in preventing homelessness and reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation. However, the number of households presenting to the service has increased significantly in recent months. The downward yearly trend in the number of households owed the full statutory homelessness duty has reversed for the first time in many years.

The Sandwell Scorecard sets out the Council’s strategic objectives and delivery targets including those centred on housing. The purpose of our Housing Strategy Statement is to outline in detail our strategic approach to housing, the headline reasons that sit behind this approach together with our principal actions that will enable us to meet our targets in the Scorecard. To keep our Statement updated we will refresh it annually in each year.
2. Our Housing Vision for the Future

Launched in July 2011 the Sandwell Scorecard sets out both the strategic objectives and delivery targets in relation to all of the Council’s outputs, including those attached to housing. As a consequence our objectives are very much aligned with supporting and delivering the Council’s Scorecard targets.

Over the next three years Homes and Communities will focus its resources and energies on working with partners to deliver excellent front-line services that offer value for money. Our vision is that:

By 2015 the people of Sandwell will feel positively about where and how they live. Communities will have been supported and developed to improve people’s quality of life and the housing offer will have been enhanced across all tenures.

From a housing perspective, this vision will be delivered by actions that support to achieve at least one of the following strategic objectives:

- Making better use of existing housing
- Improving the quality of housing available
- Encouraging the building of new homes
- Protecting and promoting health, safety and wellbeing

2.1 Our Strategic Approach for Housing

Making better use of existing housing

We will continue to deliver actions aimed at making better use of existing housing thereby enabling more people year on year to access appropriate housing that better meets their needs. We will do this firstly by returning empty private sector properties back into occupation. We will also deliver actions that enable households in the social rented sector who are unsuitably housed to re-locate to more appropriate housing, in particular those who are:

- living in homes that are over-crowded
- living in homes that have been adapted for specific purposes and where the adaptations are no longer in use
- under-occupying their current property (including those directly affected by cuts to their Housing Benefit as a consequence of the Welfare Reform Act)
Our Housing Asset Management Plan also captures a host of ‘bricks and mortar’ plans specific to our local authority owned stock, aimed at maximising its potential to support meeting housing needs. These actions include converting properties for larger household usage, for example by completing loft conversions and converting one bedroom bungalows into two bedroom properties. We will review our Housing Allocations Policy to ensure that it supports and maximises the opportunities to deliver our actions to make the best use of housing in the social rented sector.

We will carry through the actions outlined above because we know that in Sandwell there are high levels of under-occupation and above average levels of over-occupation. The overall over-occupation level of 5.0% in the borough is well above the national level (3%) and nearly 20% of Council properties are under-occupied - just under a third of these are houses (3,800) under-occupied by two bedrooms or more.

With regard to empty properties, our Council Tax records tell us we have around 1,700 private sector homes that have been empty for six months or more – this equates to nearly 2% of the private sector stock. Empty properties are a waste of a resource, reduce the values of neighbouring properties and have the potential to attract vandalism and crime.

**Improving the quality of housing available**

We will continue to deliver actions aimed at **improving the quality of housing available** because we know that in the private sector as a whole nearly a third of homes are in need of significant improvement, with disrepair by far the biggest cause of decent home failure. Just under a third of these properties (around 10,000) are occupied by a household member who is classed as vulnerable. Disrepair is most prevalent in the private rented sector - a sector that has doubled in the last ten years. We also know that a significant number of households experience fuel poverty and that cold is the major contributory factor because of the poor condition of these properties.

We will improve the quality of housing by maximising the opportunities that will allow us to continue with and to develop actions that seek to improve housing conditions across all tenures. We will do this by:

- continuing to develop the offer to vulnerable home owners from the Home Improvement Agency including new equity release products
- raising standards in the private rented sector by:
  - continuing to develop our already successful landlord and property accreditation scheme - both landlord and property accreditation will
be a condition to take part in the Council’s Private Sector leasing Scheme.

- using our enforcement powers to tackle landlords who let their properties fall into disrepair and consistently fail to engage with us

- continuing with our programmes aimed at increasing the energy and insulation efficiency of people’s homes and exploring further the opportunities to achieve this

- exploring the full range of freedoms and flexibilities created by national changes to the Housing Revenue Account and to continue with our programme to modernise all council houses through the Housing Investment Programme

**Encouraging the building of new homes**

*Encouraging the building of new homes* will remain a key strategic objective because we know from the results of our Housing Needs Study that lower incomes combined with the re-structuring of the mortgage lending market has made housing affordability a major issue in Sandwell. This applies in particular to newly forming households, but also impacts on the ability of low income home owners to access funding to improve and maintain their home. The Council will therefore develop its own mortgage products to address both of these situations.

Sandwell continues to be well placed to deliver large scale housing-led regeneration programmes. As a local authority, we have an extensive range of investment experience and approaches to ensure successful programme delivery. We have recently secured funding through the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) with our partners for an ambitious programme to build nearly 3,000 new homes by 2015. At least 1,000 of these homes will be affordable to rent, part buy or sell.

We will continue to build more affordable homes and encourage the building of new homes by:

- delivering the HCA new build programme (as above) aligned with the extensive housing regeneration programmes currently underway in West Bromwich and Smethwick (Windmill Eye).

- maximising the opportunities provided through Section 106 planning agreements and generating income to the Council through national incentive funding.

- encouraging new build (including the building of Council housing) by identifying suitable sites and ensuring new homes are built to high design standards.
**Protecting and promoting health, safety and wellbeing**

Housing is an important factor in everyone’s lives, and to this end we recognise the integral role that it can have on improving health and general wellbeing. Housing led initiatives can contribute to improving skills and employment chances whilst ill health can be improved and alleviated by living in homes which are decent, adaptable and located in safe and supportive environments.

Within a housing context, we will **protect and promote health, safety and wellbeing** by continuing to build stronger relationships with our colleagues from Health, people services and other themes. We will do this with the aim to ensure that people receive the support that they need to maintain their own home and remain living independently for as long as possible, for example through the Supporting People programme. It is also important that where possible we work towards meeting the needs identified in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. We will also continue to:

- refresh and update our safeguarding protocols
- support people with disabilities by providing adaptations, and specially adapted homes within new developments
- improve the ‘housing offer’ to older people through Extra Care schemes and new homes to encourage downsizing with a particular emphasis on building two bedroom bungalows (including one bedroom conversions)
- reduce the number of homes in the private sector with hazards as defined under the Housing Health and Safety Rating system
- develop and deliver initiatives aimed at preventing homelessness as set out below.

**Homelessness Prevention**

In recent years, through its Housing Options Service, the Council has been very successful in preventing homelessness and reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation from a high point of 76 in 2006 to just 13 in March 2011.

More recently however the number of households presenting to the service has grown considerably, with notable increases in presentations from young people, private sector tenants, people experiencing domestic abuse and people in mortgage arrears.
To tackle these new and emerging trends, in the forthcoming year we will:

- review our Prevention of Homelessness Strategy and adopt the No Second Night Out Standard to tackle rough sleeping in Sandwell
- continue to monitor homeless trends in the borough to ensure our services remain tailored to meet local demand.
- carry out a full review of our Housing Options Service
- develop further our Private Rented Sector Leasing Scheme aimed at providing more decent affordable housing specifically to meet the needs of homeless people
- review our Housing Allocations Policy to ensure that it continues to support the ‘prevention’ agenda and continues to support households not owed any statutory duty and maximises the opportunity for households to move to more appropriate accommodation that better meets their individual needs.
- maintain the strong strategic partnership that we currently have with Supporting People to ensure supported housing is available to vulnerable homeless people
- support and contribute to a coordinated approach to advise and support those households directly affected by the Welfare Reform Act
- where possible discharge our Statutory Homeless Duty through the Private Rented Sector (as per the 2011 Localism Act).

2.2 Sandwell and the wider West Midlands Region

Sandwell remains committed to supporting the West Midlands housing agenda and has worked with the three other Black Country Local Authorities to produce the Black Country Core Strategy - the key strategic planning document for the sub-region to 2026. We will also commit to taking an active role on the regional West Midlands Councils Board which brings together all 33 West Midlands Councils to promote and support member authorities and influence policies which affect the economic, social and environmental well being of the region. We will also continue to have a lead role in procuring and co-ordinating the regional housing research programme.

At the sub-region level, we will continue to work in partnership with our partners to gain better efficiencies and enhance value for money. For example we will work with our Black Country local authority neighbours to produce a sub-regional Tenancy Strategy (under the terms of the Localism Act) together with the management of the sub-regional Homeless Black Country information website.
3. Sandwell’s wider Priorities

Sandwell Council works with many partners from agencies in the private, public, voluntary and community sectors. Partners have a long history of working together to tackle shared priorities and continue to contribute to joint actions towards delivering the shared vision for Sandwell, now expressed through the Scorecard. From a strategic perspective the Homes and Communities Directorate is fully committed with its partners to contribute to these priorities wherever it can. For reference, all of the priorities for action set out in the Scorecard are reproduced in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Prospects</th>
<th>Performance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our children: Sandwell’s future here</td>
<td>West Bromwich: Top Town here</td>
<td>Investing in businesses, people and jobs here</td>
<td>“The customer is always right” here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent care for adults here</td>
<td>Homes that meet people’s needs here</td>
<td>Activities for all here</td>
<td>Excellent people, excellent council here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing NHS, improving health here</td>
<td>Cleaner and safer streets, more recycling here</td>
<td>A better deal for Smethwick here</td>
<td>Getting the money right here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local people, local services here</td>
<td>Parks and green spaces to enjoy here</td>
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The Homes and Communities Directorate is also committed to improving Sandwell in a way that is fair across all the diverse sections of our community, and that listens and responds to what people tell us matters. We will promote local involvement and neighbourliness between our communities. We will also be efficient, and sustainable, preserving and recycling valuable resources, our natural resources and environment.