

Draft

Housing Strategy 2023 - 2028



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1: Introduction

This strategy sets out how we intend to address the key housing challenges and needs affecting our communities over the next 5 years. It sets out the Council's priorities and objectives for meeting housing need and working with tenants and residents to build sustainable and cohesive communities across the borough. Access to good quality housing is essential to the health, wellbeing and life chances of our residents and as such we will integrate housing in to wider strategies and plans.

The provision of good quality, affordable housing is essential for the health, wellbeing and life chances of people in Sandwell. By achieving the strategic housing objectives set out in this strategy we will support delivery of the commitments in the Corporate Plan 2021-25, specifically on the theme of 'Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods'. Under this theme there are a number of housing objectives: to make best use of affordable housing provision, to deliver new affordable homes that meet local needs and to make our own housing stock greener. The Housing Strategy supports the Council Plan by setting out more detailed plans for how these housing-related priorities will be achieved.

The draft Strategy has been developed in response to the Housing Needs Assessment produced in 2022 which sets out the data and evidence of housing needs in Sandwell. But data and intelligence have to be coupled with the voice of our residents and we will be consulting widely on this draft before finalising the strategy for adoption in 2023.

The strategy begins by outlining some of the national changes to housing, welfare and planning policy that have taken place in recent years at a national, regional and local level. The Housing Strategy is supported by and links to the Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, Climate Change Strategy, Housing Revenue Account 30 year Business Plan, Empty Homes Strategy, Asset Management Strategy and Regeneration Strategy but also other emerging strategies and plans where housing has a part to play in meeting the needs and aspirations of our communities.

The strategy identifies 5 priorities that are fundamental to delivering Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods :

1. Ensure we make best use of all housing stock across the borough to deliver the right homes based on housing need.
2. Increase the supply of affordable housing through regeneration schemes, council housing development and wider housing partnerships.
3. Ensuring current and future homes positively contribute to health, wellbeing, independence and quality of life outcomes.
4. Raise standards in all rented housing, including the private rented sector (PRS) and the council's own stock.
5. Work to ensure that current and future housing stock plays a significant role in achieving net zero carbon.

2: Sandwell's Key Achievements

There have been a number of achievements as a result of the previous housing strategy. Included in the progress made is the delivery of new affordable homes, improving existing homes, mitigating Climate Change and contributing to health and wellbeing outcomes. Our key housing achievements over the course of our 2012 to 2022 Housing Strategy Statement include:

- Between April 2012 and March 2022, we have delivered a council new build and acquisitions programme to offset loss of stock through Right to Buy and deliver the types of homes our communities need.
- Working with developers and partners to address the housing challenges Sandwell faces. Including the completion of major projects such as Woods Lane in Cradley Heath and Harvills Hawthorn in West Bromwich, adding 152 affordable homes to the borough.
- A home improvement and housebuilding programme in the heart of Smethwick has raised the quality of existing houses, developed neighbourhood amenities and built 228 new homes (including 93 affordable homes).
- The development of new extra care schemes such as Willow Gardens in Rowley Regis, providing 90 extra Council owned and managed extra care housing apartments available for affordable rent.
- Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) work carried out in housing stock across the borough. Adaptations across tenures included 3,064 council owned, 1,811 owner-occupied, 197 registered provider and 98 private rented properties.
- Awarded 552 grants for heating or boiler repairs and 101 grants to tackle urgent disrepair.
- Reviewed and produced Sandwell's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for the period 2022 to 2025. This will be actively monitored throughout the period.
- Continuing to strengthen our strategic partnership work across the Black Country through contributing to regional documents such as the Black Country Housing Market Assessment and Black Country Tenancy Strategy.
- Contributing Section 106 funding to the repurposing of empty apartment blocks in West Bromwich to provide 54 flats for young people under St Basil's Live and Work Scheme in partnership with Sandwell and West Bromwich Hospitals Trust.

3: Changing Context – Legislation and Strategy

Legislation and policies at a national, regional and local level all have an impact on the content and delivery of the Housing Strategy. There have been considerable changes to the national policy framework for housing and planning since the last housing strategy document was produced in 2012. The key legislation and policies that relate to this document are listed below:

National
Welfare Reform Act 2012
The Care Act 2014
Housing and Planning Act 2016
Welfare Reform Act 2016
The Housing White Paper 2017: “Fixing our broken housing market”
The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
The National Planning Policy Framework 2021
The Social Housing Green Paper 2018
The Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (Prescribed Description) (England) Order 2018
The Social Housing White Paper 2020
People at the Heart of Care: Adult Social Care Reform White Paper 2021
Levelling Up White Paper 2022
Social Housing Regulation Bill 2022
Regional
The Black Country Housing Market Assessment 2021
Black Country Tenancy Strategy 2021
Local
Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2022 - 2025
Sandwell Regeneration Strategy 2022 – 2027
Sandwell 2030 Vision: Corporate Plan 2021 - 2025
Housing Allocations Policy 2021
Sandwell Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) 2020
Empty Homes Strategy 2022 (draft)
Sandwell MBC Local Development Scheme 2022
Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan 2023-2053 (draft)

4: Housing Strategy Priorities

Priority 1 : Ensure we make best use of all housing stock across the borough to deliver the right homes based on housing need.

Background

Sandwell has a diverse and growing population with differing housing needs. In order to address the housing requirements of our residents we recognise the need to shape the distribution and allocation of housing and get more empty homes in to use.

This means helping more people to move to more suitable homes at key points in their life, termed 'rightsizing'. Our data shows that there are many people in our council housing who have spare bedrooms, many of whom are subject to the under-occupation charge. If we can improve the supply of suitable and accessible smaller homes in neighbourhoods where older people in particular feel safe and connected we may be able to help some people move to more suitable housing.

Conversely, there are many families in our stock who are overcrowded and are waiting for larger family homes. If we can help with downsizing we can release more of these homes for families in housing need, many of whom have been waiting for extended periods on our housing register.

Addressing the undersupply of suitable accommodation in Sandwell will also require support from the private rented sector because social housing alone cannot meet demand. As is the national picture, the majority of private rented housing is supplied at an unaffordable cost for many within the borough. This tenure is often not attainable to those on a low income and therefore consumer choices for households seeking accommodation in Sandwell are limited. We are also seeing some private landlords exiting the market because of increasing costs and requirements and we need to support private landlords to sustain tenancies, particularly for households where we rely on this tenure e.g. asylum-seekers and refugees.

The Council has identified empty properties as one of its key priority areas in relation to bringing housing in to use and making best use of housing in the borough. With around 3,500 empty properties currently there is considerable potential to increase availability and bring homes in to use. Empty properties are a waste of scarce resources and can detract from neighbourhoods by not being in use and deteriorating. By working with the owners of these homes and exercising our statutory powers where necessary we can address the most problematic empty properties and help free up additional homes to meet the housing needs of local people.

We also need to look at how we can minimise the time we take to turn around our own voids, in the council stock, while balancing up the need to achieve the Decent Homes Standard and ensure new tenancies get off to a positive start.

Objectives

1. Plan and deliver new interventions and incentives to help council tenants who are under-occupying move within the stock and make best use of social housing for those in greatest need.
2. Take a more proactive approach to bringing empty homes in to use through implementation of a clear strategy for education, support, incentivisation and enforcement.
3. Undertake a review of our voids process in order to identify efficiencies and deliver better outcomes for tenants with diverse needs.
4. Work with private landlords to maintain supply and access to private rented homes, particularly for residents on low income and from vulnerable groups.

How will we achieve this?

Plan and deliver new interventions and incentives to help council tenants who are under-occupying move within the stock and make best use of social housing for those in greatest need.

- Use housing benefit and discretionary housing payment data to identify households affected by the under-occupation charge (bedroom tax) and offer customised support to consider other housing options.
- Develop support packages and incentives to help tenants who wish to downsize to do so, in every case where an extra bedroom would be released.
- Review the Allocations Policy and Tenancy Policy to optimise prioritisation for social housing and make appropriate use of introductory tenancies.
- Work with Adult Social Care and Health to market housing options such as extra care housing at older people who could benefit from this provision.

Take a more proactive approach to bringing empty homes in to use through implementation of a clear strategy for education, support, incentivisation and enforcement.

- Monitor the level of empty residential properties across the borough and the length of time they have been empty – using council tax data and by encouraging residents to report empty homes in their neighbourhood.
- Where empty homes are identified, support the property owner to bring it back into use and/or take appropriate action making use of the Council's legal powers where needed.
- Over the next 5 years, bring back into use a minimum of 200 long-term empty properties.

- Develop a policy for offering grants where investment is needed to bring a property in to use which will then be let at affordable rent to a household in need.

Undertake a review of our voids process in order to improve the efficiency and deliver better outcomes for tenants with diverse needs.

- Review the end to end process, involving frontline staff and tenants to identify what works.
- Review high cost voids and how these can be reduced through planned programmes and intervention before a tenancy ends.
- Reduce void turnaround times.
- Clarify and revise the letting standard (including gardens) to offer flexibility and a positive start to the tenancy.

Work with private landlords to maintain supply and access to private rented homes, particularly for residents on low income and from vulnerable groups.

- Review private sector leasing and the potential for setting up a leasing scheme.
- Offer advice to PRS landlords around what is involved in being a landlord, including managing Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).
- Encourage more landlords to engage with the council to offer homes asylum-seekers and refugees who are resettling in Sandwell.

Priority 2 : Increase the supply of affordable housing through regeneration schemes, council housing development and wider housing partnerships.

Background

Housing development is an important factor in allowing demand to be met across all tenures and improve market flexibility. It is important that we achieve maximum benefit from any additional housing stock in the borough, by ensuring it provides the homes that people really need. Whilst the government's focus on home ownership will help some residents in Sandwell join the home ownership ladder through the First Homes scheme and shared ownership, there is also a substantial need for social and affordable rented properties for those that cannot afford to own their own home.

Close co-operation with Adult Social Care and Health, Homes England, West Midlands Combined Authority, registered providers and developers will help to ensure we are making informed evidence-based decisions to address housing needs in the borough, particularly relating to housing size and type, while also addressing the challenges of viability and site availability.

The housing market also needs to demonstrate flexibility to meet the accommodation needs of vulnerable groups. This includes building accommodation for specialist and supported housing to meet the needs of physically disabled adults, adults with

learning difficulties, autistic people and people with long term mental ill health in order to support them to live as independently as possible. In addition, meeting the needs of specific groups including families, care experienced young people, older people, Black, Asian and minority ethnic households and asylum seekers and refugees.

Objectives

1. Increase the delivery of new build council homes to 100-150 per annum.
2. Deliver a balanced mix of affordable housing size and type based on demand, particularly a greater number of accessible one and two-bedroom properties in order to address demand from the housing waiting list but also larger family homes where needed.
3. Improve the housing offer for other specific household groups, including people from diverse equalities groups, people who need accessible properties and Gypsies and Travellers.

How will we do this?

Increase the delivery of new build council homes to 100-150 per annum.

- Focus on larger strategic sites where volume is higher and unit cost makes the development of affordable housing more viable.
- Use the Housing Revenue Account to purchase land for development and build this in to the HRA 30 Year Business Plan.

Deliver a balanced mix of affordable housing size and type based on demand, particularly a greater number of accessible one and two-bedroom properties in order to address demand from the housing waiting list but also larger family homes where needed.

- Engage proactively with Homes England, registered providers and developers early in the planning process to ensure that new affordable homes respond to evidenced need and gaps in the existing stock with regard to size and tenure options.
- Work with partners to deliver a greater number of one and two-bedroom properties in the borough to reflect demand from the housing waiting list.
- Make sure our plans link in with overarching development priorities such as Sandwell's 2030 Vision.
- Deliver on schemes within the Regeneration pipeline such as West Bromwich town centre – the comprehensive regeneration of the town centre, an ambitious scheme to remodel the retail core for new housing, modern and dynamic retail, and new workspaces and public realm. This will unlock land for over 1,000 homes.
- Explore collaborations between the council and developers to prepare sites for development, using council acquisitions to drive development where appropriate.

Improve the housing offer for other specific household groups, including those from diverse equalities groups and people who need accessible properties.

- Explore options for making site allocations for specialist housing within the Borough.
- Around 50 units need to be provided per annum for adults with learning disabilities and autism – either provided from council stock or arrangements with trusted social landlords and housing associations over the next few years.
- Engage with partners in Health and Social Care to maintain an up-to-date picture of need and explore opportunities to address this through the development of the Housing Transformation Plan led by Adult Social Care.
- Work on Sandwell's new Local Plan to reflect housing needs and develop policies that support delivery of accessible and specialist housing

Priority 3 : Ensure current and future homes positively contribute to health, wellbeing, independence and quality of life outcomes.

Background

It is essential that homes across all tenures provide a healthy living environment that enables Sandwell's residents to thrive.

The population growth among adults with disabilities is projected to grow significantly over the next two decades. Sandwell will see increasing numbers of physically disabled adults, adults with learning difficulties, autistic people and people with long term mental ill health who require specialist accommodation to support them to live as independently as possible¹. This includes general, extra care and supported housing schemes.

With this in mind, Sandwell will continue to support independent living, helping disabled and vulnerable people to remain in their own homes where possible. Facilitating adaptations through the Council's programme, including the Disabled Facilities Grant, will allow residents to remain in their own home for longer, relieving pressure on local health and social care services. Improving and adapting existing properties also allows for better use of stock to reduce pressures for new development.

Where new stock is required, there is a pressing need to focus on prevention, futureproofing properties and securing sustainable homes for residents. Wherever possible, adaptability of new housing development should be maximised, through requirements for enhanced accessibility standards in Building Regulations. This will provide occupants with a home that they can modify relatively easily in the future should their personal circumstances change.

¹ Sandwell Housing Needs Assessment 2022 (HNA)

We also have major responsibilities around the health and safety of our residents, both in our own stock and in other rented housing. We are mindful that the cost of living crisis increases the risk of many residents being cold in their homes and of homes being damp as a result. The impact of climate change means temperatures can be higher and we therefore need to ensure homes can be kept cool in summer through ventilation and other measures. This issue is expected to be covered in the revised Decent Homes Standard once finalised.

In the wake of the pandemic more people are experiencing social isolation and mental ill health and it is important our services and initiatives identify people in need and offer support services to keep people well at home.

Objectives

1. Deliver appropriate adaptations to current homes, in order to maintain and improve the health and wellbeing of residents.
2. Incorporate better futureproofing and design standards to meet the needs of adults with physical disabilities and other disabilities.
3. Take a proactive approach to enforcement of the Health and Housing Safety Rating System in the private rented sector.

How will we do this?

Deliver appropriate adaptations to current homes, in order to maintain and improve the health and wellbeing of residents.

- Review and revise the Housing Assistance (Adaptations) Policy 2012 to provide more flexibility in the help we can offer to more people through the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG).
- Respond to new DFG guidance (issued March 2022) to help more disabled residents via technology in the home and measures to improve the warmth of their living space.

Incorporate better futureproofing and design standards to meet the needs of adults with physical disabilities and other disabilities.

- Consider access standards and the potential for supplementary planning guidance in the development of Sandwell's new Local Plan.
- Work with Disabled People's organisations and residents to identify what works and how council and other homes can be improved through adaptations but also how needs can be met through major works and new build.

Take a proactive approach to enforcement of the Health and Housing Safety Rating System in the private rented sector.

- Work with private sector landlords and representative groups such as the National Residential Landlords Association to raise awareness and support compliance.
- Take enforcement action in cases where the landlord is not responding to early intervention.

Priority 4: Raise standards in all rented housing, including the private rented sector and the council's own stock.

Background

The proportion of the Borough's housing stock that is private rented continues to grow and has overtaken social housing as a percentage of tenure at an estimated 26%. This growth, accompanied by the decline of social rented stock due to the Right to Buy policy, has resulted in the private rented sector becoming one of the leading tenures for addressing housing need across the country. We are committed to working with landlords and tenants to ensure private rented housing is accessible, secure, affordable and good quality.

Recent consultation by Government indicates that Decent Homes Standards will be introduced for the PRS in a further drive to improve quality in the sector. This is likely to give the council additional powers to act in cases where PRS housing falls below standard.

In terms of energy efficiency, it is recognised that a proportion of the private sector housing stock in Sandwell is of poor quality. This includes pre-1930s terraced homes with solid walls which have suffered from lack of investment as rented accommodation. 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.

But we cannot be complacent about the quality of our own stock and the need to comply with the current and future Decent Homes Standard. Social housing campaigners and journalists have exposed examples of poor quality and dangerous social housing across the country. There has been a rise in disrepair claims with tenants accessing legal support to challenge the quality of their homes and seek compensation where the social landlord is found to be liable. Many of these claims relate to mould and damp.

We are also aware of the risks associated with some exempt accommodation where unscrupulous providers claim high rent levels through housing benefit, without offering the level of support to vulnerable residents that should be offered.

Objectives

1. Raise standards in the private rented sector through education and awareness and enforcement action where necessary.
2. Review the condition of the council stock through a major programme of stock condition surveys and plan remedial action.
3. Monitor exempt accommodation in the borough and implement actions to raise standards where necessary.

How will we achieve this?

Raise standards in the private rented sector through education and awareness and enforcement action where necessary.

- Grow and embed the Private Rented Sector Secure and Sustain model.
- Explore the feasibility of a Social Lettings Agency model.
- Gather intelligence through tenant contacts, intelligence from the public and HMO licensing schemes to target interventions at poor quality housing.
- Ensure compliance with the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard (MEES) Regulations.
- Review the evidence base for additional and selective licensing, building on our experience in West Bromwich.

Review the condition of the council stock through a major programme of stock condition surveys and plan remedial action.

- Gain a comprehensive picture of the quality of the stock in order to inform repairs and programmes of work to upgrade and refurbish the stock.
- Achieve EPC C as minimum in all council homes by 2030.
- Develop an Asset Management Strategy to detail how we plan to improve the stock over the next 10 years.
- Act on disrepair claims by inspecting properties and taking timely remedial action.
- Involve tenants and leaseholders and their representative bodies in plans to improve the stock and identify actions related to housing quality in the tenant satisfaction survey.

Monitor exempt accommodation in the borough and implement actions to raise standards where necessary.

- Monitor the quality of commissioned exempt (supported) accommodation and work with providers to address any issues.
- Use housing benefit data to monitor other exempt accommodation in the borough and seek resident feedback on their experiences and the quality of the housing and support offered.

Priority 5 : Work to ensure that current and future housing stock plays a significant role in achieving net zero carbon.

In 2020 the Council declared a climate emergency and published its Climate Change Strategy. Housing plays a key role in this document due to its strong environmental impact, in particular through energy consumption:

- In the case of domestic energy costs, the annual spend on energy is significantly higher than elsewhere because of the poor overall quality of domestic buildings.
- Fuel poverty is a significant issue in many areas (this is largely driven by the quality of existing housing and the income of residents). However, Sandwell is amongst the worst 10% of UK local authorities for incidence of fuel poverty.

Sandwell's industrial heritage has left it with a densely populated built environment; a complicated mixture of domestic properties, commercial activities and the public estate. This Strategy interlinks with a number of other plans towards an outcome where everyone has a home that is safe, secure, affordable, accessible and suitable and is able to make a positive contribution to climate change.

For some years Sandwell has been carrying out energy efficiency improvements to the Council's own stock, including double glazing, loft insulation and cavity wall insulation. In addition, Sandwell has recently undertaken a Warm Homes funded project for the replacement of outmoded electric storage heaters with more efficient gas wet central heating systems.

We estimate that up to 50% of the council stock is below EPC C. However, EPC is only part of the shift towards net zero carbon and we estimate that £600m of capital investment is needed to fully retrofit the stock. We have accessed funding through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, but much more external funding will be needed if we are to fully transform the stock.

Our new build programme has delivered on average 70 council homes per annum over the last few years with the majority being built to EPC B standard and all being above C rating.

An ambitious approach is needed, to achieve enhanced energy standards for new homes, and encourage widespread use of technologies needed to decarbonise Sandwell's housing stock. As part of this, new council housing needs to incorporate more renewable energy measures and use modern methods of construction, within financial constraints.

Our tenants directly experience the impacts of climate change e.g. greater fluctuations in air temperature, poor air quality and extreme weather. The neighbourhood as well as the housing itself needs to be looked at in order to mitigate climate change and improve life expectancy and quality of life.

Objectives

1. Improve the energy efficiency of existing council housing stock and reduce the carbon footprint of Housing services.

2. Contribute to reduced carbon emissions within future housing developments and refurbishment programmes, ensuring higher levels of energy efficiency and making use of alternative technologies to decarbonise housing across the borough.
3. Access external funding to upgrade the existing stock and help home owners improve the energy efficiency of their homes.
4. Implement initiatives to support tenants and residents with the shift to net zero carbon.

How will we achieve this?

Improve the energy efficiency of existing council housing stock and reduce the carbon footprint of Housing services.

- Continue the retrofit programme using HRA investment and by drawing down external funds to support this.
- Fast track homes for improvement where there is a disabled, older person or vulnerable person in the home.
- Plan the replacement of diesel vehicles in Housing through installation of electric vehicle (EV) charging points and a phasing in of EVs.

Reduce carbon emissions within future housing developments and refurbishment programmes, ensuring higher levels of energy efficiency and making use of alternative technologies to decarbonise housing across the borough.

- Follow guidance from the WMCA Housing and Health design principles and WMCA Design Charter within future housing developments.
- Ensure planning policies, building regulations and partnership working with registered providers and developers deliver a broad range of housing, supporting the council's climate goals, and meeting local needs.
- Deliver refurbishment of Darley House which includes heat source pumps, replacing existing heating systems.

Access external funding to upgrade the existing stock and help home owners improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

- Submit bid to retrofit 600 more council homes under SHDF wave 2.
- Access regional project to prioritise and help a number of homeowners to access retrofit funding and works.

Implement initiatives to support tenants and residents with the shift to net zero carbon.

- Implement measures such as promoting active travel in new and existing housing developments and integrating EV charging points.
- Improve access to recycling facilities for tenants, particularly those in high rise flats where only 40% of blocks have such facilities.

- Work with tenants' and residents' groups and the voluntary and community sector to identify impacts of climate change and plan mitigations.
- Preserve green space wherever possible on our estates.
- Measure tenant satisfaction with their neighbourhoods and set actions for improvement.