

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

Thursday 3rd July 2025 at 6.00pm, Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury, B69 3DB

Present: Councillor Lewis (Chair)

<p>Councillors: Dhatt (Vice-Chair), A Singh, J Giles, Khan, Jeffcoat</p>	<p>Councillors: W Gill, Mayo & Millard. Ms Philpe Brown (Chair- Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group)</p>
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Apologies: Councillor Crompton

Also present: Councillors Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing) & Kordala.

Nigel Collumbell (Assistant Director- Housing Management), Sarah Ager (Assistant Director- Asset Management), Alan Lunt (Executive Director-Place), Alan Martin (Business Manager Housing Partnerships) & Sue Smith (Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

40/25 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

41/25 **Minutes**

Resolved that confirmation of the minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2025, is deferred to a future meeting of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

42/25 **Urgent Additional Items of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

Housing Improvement and Transformation Plan Update

Further to Minute Nos. 36/24 (meeting held on September 2024), 45/24 (meeting held on 5 December 2024) and 5/25 (meeting held on 6 February 2025) and 34/25 (29 April 2025) the Assistant Director for Asset Management presented the quarterly update on the Housing Improvement and Transformation Plan (HITP), outlining progress made during the reporting period.

Overall the programme remained on track. A total of 14 actions had been successfully completed since the last update. Members noted those actions that were off track:-

- the procurement of the new IT system had experienced a delay, having commenced three months later than originally scheduled;
- engagement of a third-party assurance partner was delayed due to the late confirmation from the Consultancy Panel, which impacted the start of procurement activities;
- the Communication Plan was slightly behind schedule; however, progress was expected to accelerate following the onboarding of dedicated resources;
- communication of policy and process in respect of complaints was now a priority area for action following the engagement of additional communication resources.

The Board noted the key milestones achieved since the last report:

- a contractor, Sedens, had been appointed to address the backlog of repairs;
- a digital record of Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR) remedial works had been developed, which was a significant milestone, as the absence of such records had contributed to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) issuing the Council with a 'C3' Regulatory Judgement (RJ);
- the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Review was progressing positively, with the first Member Panel convened to consult on operating principles and the first training session delivered for ASB Case Officers;
- tenant engagement activities had also advanced considerably:
 - the website had been updated to promote greater tenant participation;
 - multiple consultation sessions had been held with tenants regarding policy amendments and development;

- a Task & Finish Group had been established to co-produce a new Tenant Engagement Strategy;
 - recruitment was underway for the Tenant & Leaseholders Service Group, following the expiry of several terms of office;
 - a Building Safety Forum had been established;
 - planning was in progress for a Tenant Conference themed “Being a good neighbour – we all have a part to play.”
- the first tenant newsletter had been issued, reaching approximately 17,000 residents.

There had been a small decrease in performance in relation to gas safety checks, with those properties that were non-complaint being as a result of the Council being unable to access the property. The legal process to gain access had commenced, however alternative options would be explored with Leadership Team, including forced entry, to ensure a 100% compliance rate.

The Board was informed that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) related to the Quality and Consumer Safety Standard—the area that led to the ‘C3’ RJ—were generally moving in a positive direction. However, some indicators, such as those related to Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) category one cases (those involving damp and mould), were moving in a negative direction. The Assistant Director clarified that this decline was anticipated, as the service was actively addressing older, unresolved cases, which would temporarily impact performance metrics before improvements became evident.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made:-

- a percentage target for the Stock Condition Survey had been established to enable the Board to effectively scrutinise performance against measurable outcomes;
- current practice was to attempt access to properties three times to carry out works;
- while there was no fixed date for Leadership Team’s decision in relation to completing safety compliance checks, its purpose remained to seek support for the implementation of a forced entry approach in cases where properties were non-compliant with gas safety requirements;
- tenancy agreements required tenants to provide access to their properties for essential checks, and the Council retained a range of legal and non-legal remedies to gain access where it was denied;
- the contractor Sedens, appointed to address the housing repairs backlog, had been given a 12-month timeframe from the date of appointment to complete the required works and key performance indicators were in the process of being finalised;

- a data cleansing exercise had significantly improved the accuracy of repair data and enabled a more strategic approach to managing the backlog. Although the contract allowed for a 12-month delivery period, there was an expectation that a substantial portion of the backlog would be resolved earlier;
- no firm deadline had been set for the end of the mobilisation period of the contract; however, assurance was provided that appointments were being scheduled with residents;
- the contractor was fully on board and ready to commence work, with the contract undergoing final legal processes;
- a period of dual reporting was planned until the new compliance system was fully embedded and robust, during which legacy systems would continue to operate, supported by audit checks to ensure data accuracy and additional assurance would be provided by the third-party assurance partner;
- the current Job Manager (JM) legacy system would eventually be retired;
- the contractor was required to adhere to the same specifications as internal repair teams and spot checks and work audits were in place to ensure compliance and maintain confidence in service delivery;
- system integration was identified as a priority for the new IT system, with a strong emphasis on enhancing the customer experience;
- July 2025 was the target date for carrying out 100% asbestos compliance checks;
- key risks to the overall HITP were staff capacity, morale, and external changes within the housing sector;
- policies, procedures, and governance structures were in place to prevent the recurrence of future backlogs;
- different communication methodologies would be used based on the target audience and the information being conveyed.

Resolved that, in accordance with Part 2.7 of the Council's Constitution, the duration of the meeting is extended by 1.5hrs.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Assistant Director- Asset Management create and share with the Board a briefing note on the Duty to Protect, Duty to Care and associated requirements for tenants of Sandwell Council;
- (2) that the Board is notified of any breaches in relation to performance on the contracts awarded to Sedens (housing repairs backlog) and Bradleys (asbestos compliance checks);
- (3) that all future reports to the Board by exception contain details of resourcing capacity, staff morale and retention including those who take retirement;
- (4) that a note on the communications plan for HITP is shared with residents, elected members and the wider community;
- (5) that the Board is provided with a briefing note on the apprenticeship scheme and apprenticeship levy;
- (6) that the Board is notified when the work by Sedens to clear housing repairs backlog begins;

- (7) that the Board is provided with a list of housing operatives by trade, the number of inspectors, the number of interim positions and the number of vacant posts;
- (8) that the Board is given oversight of audit checks carried out by Sandwell staff on the work of Bradleys and Sedens to ensure standards are the same as those jobs completed by internal staff and the same policies are adhered to;
- (9) that an update is provided to the Board at the end of July 2025 on compliance in relation to asbestos checks, incorporating the status of asbestos in dwellings and communal areas.

44/25

Work Programme 2025/26

The Board received its proposed work programme for 2025/26 for approval.

The work programme had been developed following a public consultation exercise from 4 April to 9 May 2025, along with consultation with chief officers and cabinet members.

It was noted that the Board's review "Bringing Communities Together" would continue into 2025/26 and the Board was asked to re-appoint councillors A Singh and Jeffcoat to the working group leading this review.

The Board was also asked to appoint two members to a working group to explore options for the future management of leisure services.

Resolved:-

- 1) that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Board Work Programme for the municipal year 2025/26 is approved;
- 2) that councillors Lewis and Millard are appointed to a working group established to explore options for leisure management;
- 3) that councillors Jeffcoat and A Singh are appointed to the working group to continue the scrutiny review "Bringing Communities Together".

45/25

Council House New-Build and Acquisitions Programme

The Business Manager for Housing Partnerships presented a comprehensive report detailing the Council's new-build housing and acquisitions programme. The report reflected over a decade of strategic effort by Sandwell Council to respond to an increasingly complex and evolving housing landscape at both national and local levels.

The report provided a retrospective review of the Council's housing development and acquisitions activity since the programme's inception in

2015, while also outlining a forward-looking strategy to meet the housing needs of Sandwell residents.

The Government had announced a target to deliver 1.5 million additional homes by 2029, supported by a £39 billion affordable and social housing programme launched in June 2025. These developments presented both opportunities and challenges for local authorities such as Sandwell, particularly in light of limited land availability and increased infrastructure pressures.

Locally, housing demand continued to exceed available land supply. The Sandwell Local Plan identified capacity for approximately 10,000 new homes by 2041, against an estimated need of 26,000 homes, resulting in a projected shortfall of 16,000 homes. This underscored the urgency of adopting a proactive and strategic approach to delivering affordable and council housing.

Since 2015, the Council had delivered 573 new council homes through direct construction across 23 sites, including landmark developments such as Oxford Road- West Bromwich, Carrisbrooke Close- Wednesbury, and Moor Lane- Rowley Regis, which included specialist housing provision. Additional homes had been secured through targeted 'off-plan' acquisitions, particularly where purchases helped unlock or accelerate wider regeneration schemes. This approach balanced market opportunities with social housing needs.

Progress had not been without challenges. Issues such as viability constraints, land contamination, and funding delays had frequently impacted delivery timelines. As brownfield land options diminished, the Council responded with robust pipeline management, the designation of key regeneration areas (including Grove Lane in Smethwick, Friar Park in Wednesbury, and Brandhall in Oldbury), and collaborative master planning with strategic partners such as Homes England and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

Alternative delivery models were also explored, including the establishment of a Council-owned development company. However, following rigorous financial analysis, this option was deemed unviable. Consequently, Sandwell's strategy focused on pragmatic delivery through acquisitions, partnerships, targeted investments, and leveraging Section 106 funding opportunities.

The programme's emphasis extended beyond quantity to quality and suitability, with a focus on delivering modern, energy-efficient, and adaptable homes that met evolving resident needs. Significant investment had been made in accessible housing and the creation of sustainable communities.

Looking ahead, the programme was expected to continue drawing on Housing Revenue Account (HRA) resources, Right to Buy replacement receipts, and strategic grant funding. However, the Council acknowledged the need to remain agile in response to potential policy

changes, particularly regarding Right to Buy receipts by March 2026, to ensure continued momentum in both delivery and innovation.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made:

- the Council had actively explored three to four storey flatted accommodation design archetypes, with at least two schemes already incorporating this type of housing;
- a 'continental' style flatted accommodation design was being considered for town centre developments, including the scheme in Tipton Town Centre, which was funded through the Towns Fund;
- in relation to Right to Buy (RTB) receipts, the Council had five years from the point of sale to utilise the funds, however, legislative changes introduced in 2024, which reduced the available discount, had led to a surge in applications (1,800) prior to the cut-off date of 23 November 2024 and consequently the Council was uncertain how many of these applications would be successful and what proportion would translate into RTB receipts;
- it was anticipated that RTB rates would decline in future years due to the reduced discount;
- the Council was able to use 100% of RTB receipts for new housing acquisitions, however this would no longer be the case from March 2026 and there had been no indication from Government regarding its replacement;
- the reduction in housing unit delivery during the 2024/25 financial year was attributed to contractual delays, although all units were originally scheduled for delivery by March 2025, not all were completed within that timeframe. Some of the delayed units had since been delivered but were not included in the 2024/25 figure;
- the main causes of delay in build contracts included unknown ground conditions, delays involving statutory bodies such as the Environment Agency and Canals and Rivers Trust, legal issues with adjoining landowners, adverse weather, and financial difficulties faced by contractors- most of which were outside the Council's control;
- the Council would explore all available funding avenues, although no specific details were available regarding the Government's proposed National Housing Bank;
- the a Cabinet would be considering the Council's housing new-build and acquisition pipeline in September/October 2025;
- all new builds and acquisitions were offered to Sandwell residents on the housing waiting list, in accordance with the Sandwell Allocations Policy;
- the potential use of grey belt land had been considered within the Sandwell Local Plan and would continue to be assessed by the Council's Strategic Planning Team. Any future proposals for grey belt development would be subject to consultation and formal approval of the Sandwell Local Plan;
- buybacks formed part of the Council's acquisition strategy, and clarification was given on the implications of buybacks for RTB receipts;
- smaller sites were made available to Sandwell-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), while larger sites were procured

through framework agreements and frameworks ensured that contractors met the necessary pre-qualification standards required for larger-scale developments.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Board receives a report on the current and future efforts to build the right homes and sustainable communities combining 'continental' apartment style living with businesses and promoting family accommodation with four to five storey apartment buildings;
- (2) that the Board is provided with a briefing note on the new National Housing Bank and other funding sources for council house building;
- (3) that the Board receives a report on the buybacks of Council houses and any other houses including details on the council's use of the practice including officer resourcing and buyback to let;
- (4) that the Board is provided details on the alternative strategies such as partnerships with private developers, modular housing being explored to accelerate building of new council housing.

Meeting ended at 8.50pm, with adjournments at 7.22pm-7.51pm & 8.33pm-8.48pm.