

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

20 January 2026 at 6.07pm at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Lewis (Chair).

<p>Councillors: Dhatt (Vice- Chair) Crompton J Giles Jeffcoat</p>	<p>Councillors: Khan Kordala A Singh</p>
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Also present: Councillor Smith (Cabinet Member for Housing).

In attendance: Ann- Marie Docker Chair – (Sandwell Information and Participation Service), Jan Macmillan (Chief Executive – Sandwell Information and Participation Service), Sue Smith (Sandwell Council Tenant, Tenant Engagement Strategy Task and Finish Group and Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service Board Member), Stephanie Thomas (Sandwell Council Tenant) and Ali Yassin (Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

Officers: Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place), Nigel Collumbell (Assistant Director – Housing Management), Sarah Ager (Assistant Director – Asset Management and Improvement), Karl Robinson (Head of Housing Solutions), Manny Sehmbi (Head of Community Partnerships and Support Services), Louis Bebb (Housing Policy and Strategy Lead Officer), Chris Davis (Tenant Engagement Officer), John Swann (Democratic Services Officer) and Rhys Attwell (Interim Democratic Services Officer).

1/26 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mayo, Millard and Ms Brown.

2/26 **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no interests or party whips declared at the meeting.

3/26

Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2025 are confirmed as a correct record.

4/26

Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

5/26

Tenant Engagement Strategy

The Board considered the Tenant Engagement Strategy. The strategy set out how the Council would listen to, involve, and work alongside tenants to shape the homes and communities in which they lived and provided a clear framework for partnership working.

Following work conducted by officers, it had been identified that the voice of tenants could be amplified to ensure the service was led not only by officers, but by those experiencing the service.

The Strategy had been co-produced with officers, tenants and the Sandwell Information and Participation Service. The Strategy supported the new consumer standards, which needed to evidence engagement with tenants as part of efforts to improve the service.

The work had been led by a Task and Finish Group, which had met throughout the production of the Strategy.

The strategy was characterised as a framework for meaningful partnership working, which was designed to support identifiable and measurable improvements.

As part of the task and finish group, a 'tenant-approved' logo had been created which would be attached to documentation which had received approval from tenant forums to evidence that sufficient consultation with tenants, leaseholders and other interest parties had taken place.

It was agreed that the Council's approach to tenant engagement would be monitored on a quarterly basis by both the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group on the following metrics:

- Participation rates
- Satisfaction scores
- Diversity of tenants and leaseholders engaged
- Annual review of tenant and leaseholder input

It was proposed that following approval at Cabinet in February 2026, that the strategy would be embedded across the directorate and wider Council. Throughout the process of embedding the strategy, key

performance indicators would be used to measure progress, which would in turn be submitted to the Regulator of Social Housing.

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

- Tenants would continually be consulted throughout the implementation of the strategy and would receive progress updated regularly.
- The Tenant Auditor Group had fed into the Councils response to the changes in the new consumer standards.
- Tenants had been consulted when drafting new housing management policies, notably the re-chargeable repairs policy.
- Easy read versions of policies had been developed to ensure accessibility for those with low levels of literacy and those who did not speak English as a first language.
- It was acknowledged that only thirteen tenants or leaseholders responded as part of the consultation via the online survey. Whilst further individuals had fed into the consultation via other methods, it was accepted that a wider consultation would have been preferable.
- Engagement had taken place with individuals who were care experienced and young people.

6/26

Scrutiny Review of the Communities in our Borough

Further to Minute No. 37/25 (29 April 2025) the Board considered the final report on the review of The Communities in our Borough.

The review had highlighted challenges in community participation, among hard-to-reach groups, noting that communication was more effective when delivered by local champions and trusted community figures.

The review directly supported the Council Plan by the strengthening of community cohesion, the improvement of access to information and aimed to foster a connected and accessible Borough.

In addition to a number of recommendations to the Cabinet, the working group had also suggested that a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of the commissioned translation and interpretation service be carried out by the Board in 2026/27. This would be considered by the Board at its work programming events in summer 2026.

Resolved that the final report on the scrutiny review of The Communities in our Borough, which sets out the following recommendations, is approved and submitted to the Cabinet:-

- 1) that the Cabinet Member for Business and Skills creates a publicly accessible comprehensive directory of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses;

- 2) that the Statutory Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources conduct a coordinated campaign to increase the profile and awareness of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses across the borough;
- 3) that the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods produces and develop a borough wide Community Asset Map of organisations, services, and resources by ward;
- 4) that the Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods promotes and supports inclusive community events and cultural celebration days in public spaces, with family friendly activities provided free of charge.

7/26

Housing Needs Assessment 2025 – Summary of Findings

The Board received a summary of the Housing Needs Assessment 2025 and the accompanying consultation feedback. The Assessment had updated the 2022 findings using new demographic, housing market, and register data, projecting needs through to 2041. Members were informed that Sandwell's population had continued to grow at a faster rate than national trends, with high levels of deprivation, increasing fuel poverty, and rising demand for affordable housing. The housing register had more than tripled since 2020, reaching over 24,000 households by late 2025, with the majority requiring one-bedroom accommodation and most applicants placed in Band 5. Wait times for three- and four-bedroom properties had reached several years, with projections that demand would continue to rise amid falling availability of homes for letting.

The Assessment had also highlighted pressures across specific groups, including older people, disabled residents, care-experienced young people, and larger families. Projections indicated that more adapted homes, specialist accommodation, and larger family units would be required by 2041. Members noted that although new council homes were being delivered through regeneration programmes, projected build and acquisition rates would not keep pace with demand. Officers reported that a full review and consultation on a new Allocations Policy would be undertaken in summer 2026.

Feedback from the public consultation, which ran from August to October 2025, had shown that most respondents felt the Assessment reflected both housing demand and supply, although some highlighted gaps relating to hidden homelessness, overcrowding, and the experiences of residents in large apartment blocks. Respondents also commented on the clarity of the document, suggesting improvements in readability, greater use of visual summaries, and wider accessibility formats. Stakeholder engagement sessions further reinforced concerns

around hidden homelessness, the need for more granular data, and the importance of continued engagement as needs evolve.

Overall, the Board noted the scale of the challenge presented by the rising register, insufficient supply, and worsening affordability in the private rented sector. Members acknowledged the financial and operational pressures associated with these trends and recognised that housebuilding, stock acquisition, and a revised Allocations Policy would form key elements of the Council's response.

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

- It was noted that the Housing team was working to streamline the process so that applicants within the top 10 on the housing list would receive a further review. The review would confirm whether their circumstances had changed during the time they had been on the list.
- It was noted that, during both the housing application process and the subsequent waiting period, applicants were responsible for informing the Council of any changes that might be material to their application.
- A discussion took place on improving the ways applicants were encouraged to update any changes in their circumstances, including the potential use of social media campaigns and six-monthly checks.
- There was a discussion about utilising bedsits for single occupancy use and making better use of the available space and resources at the Authority's disposal.
- There was a discussion around value for money, with Members expressing concern about buying back former Council homes at market rate when they had previously been purchased at a discounted price through the Right to Buy scheme.
- Members were informed that the Authority through the statutory right to buy scheme sells more properties than acquired or build each year.

Resolved: -

- 1) That the Executive Director for Place provide ongoing updates to the Board on the development of the Housing Allocation Policy, including presenting emerging proposals at future spotlight sessions.

Housing Improvement and Transformation Plan Update

The Board received an update on progress against the Housing Improvement and Transformation Plan (HITP) and noted that the December 2025 Exception Report evidenced continued improvement activity. Members were reminded that the Council had been subject to a C3 Regulatory Judgement in October 2024, with significant failings identified in asbestos management, electrical safety follow-up, the

repairs backlog, and the limited completion of stock condition surveys. Regular engagement with the Regulator continued, and internal audits had provided mixed but generally improving assurance levels.

The service reported that key achievements since the previous update included the publication of the Tenants' Annual Report, delivery of tenant engagement events, approval of the Damp and Mould Policy, and the successful achievement of 100% asbestos compliance. Audit work on electrical safety had offered limited assurance, while fire doors and stock condition surveys received reasonable assurance.

Compliance work advanced through implementation of the new C365Cloud system, with live reporting across six safety areas. Procurement of the replacement Integrated Housing Management System was delayed by new procurement legislation, with the process scheduled to begin in January 2026.

The December 2025 Exception Report showed most programmes progressing, though IT/Systems Transformation remained significantly off track, and several workstreams showed minor delay. Tenant satisfaction results were largely static. Out of 212 actions, only two were significantly off track.

Repairs performance improved with ongoing reduction of the backlog, though scheduling issues, resource shortages, and increased demand from Awaab's Law affected progress. Compliance in gas, fire, asbestos and lifts remained strong, though electrical compliance dipped due to re-benchmarking and outstanding remedial works. Stock condition surveying progressed ahead of profile. Voids performance continued to worsen, prompting process changes and strengthened monitoring.

Overall risk remained Amber, reflecting improved trajectory but acknowledging the substantial work still required to achieve regulatory compliance.

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

- It was noted that kitchens were expected to have a 20-year lifespan under the Better Homes Standard, subject to surveyor inspection. Members further noted that additional data was required to identify which properties had kitchens that had exceeded this 20-year lifecycle.
- It was noted that, in relation to the backlog of housing disrepair claims, approximately 300 cases were currently ongoing.
- Members congratulated officers on the progress made in strengthening asbestos assessment work.
- It was noted that systems was outdated and that procuring a replacement system would take up to two years. Officers confirmed that backlog data could still be collected during this period and that the procurement process was already underway. Members were assured that this would not jeopardise the target

date of February 2027 for clearing the backlog and requested that a detailed timeline be mapped out leading up to that deadline.

- Members were informed that organisational capacity issues that could happen was the IT package, procurement and legal and going through a detailed procurement process which was one of the challenges facing housing.

Resolved: -

- 1) That the Board be provided with a comprehensive procurement roadmap, including key milestones and risks, along with scheduled progress updates to ensure ongoing oversight of the timelines set out in the report.

9/26

Work Programme 2025/26

The Board noted its work programme for the 2025/ 6 municipal year.

Meeting closed at 19:47pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk