

HomeLife

Spring
2010

Issue 19

News, views and information for tenants and leaseholders of Sandwell Homes

Join us on twitter

It really is simple. Just go to www.twitter.com/sandwellhomes and click on the 'Join Today' button. Add a few simple details including email address and password and you are ready to start tweeting!

Once you're following the Sandwell Homes Twitter page we will return the favour. You can talk to us and other tenants about literally anything to do with Sandwell Homes. Twitter is completely free and really easy to use.



Give us your views and you could win £50!

From April this year a new social housing regulator comes into force. The Tenant Services Authority or TSA is being set up by the Government to ensure that all social housing tenants, including Sandwell Homes tenants, have the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect them, their homes and the neighbourhoods where they live.

See the questionnaire on page 10 to give us your views on your neighbourhood and community. All completed questionnaires will be entered into a prize draw.



Future Skills project manager Mario Di-Vito with his apprentices, Ed Cox from Think Local and Tipton Muslim Community Centre representatives.

Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership celebrates £250m spent milestone

The Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership has been celebrating its latest investment milestone by undertaking £25,000 worth of community projects in the borough's six towns.

With £250 million having been spent on the borough over the last four years, the Partnership is well on course for bringing Sandwell's 29,000 local authority owned homes, which are managed by Sandwell Homes, up to a 'Decent' standard by 2013.

To mark the programme's ongoing success, the Partnership has been

undertaking projects aimed at engaging community groups, schools and sports institutions by investing resources into helping improve local facilities.

In **Oldbury**, ten schools have received £2,000 worth of books to give their libraries a boost. In **Rowley Regis**, a sports facility at Britannia Park is soon

to receive refurbishment and minor improvements to benefit the local sports groups.

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Welcome to Homelife.

A new social housing regulator comes into force on April 1st – the Tenant Services Authority. Part of our three-star rating was down to our expertise in tenant involvement and the TSA wants to encourage greater involvement of tenants.

To capture wider views they have designed a number of standards which cover areas including customer service, repairs and maintenance and how we manage our neighbourhoods. Every 12 months we will need to send information to the TSA which shows that we have worked with you and taken on board your views about the services you receive from Sandwell Homes.

We will need to show that our services are what you want and continue to be value for money. This is a tremendous challenge especially in the present economic climate. One of the TSA standards is about neighbourhood and community and this deals with issues such as the upkeep of the neighbourhood and incidents of anti-social behaviour.

Currently, we are working with a group of tenants to get their views, and you can have your say by completing and returning the questionnaire printed on page 10. Future issues of Homelife will feature further articles about how we are working with the TSA.

Brian Oakley,
Chief Executive, Sandwell Homes

If you would like a copy of Homelife translated or require a copy in Braille, Large Print or Audio Tape, please contact 0121 569 6030.

Arabic

يُرجى الاتصال على رقم 0121 569 6030 إذا كنت تريد نسخة مترجمة من Homelife [هوملايف] أو إذا كنت تطلب نسخة مطبوعة بطريقة بريفيل أو بحروف كبيرة، أو نسخة صوتية.

Bengali

"যদি আপনার গৃহস্থীভবন [Homelife] পুস্তিকার একটি অনুলিখিত কপি অথবা ট্রেইন, বড় হারফের ছাপা অথবা অডিও টেপের সংস্করণের প্রয়োজন হয়, তাহলে অনুগ্রহ করে 0121 569 6030 নম্বরে যোগাযোগ করুন।"

Kurdish-Kurmanji

Eger te bivêt kopyeka vê docyumentê (Homelife) bi renekê wergêray, yan ager te pêtyv kopyeka dest nvysy hebêt bi renekê brayil yan bi pytên mezin yan bi rengê kasêta tomar krybyt hevbenyê bi hežmara telefonê bke 0121 569 6030.

Kurdish-Sorani

ئەگەر کۆپیەکە بۆ دەست نۆوست هەبێت بە شێوەی برابەر یان پیتی گەورە یان کاسیتی تۆمار کراو تەلەفۆنی بکە بە ژمارە تەلەفۆنی 0121 569 6030.

Punjabi

"ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਹੋਮਲਾਈਫ [Home Life] ਦੀ ਅਨੁਵਾਦ ਕੀਤੀ ਹੋਈ ਇੱਕ ਕਾਪੀ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ ਜਾਂ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਸਦੀ ਕਾਪੀ ਦੀ ਢੁੱਕੀ ਢੰਗ ਨੂੰ ਜਾਂ ਅੱਡਿਓ ਟੇਪ ਵਿਚ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ 0121 569 6030 'ਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।"

Somali

"Haddii aad jeclaan lahayd nuqul ah Nololsha Guriga [Homelife] oo tarjuman ama aad dooneyso nuqul ah Luuqadda indhoolayaasha, Daabacaad weyn ama Cajalad dhegeysi, fadlan la xariir 0121 569 6030."

Urdu

"اگر آپ کو خانگی زندگی [Homelife] کے ترجمے کی یا اس کی پریفیل، موٹے حروف یا آڈیو ٹیپ میں ضرورت ہے تو برائے مہربانی 0121 569 6030 پر رابطہ کریں۔"

Golden Number Update

Calls made on the old neighbourhood office or repairs numbers are no longer automatically diverted.

Customers wanting to contact Sandwell Homes should ring 0121 569 6000, Monday to Friday from 8am-8pm.

The out-of-hours emergency number is 0800 844112.

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Easter Opening: Offices will be closed on Friday 2nd April and Monday 5th April. Our emergency out-of-hours number is 0800 844112

Customer feedback surveys

Customer satisfaction surveys have now been running for four years within Sandwell Homes.

The surveys help us to capture your views on a monthly, quarterly and bi-annually basis and from your responses, we are continually trying to improve our services.

Surveys are carried out in the following service areas; repairs and maintenance, new tenancies, cleaning and care-taking services, improvement works (decent homes), tenancy support, gas services, gas breakdowns, warden service, electrical safety checks, customer care and access at neighbourhood offices, anti-social behaviour, aids and adaptations work and ground care.

If you receive a survey by post or a telephone call from us, we urge you to take part as all completed surveys will be entered into a £50 monthly prize draw.

Congratulations to the latest winners: - Mrs Jean Kiteley, Rowley Regis, Mrs Madge Harding, Wednesbury Mr Bhupinder Singh, West Bromwich

Survey results are marked as an average out of 10. The most recent result for each service area is as follows: -

Electrical Safety Checks	9.34
Gas Servicing	9.24
Decent Homes Programme	9.06
Aids and Adaptations	8.89
Gas Breakdowns	8.85
Tenancy Support Service	8.82
Warden Services	8.78
Repairs and Maintenance	8.63
New Tenancies	8.41
Customer Care	7.50
Care-taking and Cleaning Service	7.50
Anti-Social Behaviour Cases	7.39
Ground Care	5.42

If you would like more information on customer feedback surveys, please contact the Business Support team on 0121 569 6000.



Eco-champions update

At home with the Preeces

In the last edition of Homelife, we introduced the company's eco-champions who have made a commitment to try and reduce their carbon footprint whilst sharing their experiences with fellow residents.

This month we went to see how couple Derek and Jean Preece were getting on. Though veterans of environmentally friendly living, just recently the Preeces have been using new gadgets to further improve their carbon footprint.

They are keeping their energy usage down with the help of a small gizmo called an 'energy monitor'. The monitor (or Real Time Display as it's known in the industry), which has been provided to all our eco-champions, monitors the wattage used by electrical appliances when they are on, from kettles to TVs and fridges, revealing the biggest culprits for clocking up the pounds.

One of these is perhaps surprisingly the kettle. If you were to view an energy monitor whilst the kettle was boiling you'd notice a big upsurge in the amount of energy used.

"We decided to purchase an eco-kettle which boils enough water for two mugs of tea in just 50 seconds," said Derek. "The energy monitor showed that this kettle only needs about 30 per cent of the energy required to boil water in a normal kettle. It also cuts down on the amount of water that might otherwise get wasted."

Derek and Jean have also invested in an eco-friendly TV. At roughly the same price as a standard LCD TV, the eco-panel television consumes 45 per cent less energy and it doesn't compromise on features with high definition capability, USB download ports for photographs and video, and great picture quality all included. According to their energy monitor the previous standard TV required 173 watts of electricity compared to just 96 watts on its environmentally friendly replacement.

The Preeces already compost all organic household waste – food, cardboard, paper, even dust from the vacuum cleaner – to feed a variety of vegetables including leeks

and cabbages. They also collect rain water in empty dustbin containers, which can be stored and used to water plants and flowers instead of using costly tap water.

In addition to this the Preeces use their council recycling bin, which is collected every fortnight. This means they only have to put out a shopping bag sized amount of general waste for collection.

Following their lead could help us reduce our carbon footprint whilst leaving extra cash in our pockets for the finer things in life. It's worth thinking about.



Eco-champion Derek Preece with his energy monitor.



Sandwell Homes officers, environmental forum members, and eco-champions at the BRE innovation park.

Eco-champs get a glimpse into the future

Sandwell Homes officers, eco-champions, and tenant environmental forum members visited the Building Research Establishment (BRE), based in Watford, in February (following on from visits to Worcester Bosch and the Centre for Alternative Technology) to look at methods being developed to achieve more environmentally friendly homes.

Modern construction techniques are now combining organic and technological approaches to achieve 'zero-carbon' housing designs.

The BRE Innovation Park is a world leading demonstration park designed to show how the future delivery of eco-friendly buildings and communities

can be achieved not only in the UK but around the world. It features seven of the world's most sustainable houses (built to a specific sustainable housing code), a health centre of the future, and over 300 different construction innovations and emerging technologies as well as a state of the art community landscape design.

Collectively these projects show diverse and original approaches to eco-friendly design and construction. They each share the common goal of having a low impact on the environment, by reducing CO2 emissions, but a high impact on the quality of life for occupants.

The visit also showed how expensive these methods of construction are currently, highlighting the problems faced by authorities and social landlords in their quest to develop zero-carbon housing stock.

For information about the eco-products mentioned here or to submit your own stories and experiences please email going_green@sandwellhomes.org.uk

Visit www.sandwellhomes.org.uk/goinggreen to follow the eco-champions and to see how you can Go Green or find us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/sandwellhomes

Corporate equality scheme progress



Sandwell Homes Equality team continues to monitor the good progress made against requirements in its Corporate Equality Scheme.

The scheme requires the organisation to show how it meets the general duties set out under separate Race, Disability and Gender Equality legislation and also encompasses its commitments to the other equality strands – sexual orientation, religion/belief and age.

Below is a sample of achievements so far:-

Interpreting & Translation

If English isn't your first language and you need help with interpreting or translation, did you know that Sandwell Homes offers four main ways to access its interpreting and translation services.

Interpreting and translation are available in many languages including British Sign Language. Versions of our documents can also be obtained in Braille, large print and audio.

Here's how we do it:-

Internal Bi-Lingual Scheme

This is where bilingual employees are able to interpret for customers visiting their place of work

National Interpreting Service

If you need an interpreter when visiting or telephoning one of our offices, we can provide this for you, using the National Interpreting Service. This means we telephone a translator who will interpret over the phone for you.

Face-to-Face Interpreting Companies

For pre-arranged meetings we can organise an interpreter to assist you. If you need an interpreter for a meeting at one of our places of business or at a meeting in your home, please inform our employee when making the arrangements.

Translation of Documents

If you need any of our documents, correspondence or leaflets to be translated into another language, or require a Braille, large print or audio version, please advise one of our employees or speak to a member of the Equality team on 0121 569 6030/6384.

Requirement	Progress
Look at patterns of take up of services through customer diversity information and identify groups for targeted promotions	Targets have been set to reduce the differences between White British and Black Minority Ethnic (BME) tenants following analysis of performance information in these areas: • Rent arrears of seven or more weeks • Evictions due to rent arrears • Refusal of property offers • Successfully preventing homelessness cases • Satisfaction with attitude of repairs operative
Raise cultural awareness through training with different communities	Housing Services employees will receive training to raise their awareness of the different cultures within Sandwell
Ensure people from all racial groups are well informed about homelessness services	Sandwell Homes is working to raise awareness of the Housing Options service with BME and other new communities. It is also introducing workshops and surgeries within BME communities promoting initiatives to deal with overcrowding
Review the level of gardening support provided to older people	The Garden Task Force has been extended to increase gardening support given to older people
Develop and deliver a programme to work with schools, promoting awareness of housing services and issues	Sandwell Homes Anti-Social Behaviour team and the Police are working in partnership with three local schools having problems with anti-social behaviour to deliver a citizenship programme incorporating housing services
Review the processes and level of support provided to new tenants who are potentially vulnerable	A training package has been developed to enable Sandwell Homes employees to better identify and help vulnerable new tenants

10,000 hits for Sandwell Homes DigiTV service

Don't forget that housing advice and other local services can now be accessed via Sky and Virgin TV box sets as well as internet ready mobile phones following Sandwell Homes' move onto Digital TV.

Simple steps to find Sandwell Homes through your TV or mobile phone:

- Looking for a job?
- Need the latest local travel information including bus and train timetables?
- Perhaps you want to access local GP service information?

Well you can, and all from the comfort of your living room.

With 10,000 visits to the site already since its launch last year customers have been discovering that they can report repairs and anti-social behaviour, request housing registration forms, and get the latest housing news all from the comfort of their living rooms.

The service is now completely free for customers with Sky and Virgin subscriptions so make sure you check it out and see what it can do for you by following these simple instructions.

SKY

- Press **Interactive #8** (Directgov)
- Press **'Select'** on welcome page
- Press **'1 – Local Services'**
- Select appropriate regional menu or
- Press **'1- Search for your area'**

Virgin

- Press the **Interactive** button
- Select **News & Info**
- Select **Looking Local**

Wii & PC

- Insert the following url into your browser: **lookinglocal.gov.uk**

For a specific area of the UK add the town name to the end of the url

Mobile

- Via any web enabled phone: **lookinglocal.gov.uk**

For a specific area of the UK add the town name to the end of the url

NEW CCTV Control Centre nears completion

Back in the summer we reported that Sandwell Homes is investing £2.2million in a new state-of-the-art CCTV and concierge control centre.

This will be a more effective means of contributing to the safety and security of a number of our residents across the borough.

The project is forging ahead with completion on course for this May.

A new control room has been built, door entry systems are being upgraded, intercom handsets

replaced and a new wireless network put in place. The work has caused some upheaval for our residents and we would like to thank everyone for their patience and understanding during this period and as temporary systems are put in place.

We look forward to reporting on the project completion in the next edition of Homelife.



The new state-of-the-art CCTV control centre.

Illegal drugs = Lose your home

People dealing, growing or allowing illegal drugs at their home face eviction under the Safer Sandwell Partnership's tough enforcement approach.

Police have carried out a series of drugs raids at homes and business premises across the borough, closing down a string of cannabis factories and drugs dens and taking the perpetrators to court for prosecution. Sandwell Homes and Sandwell Council's anti-social behaviour team have then taken

tough action against any tenants whose rented council homes have become drugs dens.

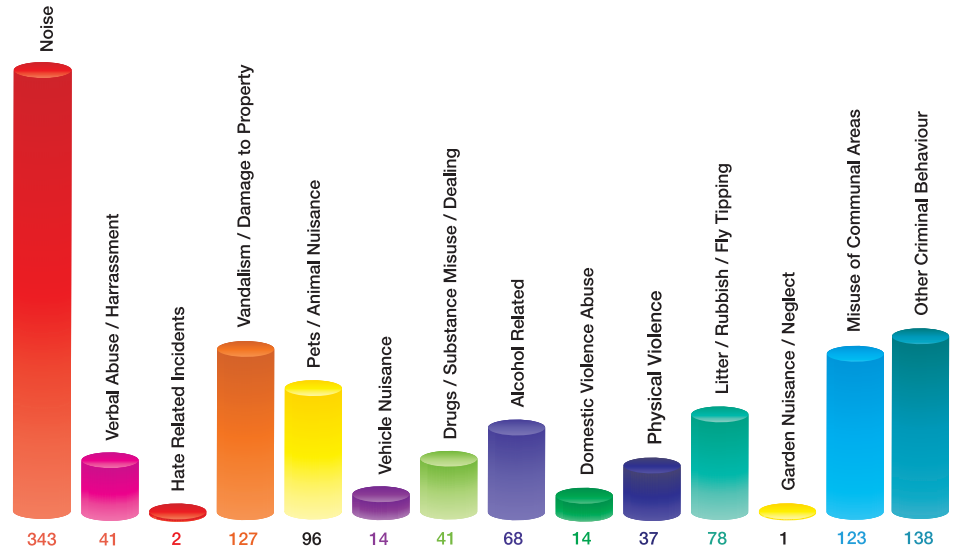
Brian Oakley, chief executive for Sandwell Homes, said: "We are working closely with the police and Sandwell Council to stamp out illegal drugs, which can have a devastating

In the meantime, Sandwell Homes Security and Concierge service continues to strive to provide an excellent service to residents.

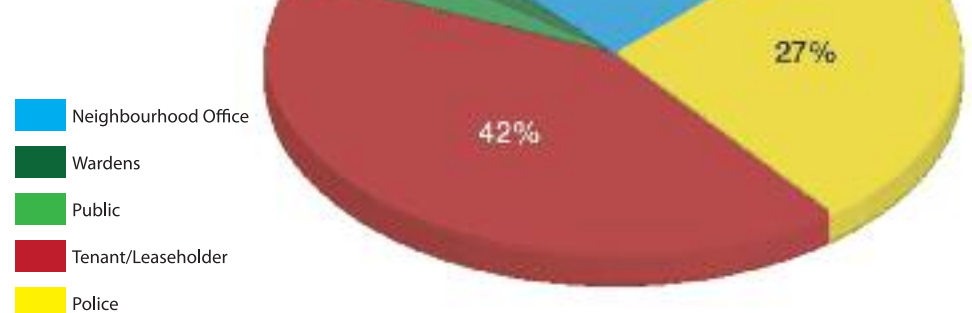
During 2009, a total of 1,123 anti-social behaviour incidents were reported and we had a total of 3,763 requests for information or assistance as shown in the charts below.

In addition, CCTV footage was used in 15 court cases last year. In nine cases the perpetrators were found guilty and five cases are still on-going.

Anti-social behaviour incidents



Requests for information or assistance



effect on local communities. This illegal activity breaks the terms of tenancy conditions, so we take a hard line against the small minority of people responsible for it."

Brian added: "Sandwell Homes is committed to keeping the borough's homes and estates free from drugs, and particularly to preventing any growing or dealing of drugs from any of the properties under its management.

"If you are evicted from a council property, we are extremely unlikely to offer you accommodation in the future unless there have been major changes to your circumstances.

"We will also tell other landlords that we have evicted you for anti-social behaviour, which means you may not be able to rent any council properties in the region."

Report drug dealing in your area by calling Crimestoppers in confidence on **0800 555 111**, the police on **0845 113 5000** or the anti-social behaviour helpline on **0845 359 7500**.

Anyone seeking help for drug addiction should contact: Anchor (structured adult drug treatment) **0845 112 0100**, Open Sandwell (open access adult drug treatment) **0121 612 5080** or Drug Concern **0121 612 5079**.

DEALING DRUGS FROM YOUR RENTED HOME?

Call **CRIMESTOPPERS** on **0800 555 111** to anonymously report drug dealing in your area. Visit www.sandwellhomes.org.uk/paranoid for more information.

YOU SHOULD BE PARANOID

GET CAUGHT, GET EVICTED

Sandwell Homes logo and Crimestoppers logo.

DECENT HOMES PROGRAMME UPDATE

Low-rise updates

The low-rise programme has seen a number of landmarks reached since work began in 2005 with 14,964 properties having been completed and handed over.

The following breakdown shows how much has been achieved on the low-rise programme to date:

Kitchens completed 11,312

Bathrooms completed 11,145

Rewires completed 12,501

Central heating installations completed 9,506

New roofs completed 6,316

Our latest resident satisfaction survey showed that the average level of satisfaction with the finished product was 93 per cent, with customers also happy with the service being delivered in carrying out the works with an average 91 per cent rating.

continued from page 1

Tipton Muslim Community Centre has benefited from a refurbished reception area, including newly painted hallways and doors.

In **Wednesbury** the town's Rugby Club received a brand new floor courtesy of the Partnership, replacing old, water damaged floorboards.

Children from Cape Hill Primary School in **Smethwick** were over the moon when the Partnership fitted lighting and heating in their playhouse as well as donating a brand new stereo system.

At the Holy Trinity Primary School in **West Bromwich** a vegetable patch has been created on which pupils will be taught how to plant and grow all their own vegetables.

The Partnership has so far brought the total number of homes meeting the 'Decent' standard up to 23,000, which includes replacing bathrooms, kitchens, windows, heating systems and roofs, giving tenants modern, warm and energy efficient homes.



Officers from Wates and Sandwell Homes with children and teachers collecting their books.

Local employment opportunities

Throughout the programme the Decent Homes Partnership has drawn on the considerable skills of local people. Latest figures show that employees living within a 30 mile radius of Sandwell represent 99 per cent of the workforce.

In addition, apprentices employed on the programme represent 12 per cent of the workforce, showing the Partnership's commitment to developing local talent and to creating a legacy of skilled local workers for the future.

Together with Think Local Construction the Partnership has successfully provided opportunities to over 150 apprentices working towards an NVQ level 2 qualification in a number of disciplines.



Bob Wildboar (Sandwell Homes), Sylvia Fieldon-Nicholls (Connaught), Katrina Cunningham (Connaught), David Morehouse (Connaught), Sally Baker (Cape Hill School), Greg Badura (Connaught) and happy pupils from Cape Hill School.

The Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership



RLB Rider Levett Bucknall



High-rise completions

To date the Partnership has spent approximately £65 million on bringing 20 blocks up to the Government's Decent Homes standard. Astbury Court, Lawrence Court, Neale House, Macauley House, Allen House, Thompson Gardens, Broadmede House, Brookview House, Meadow Avenue (three blocks), Hamstead House, Scott House, Boulton House, Mountford House, Horton and Farley Street (four blocks), and Greenford House are now all complete.

A further two blocks are under development with the £8m Lancaster House project due to complete in May, followed by Lissimore House in November later this year.

Work is also due to start on Russell House (April), Beaconview and Wyndmill Houses (May), Kenrick House (September) and finally Kynaston House in October.

The Partnership works very closely with individual tenants and residents action groups throughout the refurbishment process. Residents are consulted at a very early stage with regards to the proposed designs and

colours for the blocks, and are given the opportunity to comment and vote on their preferences.

Throughout the project, at all stages, partners inform residents on all aspects of the work due to be undertaken via customer liaison officers. Members of residents action groups are also invited to attend monthly site meetings where they can report problems and take back information to individual residents.

As well as the improvements that are changing the skyline in Sandwell, Sandwell Homes has been keen to develop new accommodation for its residents and to date there have been 19 new flats constructed within the blocks either where existing disused stores have been demolished or, in the case of Lancaster House, above the existing flat roof level.



Lancaster House is now nearing completion.



Sandwell Homes garage strategy

Sandwell Homes is developing a borough wide strategy for the garages it manages on behalf of Sandwell Council. With responsibility for managing over 3,000 garages across 256 garage sites and plots Sandwell Homes is looking at reviewing garage occupancy and demand.

Borough wide consultation including a postal survey and face to face events in each of the six towns has already taken place, with a staggering 1,000 plus customers making valuable contributions and providing feedback that has been considered in the review. Each of the Housing Service Panels was visited and internal consultation has been conducted with employees in neighbourhood offices and the repairs teams.

The feedback from customers – this includes those renting, those on the waiting list and residents who are affected by our garages – has been considered and Sandwell Homes has identified a number of key priorities:

- Retain garage sites in the majority of cases
- Detailed option appraisals including one-to-one consultation with those renting garages in approximately 40 sites across the borough, causing concern
- Make improvements in the way demand and waiting lists for garages is managed
- Improve the marketing strategy for garages
- Identify a budget to improve all of the sites to be brought up to a satisfactory level

All customers who have contributed to the consultation exercise have been contacted with further information and specific details, with an action plan being developed over the next 12 months to work with other sections of Sandwell Homes so that the improvements identified can be carried out.

For further information contact the asset management team in the investment division on 0121 569 5080.

New reps WANTED

Sandwell Homes is reviewing its Stakeholder Panel for Decent Homes to involve tenants from the towns currently not represented: Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick and Tipton.

You will be helping us design and evaluate our processes to improve the way we deliver the Decent Homes programme between December 2010 and March 2013. This is a voluntary role which is valuable and rewarding.

If you are interested in finding out more, please register your interest by Friday 30th April 2010. Call 0121 569 2924 or email: investment_division@sandwellhomes.org.uk

We will contact you after the deadline to invite you to an event to provide you with more information.

HomeSwapper

The way forward for mutual exchanges

More than 2,000 Sandwell Homes tenants have now signed up for a move with HomeSwapper, the largest and most successful FREE home swap service in the UK.

With 580 social landlords across the country signed up to HomeSwapper, including Sandwell Homes, Wolverhampton Homes, Birmingham City and Dudley Councils plus Cannock and Tamworth Councils, the scheme enjoys good coverage in the West Midlands area.

HomeSwapper is flexible, you can look to swap homes with another Sandwell Homes tenant or tenants of other Registered Social Landlords such as a housing association.

You may consider a two-way, three-way or more swap. It could be a swap that is down the street or across the country – the choice is yours.

Registering for a swap is easy:

- Simply register online at www.homeswapper.co.uk or
- Complete an application form at any housing service centre, neighbourhood office or property shop

Once you are an approved member you will receive your matches on a regular basis via email or text.

A HomeSwapper brochure detailing all potential swaps is produced monthly and available in all our housing service centres, neighbourhood offices and property shops.

For more information visit www.homeswapper.co.uk or your nearest housing service centre, neighbourhood office or property shop.

Please note you cannot exchange properties without your landlord's permission.

HomeSwapper



A delighted Corinne Brinton and her son Zachary.

Deposit Guarantee Scheme

If you're desperate to move but can't afford the deposit needed to rent privately, DiGS could be for you.

Through the Deposit Guarantee Scheme (DiGS), Sandwell Homes provides a written bond guarantee instead of the cash deposit normally needed by private landlords.

Applicants have to be referred through the Housing Options Service and will then be invited to an interview to put together their application.

You may qualify for the scheme if you're not subject to immigration control, have a local connection with the Sandwell area, are over 18 and

have dependent children, are over 25 and experiencing a relationship breakdown, are homeless or threatened with homelessness, receive benefits or are on a low income and have no history of breaking tenancy conditions.

Our perfect home

Young mum Corinne Brinton was living in a crowded family house and on a deadline to leave when she discovered the DiGS scheme. She said: "I phoned Housing Options in desperation. I was living at my

mum's and sharing a room with my older brother. My mum had given me until the end of the month and I needed somewhere to live. Housing Options told me about the scheme and what it involved."

Corinne, aged 27, had been on the housing register for her own home for over a year with no success. But although she works part-time as a sales manager she says: "It would have taken me forever to save up for a deposit so I didn't think renting privately would be an option."

Having passed the DiGS application process, she moved into her home in Thimblemill Road last May, with her son Zachary, now aged three.

Mortgage Rescue scheme

Launched in January 2009, this government scheme helps vulnerable homeowners who are facing repossession to stay in their homes.

To qualify for Mortgage Rescue, you must meet certain criteria which the Housing Options Team can discuss with you.

We work in partnership with Orbit Housing Association to run the scheme which can provide help in two ways:

- Shared Equity – an equity loan is provided to reduce your mortgage repayment.
- Government Mortgage to Rent – Orbit Housing Association clears your secured debt completely and you pay rent to them as a tenant.

Saved from homelessness

One couple who fell behind with their mortgage in late 2008 when Mortgage Rescue was just being launched are now safe from the

threat of homelessness. "Our lender became aggressive and issued a default notice, then threatened to repossess our home when we were just £1,500 in arrears. After a meeting with Nicola Palmer, the CAB advisor, she assured us that help was available.

"However, it was a race against time as the lender was about to go to court. Nicola worked closely with Orbit to ensure we were rescued before the lender repossessed our home.

"In September 2009, Orbit purchased our home under Mortgage Rescue so we could remain living there whilst paying them a competitive monthly rent. Without the assistance from Sandwell Homes, the CAB and Orbit we would have been homeless."

"It's a two bedroom house which is just perfect for me and my son," she says. "There's a decent garden, so it's better than a high-rise flat. It's feeling like home now and we're getting it to be the way we want it."

The home is rented from Stewardson Properties, who have 120 properties on their books. Accredited landlord, Philip Stewardson said he first heard about DiGS when Corinne rang and asked if they were part of the scheme.

They found out about it from Sandwell Homes, and fulfilled the criteria to join. Philip said: "We thought it was a great idea. Corinne's a great tenant but she couldn't have moved in without this scheme. We've taken on a couple more people through DiGS since then. We deal with four boroughs and I wish it was available in all the local boroughs."

The Housing Options team can be contacted on 0121 569 6000. Their emergency out-of-hours number is 0121 525 4688. Email enquiries: housing_options@sandwellhomes.org.uk or via the Sandwell Homes website www.sandwellhomes.org.uk



Hard work pays off

The Housing Options team works alongside accredited private landlords and management agents to secure accommodation in the private sector and were recently offered 25 two-bedroomed units in the West Bromwich area.

Within a week, all properties were allocated which was a magnificent achievement involving an open day, block accompanied viewings, sign-ups, arranging housing benefit payments and inspections of the properties.

Pictured here is Annah Wire who accepted a tenancy, with Jade Ryles from the Housing Options team and Sarah Bagley from Bagleys Letting Agents, Kidderminster.

Preventing falls in the home

Nearly half (46 per cent) of the injuries from accidents in the home are the result of a fall. Each year, around 1,500 over 65s suffer fatal injuries following a fall at home. The other vulnerable group is babies and toddlers because of their inexperience. There are a lot of simple and inexpensive things that can be done to prevent falls in the home.

Stairs

- Handrails should run the full length of the stairs.
- Use high wattage light bulbs on staircases. There should be switches at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- Do not use throw rugs at the top or bottom of stairs.
- Fix loose stair carpet as soon as you notice it.
- On non-carpeted stairs, use a slip-resistant surface treatment or fit non-skid rubber stair treads.
- Do not leave toys, packages or objects on stairs.
- If there are toddlers in the home, fit approved safety gates at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- Where there are banisters, there should be no horizontal rails and the gaps between vertical rails should be less than 6.5 cm.
- Toddlers should be taught to descend stairs on their stomachs, feet-first, and later the importance of using the handrail.

Children

- When a child can pull itself to a standing position, the cot mattress should be adjusted to its lowest position. There should be at least



66 cm between the top rail of the drop side and the mattress.

- Never allow a child under six to sleep on the top bunk of bunk beds.
- Bunk beds should have guardrails on both sides, unless one side is against the wall.
- All children roll during sleep so guardrails should be kept in place, however old the child is.
- Fit safety locks to windows to restrict opening to less than 6.5 cm.
- To prevent injuries if a child falls on to it, a glass door should be fitted with safety glass.

- Keep drawers pushed in to prevent children using them for climbing.

Babies

- Never leave babies alone on changing tables, beds or sofas.
- Use five-point harnesses in highchairs, prams and push chairs.
- Fireguards are important to prevent babies falling on to hot fires.
- Babies in car seats or bouncing cradles should not be put on tables, kitchen counters or other raised surfaces.



Bathrooms

- Use rubber bathmats in bathtubs and showers.
- Fit grab rails in baths and showers.
- For elderly persons, provide a stool with non-skid feet.
- Clean up water from the floor.



DO YOU HAVE A WORKING SMOKE ALARM AT HOME?

IF NOT YOU ARE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY TO DIE IN A FIRE



200 people die each year in accidental fires in their homes, caused by smoking materials, candles, and other factors such as cooking appliances.

You can reduce the risk of fire in your home by following some simple fire safety steps.

Social Housing landlords have a responsibility to you and your home and must ensure that gas and electrical appliances they supply are safe and in good working order. Your landlord may also fit smoke alarms in shared accommodation and communal areas. Speak to your landlord if you have any questions or concerns.



1 Fit smoke alarms on each level of your home.



2 Test your smoke alarms weekly. Never remove the batteries.



3 Put it out. Right out! Make sure you put cigarettes out properly and never smoke in bed.



4 Plan an escape route and make sure everyone knows it and where doors and window keys are kept.

Your local fire and rescue service offers free Home Fire Risk Checks and may be able to fit free smoke alarms in your home. For more information visit our website below:

www.direct.gov.uk/firekills



All rooms

- On smooth floors, use double-sided adhesive tape to secure rugs.
- Arrange furniture so that it does not obstruct walkways.
- Keep floors clear of toys and other clutter, especially when toddlers are learning to walk or there are elderly people present.
- Make sure you can turn on lights without having to walk through dark areas.
- Do not stand on chairs or stools to reach high objects. Use a stepladder.

New social housing regulator comes into force

Sandwell Homes supports the aims of the TSA and we want as many tenants as possible to get involved and work with us to make sure that the services we provide are the services that tenants want.

The TSA has been consulting with tenants throughout the country. Some Sandwell Homes tenants have been involved in these discussions. The TSA has come up with six standards that cover the services we provide.

Sandwell Homes has been working with tenants over the past four years and we already have fifteen standards that have been 'Tenant Approved'. Now we want to link our fifteen standards with the TSA's six.

Throughout the spring and summer we will be running a series of events which you can attend to give us your thoughts, ideas and suggestions. If you would like to attend please tick the relevant box at the end of the questionnaire.

The six standards that the TSA are bringing out are:

1. Tenant involvement and empowerment

Covering customer service and choice, tenant involvement and empowerment and complaints.

2. Home

Covering quality of accommodation and repairs and maintenance.

3. Tenancy

Covering how we let homes and rents.

4. Neighbourhood and community

Covering how we manage your

neighbourhood, how we work with other local partners and anti-social behaviour.

5. Value for money

Looking to make sure that the services we provide are cost effective, cost efficient and still provide value for money.

6. Governance and financial viability

Showing that the organisation is well run and has good structures in place, which complies with all Government legislation.

We have already started working with a group of tenants and Sandwell Community Information and Participation Services (SCIPS) on developing Standard Number 4: Neighbourhood and Community. Please fill in this questionnaire to give us your views – you could win £50.

- 1 Very Satisfied
 2 Fairly Satisfied
 3 Neither
 4 Fairly Dissatisfied
 5 Very Dissatisfied

1. How satisfied are you generally with your neighbourhood as a place to live?

People damaging your property

2. How satisfied are you with the following?

Drug use or dealing

Hedges and borders

Abandoned/burnt out vehicles

Communal grassed areas

Other crime

Off road parking and garages

Noise from traffic

Communal drying areas

Car parking

Weed control on paved areas

6. Have you ever had to complain about any of the above? Yes No

Play areas for children

Grass cutting

6a. If yes, how satisfied were you with the outcome?

3. Have you ever had to complain about any of the above? Yes No

7. If you live in high rise/low rise property – how satisfied are you generally with the standard of cleaning in the block?

3a. If yes, how satisfied were you with the outcome?

4. How safe and secure do you feel in your neighbourhood?

8. Please tell us anything that you think might improve your neighbourhood.

5. To what extent are any of the following a problem in your neighbourhood?

1 Very big problem 2 Fairly big problem

3 Bit of a problem 4 Not a problem at all

Rubbish or litter

Noisy neighbours

Pets and animals

Disruptive children/teenagers

Drunk or rowdy behaviour

Vandalism and graffiti

9. If you wish to be entered in the prize draw please complete the following.

Name:

Address:

Tel No:

The following information is optional, but will help us ensure that everyone is represented and their views are taken into account.

Age:

Ethnicity:

Property type:

10. Would you like to be more involved in working with us to develop this standard? Yes No

All the information you give will be kept completely confidential. It will only be used to develop and monitor Sandwell Homes service standards. The confidential results may be passed to the relevant agencies who will compare our performance against other landlords.

Thank you for sharing your views with us.

I would like to attend future events to share my views with Sandwell Homes

Please send this questionnaire by Friday 16th April, 2010 to: **Homelife, Freepost Plus RRZK-YKTY-TUUG, Sandwell Homes, Business Development, Dartmouth House, Sandwell Road, West Bromwich B70 8TQ**

Spring clean your finances

Traditionally Spring is the time of year when we clean up around the house and throw out things we no longer find useful. It's also a good time to consider doing a spring clean on your finances. By taking a close look, you'll be able to see areas where you can make changes, or be reassured that you've been doing the right things all along.



Figure out what you are spending

Working out exactly where money goes is vital, but takes a bit of effort. However it doesn't have to be a daunting task. It's a simple matter of discovering where your money is going each week or month and how much you should have left over. All you have to do is add up all your income and subtract your bills and other outgoings.

Work out your personal budget

Once you know how much you are spending, and on what, you'll quickly spot what is essential (such as rent, council tax, utility bills, household food and insurance) and what you can do without. Now you can plan your budget for future weeks or months which will help you keep a track of your spending and expenses and will also help you spend less, or spend differently.

Don't forget you need to allow for one-offs such as car servicing, birthdays, holidays and that rainy day fund. Be sure to keep hold of receipts so you can check your daily spending.

Pay your bills by direct debit

Paying bills by direct debit is a great idea as you'll never miss a payment and incur unnecessary costs (as long as you keep sufficient funds in your bank account). You could also save as much as £200 a year by paying certain bills in this way.

Paying your rent by direct debit couldn't be easier

Sandwell Homes tenants can benefit from direct debit by spreading the cost over 12 monthly payments. Telephone 0121 569 5031 to request a direct debit mandate form.

Reduce your debts

This is a priority, especially unsecured debts such as personal loans and card balances. They cost you money and can add significantly to your woes if problems arise. Generally you should pay off the debts with the highest interest rates first, such as store cards or credit cards.

Having difficulty managing your finances?

Sandwell Homes tenants can make an appointment to see a money advisor for free, independent advice at several neighbourhood offices within the borough. Contact Sandwell Citizens Advice Bureau on 0121 500 2700.

Save for a rainy day

If you haven't already, start a rainy day fund. Committing yourself to a regular saving pattern can be difficult but saving is part of budgeting and can help you to stop getting into debt by putting money aside.

Review your insurance cover

Check you have enough home contents insurance cover for all your possessions. Equally, make sure you aren't over-insured and paying for unnecessary cover. It's also important to have enough insurance to protect your dependents and your income in the case of death or disability. Decide how much cover you need and whether it matches what you have.

Sandwell Homes has its own contents insurance scheme. Prices start from as little as 84p a week for senior citizens and £1.33 for all other tenants. Application forms are available from neighbourhood and housing service centre offices, by contacting the Contents Insurance

section on 0121 569 5024 or can be downloaded via www.sandwellhomes.org.uk

Shop around for the best deals

This goes for nearly everything you spend your money on such as groceries, car insurance, electricity, gas, the list is endless.

Find out more about the best ways of saving money by visiting www.moneysavingexpert.com Think about using a price comparison website such as www.moneysupermarket.com www.uswitch.com and www.energyhelpline.com

The energy helpline can also be contacted on 0800 074 0745.

Check your credit file

Do this annually. Obtaining a copy of your credit file can help you combat identity fraud and also highlight mistakes about your credit history that could affect your ability to get credit or the best interest rates. A copy of your credit file will cost £2 from either www.experian.co.uk, www.equifax.co.uk and www.callcredit.co.uk

Keep an eye on your finances

Along with your budget planner and your awareness of what you spend each week or month it is still important that you keep an eye on your finances. Organise your paperwork to make it easier to do this. Keep copies of your bills and bank statements, they're valuable documents and throwing them away could put you at risk of identity fraud. Lastly, remember to make a plan and be clear about what you want your finances to do for you.

Tenants help shape future

On Saturday 14th November, nearly 50 tenants and residents came together from across the borough to discuss developments in the repairs and maintenance directorate and to look at ways to improve the service over the next three to five years.

A number of pressing issues were discussed with workshops held across a range of topics including: rechargeable repairs, safety awareness, zoned maintenance and responsive repairs.

Issues discussed included:

- Support for an end of tenancy bonus scheme. This would reward tenants who leave their properties in a good state of repair when they end their tenancy, reducing the amount of money Sandwell Homes would have to spend before the property was suitable to rent again
- Introducing a private gas appliance scheme in 2010 to enable annual gas appliance checks to be offered to tenants and leaseholders
- Combining common gas repairs, smoke alarm and carbon monoxide checks with the annual gas appliance service to minimise inconvenience to tenants. Those allowing access to properties on our first visit will be eligible to be entered into a prize draw
- Introducing text messaging alerts later in 2010 to remind tenants of their pending repairs appointment

Tenant Jacquita Hood from Oldbury who attended the conference said: "As a relatively new Sandwell Homes tenant, I learned a huge amount about how repairs and maintenance operates and it's good to know that as an organisation, you are looking to improve and develop services."

Chris Poulton, repairs and maintenance director added: "I'd like to thank all those tenants who attended. They made an invaluable contribution throughout the event and their feedback will prove crucial in the future development and delivery of the repairs and maintenance service."

Need extra help?

To book a debt/benefit appointment with Sandwell CAB, telephone 0121 500 2700.

Did you know?

You can now discuss your rent account and make payments from 8am - 8pm. Telephone the Rents team on 0121 569 6000 and select option 2.

Don't get bored



JUST YOUTH
Say NO to boredom in Sandwell

That's what Sandwell Council is telling young people as its exciting programme of Easter holiday activities gears up.

Youngsters can check out what's on offer during the school holidays - and throughout the year - at www.justyouth.org.uk or by flicking through Voice 21, the regular magazine produced by the Council's youth service.

Thanks to £5 million from the Government's Aiming High for Young People strategy for 2008-11, Sandwell's youth activities programme is better than ever.

Don't miss out!

Children's colouring competition winners

A big thank you to all the youngsters who entered our Christmas colouring competition.

We received more than 100 colourful and creative entries in all. The Homelife editorial panel took on the task of selecting the winners who each win a £10 gift voucher.

Panel member John Cash said: "The standard of entries was extremely high and to reflect that we selected six winners instead of the original three as planned."

Editorial panel members meet with Sandwell Homes media relations manager Jayne Maull six times a year (two meetings per edition of Homelife) to suggest and read articles.

If you are interested in joining us, please contact Jayne on 0121 569 5014 or email jayne_maull@sandwellhomes.org.uk



Editorial panel members Bob Cohen, Edna Barker and John Cash judging the Christmas colouring competition.

The six winning entries:

Gemma Osbaldeston aged 9



Ruksana Begum aged 10



Dane Adams aged 8



Jessica Skidmore aged 7



Rheannon Danaher-Lawrence aged 3½



Ethan Burgoyne-Daniels aged 4



Congratulations also go to our wordsearch winners:

Chantelle Clarke of Cradley Heath, Veronica Lambert of Oldbury and Lee Clark of Tipton who win £25 each.

Safeguard yourself from bogus callers

Housing chiefs at Sandwell Homes are reiterating the safeguards they have in place to protect residents from potential bogus callers.

The advice comes following a spate of distraction burglaries across the borough targeting pensioners.

In one of the reported incidents, callers posed as officials from Sandwell Homes.

Repairs and maintenance director, Chris Poulton said: "The vast majority of visits we make are from our repairs teams and are by appointment only.

"We operate a system with a unique password known only to the tenant and our repairs operative, so anyone in doubt as to the validity of the caller can ask them to quote this password."

Mr Poulton added: "Any genuine caller from Sandwell Homes carries a photographic ID card with a contact telephone number on the



JANE SMITH
MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS ASSISTANT
Quality Housing, Excellent Services

reverse which can be called to check their identity.

"The numbers are 0121 569 5242 during office hours and 0800 844112 at all other times. All our partner organisations operate a similar scheme.

"We would rather our employee or partner representative has to wait a few minutes while their ID is checked, if it ensures residents have peace of mind.

"If tenants are in any doubt, they should refuse to let the caller in and contact the police."