



Sandwell Council: Residential Refurbishments

Sandwell Council manages council-owned houses and flats across the six towns within its borough – Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich. In a drive to make its properties warmer, safer and more visually appealing, the council sought a trusted framework partner to deliver a diverse range of refurbishment works.

The solution

That partner came in the form of Building Solutions – the specialist building and refurbishment arm of VINCI Facilities.

Since the partnership commenced 15 years ago, Building Solutions has secured ten contracts with the council, encompassing its Decent Homes programme, replacement windows, externals, aids/adaptations and void work contracts. With a total value of c.£202m delivered to date, these contracts have seen Building Solutions conduct major internal and external refurbishments to no fewer than 18,750 homes.

The diverse scope of works has included kitchens, bathrooms, heating systems, windows, doors, electrical rewiring, roof repairs, environmental works, external rendering, external wall insulation and void works. Additionally, major adaptation works have included the installation of ramped access, level access showers, and extensions to bedrooms and bathrooms.

Crucially, over the course of the past 15 years, Building Solutions is the only contractor that’s remained continually appointed by the council, enabling it to forge a true partnership and lend stability to the transformation of the housing stock.

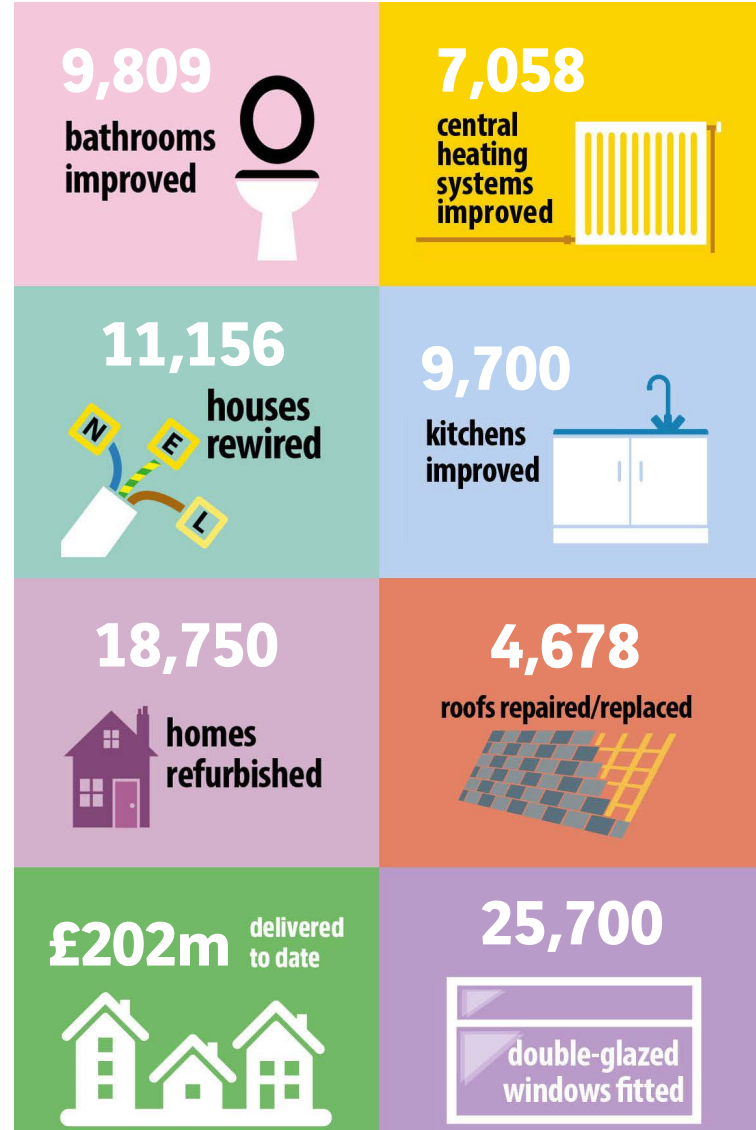
EWI (external wall insulation)

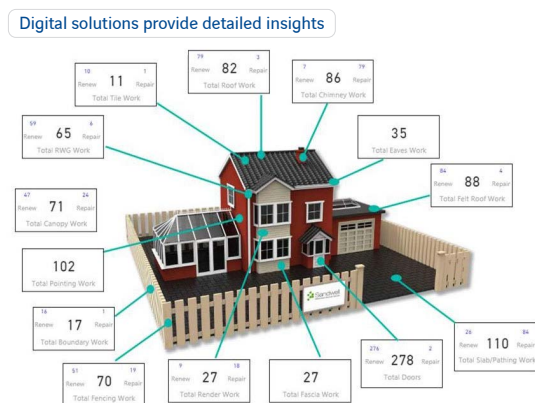
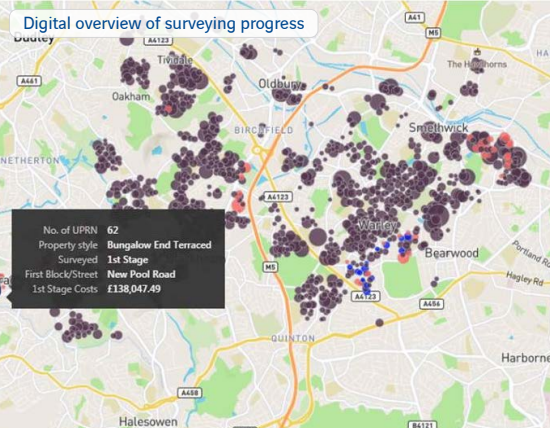
A major aspects of the works completed to date include £4m of EWI works to approximately 350 properties, ranging from traditional brick houses to concrete panelled houses and flats.

Building Solutions worked closely with local tenants in the lead up to the works by holding pre-start tenant consultation meetings, attending local council meetings, and issuing fortnightly newsletters to tenants. This strong communication played a vital role in ensuring that the schemes were completed on time, trouble-free and under budget.

The council benefited from cost savings of c.£880k thanks to Building Solutions securing grant funding from the Government’s ECO (Energy Company Obligation) scheme – an energy efficiency scheme designed to help reduce carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty.

The works have also significantly improved the environmental efficiency of the homes, with the carbon savings calculated by OFGEM (Office of Gas and Electricity Markets) totalling 11,070 tonnes of CO₂.





Continuous improvement through digital solutions

Building Solutions has worked collaboratively with the council to create a bespoke digital solutions strategy that's specifically tailored to the needs of social housing projects.

This sees Building Solutions' team equipped with tablets, enabling them to efficiently conduct surveys, log quality standards, monitor permits to work and gather customer feedback, with all data being instantly synced centrally.

The new digital solutions strategy provides a major step-change in the standard of communication between the council and its contractors. Through the use of the industry-leading platforms such as Microsoft's PowerBI, all parties are able to view real-time data on the contract's performance. This, in turn, is enabling opportunities for Lean initiatives and efficiencies to be identified with a view to driving improvements in productivity, costs and carbon emissions.

Gulshanara Begum, Customer Care Coordinator at Sandwell Council, said: "We were impressed with the support from senior management and the enthusiasm shown by everyone to deliver the digital project. It's a real transformation!"

Understanding tenants' needs

Building Solutions deploys Customer Liaison Officers (CLOs) who work closely with tenants in order to ensure the service delivery caters to their unique needs. The needs of some tenants are greater, such as vulnerable tenants, with their properties being marked as 'red tag'. As a red tag property, Building Solutions sets out to not just refurbish the tenant's home, but to improve their quality of life by making their home unique to their needs. Such properties are also prioritised for early completion.

Red tag spotlight: Natalie Blewitt

An example of the red tag approach in action can be seen with tenant Natalie Blewitt. Natalie, her husband and their three children were living in a cluttered, cramped and cold home, and due to a chronic illness, which made her wheelchair bound, Natalie was forced to live downstairs and sleep in the living room, with little to no privacy.

Following a survey of the property, and several meetings between the family, Sandwell Council and Building Solutions, an 11-day timetable was drawn up for the refurbishment of the Blewitt family home. Preparation works saw the family's belongings packaged up into 70 boxes and stored in a container, while the children spent time with relatives and friends. When possible, Natalie and David stayed in the house.

The programme of works saw Building Solutions install new partition walls in order to reposition the kitchen and create a new downstairs bedroom for Natalie, with all the downstairs fittings and fixtures being Disability Discrimination Act compliant. Up to 11 trades worked simultaneously on site to successfully deliver the works within the tight time frame.

Delighted with the results, Natalie commented: "Before the work began, it was a depressing atmosphere for everyone. The improvements are going to make a huge difference to me and my family."

Councillor Ian Jones, Sandwell Council's cabinet member for jobs and economy at the time, said: "This is a great example of how improving someone's home is about much more than bricks and mortar, and plaster and paint. It's about improving the quality of people's lives, like those of Natalie and her family, not only now but for the foreseeable future."



Celebrating the 5,000th completed home



A CLO meeting residents



A typical refurbished kitchen



A typical refurbished bathroom

Milestone achievements: The 5,000th home

West Bromwich council tenant Debbie Garmston became the 5,000th resident to have their home refurbished.

Located in Hateley Heath, Debbie's home benefited from replacement central heating and electrical rewiring, plus a new kitchen and bathroom.

Debbie, who suffers with severe ill-health, said she could not have coped without the help and support of Building Solutions and the council. She commented: "I'm over the moon with what has been done. I can't thank everyone involved enough. It took a lot of planning, but everyone was respectful, took care of me and my home, and I am really pleased with the difference that it's made."

Trust and transparency

Building Solutions operates an open book approach in order to maximise levels of collaboration, trust and transparency within the long-term partnership.

In addition, a 'pain' or 'gain' mechanism is utilised to drive shared performance and financial targets. If costs are delivered below target levels, it results in the savings being shared equally between both parties. If costs exceeded target levels, it results in the difference being paid equally by both parties up to a guaranteed maximum price, after which Building Solutions becomes fully liable.

To further stimulate strong performance, financial penalties are incurred if performance falls below agreed KPIs.

This transparent approach has proven highly successful, with millions of pounds of cost savings having been generated over the duration of the partnership.

Collaborative working and strong communication

With the works spanning such a wide range of locations across Sandwell, strong communication and collaboration is vital. Therefore, Building Solutions ensures:

- » Site offices are shared with the council to maximise daily interaction.
- » Regular meetings are held to review progress and KPI performance.
- » Its team is available 24/7/365 to the council and residents.
- » Tablets and industry-leading digital platforms are utilised to allow stakeholders to view real-time performance data.

Strong supply chain management

The partnership sees Building Solutions manage a network of c.18 SMEs across its supply chain. A purchasing policy ensures that all the firms are locally based, resulting in Building Solutions injecting approximately £88m into the local community.

In fact, such is the strength of the supply chain that all but one of the firms have remained in place throughout the duration of the partnership. This provides continuity of service for the client, along with providing long-term investment in the community via jobs and training.

Minimising environmental impact

Rigorous environmental standards ensure that 98% of waste is recycled, diverting 25,000 tonnes of waste from landfill, and saving more than £1m in landfill tax.

To further minimise the environmental impact of the works, 98% of project employees are sourced from within 30 miles of Sandwell, and 48% are from within the Sandwell borough.

Flexibility and rapid mobilisation

20 staff are permanently assigned to the partnership, ensuring that Building Solutions can rapidly respond to any situation at short notice.

An example of this can be seen when the council approached Building Solutions to deliver more than 100 adapted bathrooms to vulnerable tenants over a short period of time. The team mobilised for delivery whilst still maintaining high levels of performance within the main programme.

On another occasion, the team installed and tested a tenant's new cooker in her newly refurbished flat within one hour of receiving the request.

Nurturing a strong culture of health and safety

Despite a cumulative 1.2m man-hours worked, the last three years saw just one minor accident.

This strong performance is thanks to the adoption of Building Solutions' behavioural safety programme, 'Think Again', and the use of best practice safety equipment, including dust cubes and saw muzzles (which minimise dust within the working area).

The standards displayed are thoroughly assessed and verified by Building Solutions' independent health and safety team, the council's Health and Safety Officer and ad hoc visits by the HSE.





Ensuring a Lean approach and continuous improvement

Building Solutions has invested in providing formal Lean training to all its senior staff. This, coupled with its commitment to digital solutions (such as digital data capture and drone surveys), enables the team to develop a culture of Lean principles designed to eliminate waste in the programme.

For example, although the initial brief for the Decent Homes contract stipulated that internal and external works should be conducted independently of each other, Building Solutions recognised this as an ineffective use of resources. To address this, Building Solutions developed a cost-efficient methodology and sequence of works that enabled the team to work inside and outside simultaneously.

The Lean approach was highly successful, enabling the turnaround time for a typical property to reduce from 12 weeks to just four weeks – and all without sacrificing quality, as evident from a Zero Defects rate of more than 90%.

Corporate social responsibility

Building Solutions' work goes further than refurbishing the properties – its wider focus is on providing added value by supporting the council to improve the lives of its tenants and their local communities.

Utilising a sector-leading social value framework (developed in partnership with Social Value UK), Building Solutions is able to quantify the exact financial worth of its social support. This model calculates that Building Solutions has delivered £3.47m worth of social value within Sandwell since the partnership began 15 years ago.



Examples of the CSR support provided include:

Creating apprenticeships to support young people

Building Solutions places a strong focus on providing opportunities for apprentices, enabling young people aged 16-24 to enter a career in construction. To date, the firm has employed more than 100 apprentices.

Crucially, Building Solutions ensures that students, and indeed all its people, have a clear route for progressing to more senior roles. For example, a recent apprentice successfully progressed to an administrator role, followed by studying to become a Quantity Surveyor. He commented: "I was able to demonstrate my capabilities and by studying at Wolverhampton University on day release I have a clearly defined professional career path."

Local MP Liam Byrne visited students on site and praised Building Solutions' approach, stating that the country "has a lot to learn" from the example being shown in Sandwell.

School refurbishment

Located close to Building Solutions' site office, Ocker Hill Infant and Nursery School in Tipton benefited from a wealth of refurbishment works that saw Building Solutions re-decorate the nursery, computer room and corridors, refurbish the staff room and staff toilets, repair walls, and replace guttering, soffits and fascias.

Headteacher Heidi Faulkner said: "The whole school community would like to offer their sincere thanks to Building Solutions – their efforts have helped to make our school a lovely place to be."



Strengthening students' interview skills

In collaboration with other partners from the framework, Building Solutions provided job interview coaching to students from ACE Academy in Tipton. More than 200 students aged 16-17 years old took part in mock interviews with a host of interviewers from scores of local employers.

Litter picking

Three stretches of Sandwell's historic canal network were cleaned up as part of the national Clean for the Queen campaign to mark Her Majesty's 90th birthday. Working with other key partners, Building Solutions and the team collected more than 100 bags of rubbish from along the canal banks.

Redecorating Farley Lodge

Building Solutions conducted the full redecoration of The Hall at Farley Lodge – a popular local community space. The works were done as part of Sandwell Council's 'Hands-on Help' scheme, which is designed to support local worthy causes.

Supporting ex-offenders

Building Solutions worked with Sandwell Council to fully refurbish a tired building in Smethwick and re-purpose it for use as a training centre to rehabilitate ex-offenders associated with knife crime. The comprehensive works encompassed a new boiler, central heating system, lighting, office space, blinds and more. Named 'The Hub', the re-purposed building has been a resounding success; so much so that its scope has since been extended to also offer construction training opportunities for young adults unable to access apprenticeships elsewhere.



Apprenticeships



Exterior works at Ocker Hill Infant and Nursery School



Thank-you messages from Ocker Hill Infant and Nursery School



Refurbishment of Farley Lodge



Spotlight on CSR

"It's a cliché to say that property is about more than bricks and mortar, but that's what Building Solutions have done – they've gone into the community to see what more they can do."

**Gulshanara Begum,
Customer Care Coordinator at Sandwell Council.**



Presenting to students



Presenting to students



Strengthening students' interviewing skills



Apprenticeships

Resident satisfaction

Following the refurbishment of each property, Building Solutions gives tenants the opportunity to voice their opinions about the firm's performance. After surveying a cross-section of tenants, Building Solutions achieved an exceptional average resident satisfaction score of 96%. Additionally, more than 300 letters of thanks have been received to date.

Mr and Mrs Hemming of Tipton commented: "The kitchen is so much brighter and actually looks bigger. We're so pleased with everything that we've been out and bought new utensils for the kitchen and new lampshades for the living room."

Customer satisfaction

Building Solutions recently scored an average of 9/10 in its partnership review, encompassing areas including Technical Expertise, HSE, Quality, Budget Adherence, and Value.

The council also rated Building Solutions "better" than its competitors, and was "very likely" to recommend it to others.

Simon Parry, Business Manager – Capital Investment at Sandwell Council, said: "First and foremost, the partnership is about improving people's properties – council properties – and VINCI Facilities have done an excellent job throughout."

Accolades

The partnership between Building Solutions and Sandwell Council has been recognised as sector-leading, having received several awards including the Celebrating Construction Award for Value, and the National Federation of Builders Award for Delivering Social Value.

Additionally, Building Solutions has been honoured with five years of consecutive awards from the Considerate Constructors Scheme Annual Awards, with all scores exceeding 40 points (equivalent to Excellent and Exceptional).



BUILDING SOLUTIONS

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