

# Smethwick tower blocks transformed

HA Magazine reports on the successful completion of refurbishment work on three high-rise residential buildings belonging to a Midland council, the result of which has been a huge uplift in terms of energy performance and the sense of community.

While many local authorities across the country have chosen to demolish their outdated tower blocks, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council in the West Midlands has implemented a policy of radical refurbishment; not simply transforming their appearance, but turning the once run down flats into desirable places to live.



Now, with work completed on "The Crofts" it brings to 33 the number of tower blocks which have been refurbished across the district since the programme began. So after a two year, £11 million contract for specialist Keepmoat, the 270 homes within Ashcroft, Birchcroft and Elmcroft houses have seen a series of improvements which have included flat-to-pitched roof conversions, together with the installation of an insulated cladding system and new energy efficient windows; as well as striking new balcony enclosures.

The latter have been supplied by specialist manufacturer, Windoor UK Ltd, and installed by McKean Developments: a contractor well used to tackling conversions of the old and sometimes challenging outdoor spaces. Darren Cooper leader of Sandwell Borough Council said: "I'm extremely proud of the work we have been able to do here at The Crofts. These improvements have made a massive impact on both the internal and external appearance of the blocks, as well as the local skyline.

"And the much improved insulation offered by the eye-catching cladding and new energy efficient windows, and roof panels will help reduce fuel bills for tenants. This fantastic project represents a significant amount of investment into Smethwick and complements our other regeneration work in the Windmill Eye area which is creating around 200 much needed quality homes."

Neil Baxter, New Business Director at Keepmoat, added: "We hope this project has

made a lasting impact on the wider area of Sandwell, the finished work looks fantastic and the residents are really pleased with the results."

Thanks to the installation of the Windoor balcony enclosures across all three Crofts, every occupant now has fresh opportunity to enjoy the view of their rejuvenated neighbourhood.

Tony Davies, the Senior Architect/Technologist on the project for Sandwell Council, reflected: "These blocks, constructed during the early 1960s, had no wall insulation while the windows were single glazed and in poor condition. By carrying out the substantial improvements it is estimated that, in total, approximately 9600 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions will be saved every year.

"There were several reasons for enclosing the balconies at the Crofts: the main ones being aesthetics, problems with degradation to the concrete balcony slabs, and to reduce pigeon infestation which we find is a problem with almost all of our high-rise blocks.

"We do therefore upgrade the balconies to the high-rise blocks whenever we carry out external refurbishment works, but this usually takes the form of tinted toughened glass panels on a stainless steel framing system to replace the old painted steel and wired glass. On this occasion, due to the size of the project, we took the opportunity to trial the balcony enclosures which has proved to be very successful. The tenants now have the opportunity of having an 'enclosed' sun-room



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or an open balcony, simply by sliding back the glass panels to the enclosure."

With single balconies on one elevation and twin balcony spaces on the other, the latter spanning 6700 mm wide on the exterior, the System 1000 Light single glazed units being split horizontally to provide privacy. All of the aluminium extrusions were polyester powder coated RAL 7012 Grey.

Overall The Crofts can be seen as a significant success for all involved: impacting as it has on a district which was rated 12th out of 326 in terms of deprivation in a 2010 study of the country. Furthermore the contract has seen a high proportion of local labour employed and 14 apprenticeships created in the Sandwell area which is ranked seventh highest out of 406 local authorities for the number of Jobseekers claimants amongst 18-24 year olds. These three tower blocks are not merely visibly transformed residences, they are beacons of hope.

**1 & 2:** The exterior refurbishment of "The Crofts" has impacted on the skyline alongside a busy route into Birmingham and dramatically improved the energy performance of the 270 high-rise homes.



Stand C4