

Space in the sun

John Baillie reports on an award winning council refurbishment scheme in Smethwick, West Midlands, which included the installation of highly efficient balcony enclosure systems to three high-rise tower blocks and helped transform the prospects of the local community.



The Crofts tower blocks have benefitted from an £11m refurbishment programme

Three tired, run down tower blocks, collectively known as The Crofts, have benefitted from an £11m refurbishment programme over the last two years. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has transformed 270 high-rise homes in what was once the 12th ranked most deprived area in the country¹ into one of the most desirable areas for social housing in the West Midlands.

The plan was to make more than physical and environmental improvements to The Crofts. The project is a double award winner, one of which is *The International CSR Excellence Awards*. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was found to be at the heart of this development, securing the *Bronze Award* in the *Local Authority* category.

In July 2012, the Job Seekers Allowance claimant count for 18-24 year olds was the 7th highest out of 406 local authorities across the UK. Working in conjunction with contractor, Keepmoat, the aim was to improve people's lives in this disadvantaged area through training, employment, establishing partnerships with local charities, utilising local business and providing help and advice to local schools, residents and the wider community — 46 local people were employed on site, together with 14 apprentices and 10 work experience placements.

Winter packs for the elderly and the establishment of food banks are just two of the charitable areas of support given in the neighbourhood. It has been acknowledged that this exemplar model of corporate social responsibility goes far beyond a standard building contract to a scheme that will provide benefits long after its completion.

Structural improvements

In terms of structure, the three blocks of Ashcroft, Birchcroft and Elmcroft have undergone significant improvements in energy efficiency. Constructed in the 1960s,



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the homes had no wall insulation and were single glazed. As a result of the refurbishment, an insulated cladding system has been installed together with new energy-efficient windows and the former concrete balconies have been transformed into stunning balcony enclosures. These new balconies, manufactured by Windoor UK, have totally transformed the external façade, which also contributes to improving the visual appearance of the wider area.

Darren Cooper, leader of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, says: "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."

Neil Baxter, new business director at Keepmoat, adds: "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."

Reducing carbon emissions

It is estimated that in total approximately 9,600 tonnes of CO₂ emissions will be saved every year. In addition, residents will benefit from reduced fuel bills due to increased energy efficiencies. The Windoor balcony enclosures capture heat from natural solar gain, which will permeate the inner rooms when those inner doors are left open. Alternatively, when the glazing is opened up and so too those inner doors, they can naturally ventilate the apartment. Balcony enclosures also protect the main fabric of

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the building against the elements and unwanted vermin. It provides the ideal place for residents to sit and enjoy reading, hobbies, or just enjoy the view. Balcony enclosures have been shown to be used for up to 100 days per year more than a traditional open balcony, particularly in the cooler spring and autumn months, contributing to improved wellbeing.

The balconies are versatile; they can be enclosed, partially or fully open allowing the residents to set their own comfort levels. For local authorities, they also

continue to contribute towards the requirement for outside amenity space.

Successful installation

The senior architect/technologist on the project, Tony Davieson, for Sandwell Council, reflects: "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 have proved to be very successful. The tenants now have the opportunity of having an 'enclosed' sun-room or an open balcony, simply by sliding back the glass panels to the enclosure."

Windoor's specialist installer McKean Developments, worked alongside Keepmoat to install the 270 balconies on the three blocks. Featuring both single and double width stacks, the pre-fabricated balconies were quick to install and erected once all other external wet works were complete.

¹Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010

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270 balconies were installed across the three tower blocks of Ashcroft, Birchcroft and Elmcroft