



Research Methodology

Revised June 2018

AREA DEFINITIONS IN SANDWELL

Geography across the Country is a complex subject, and Sandwell is no exception. Whilst much of the data produced by *Research Sandwell* and other agencies such as the *Office for National Statistics (ONS)* is based on administrative boundaries, there are boundaries that are commonly used within the Borough that have been derived locally. This note aims to give an overview of the different boundaries and the situations in which they are often used.

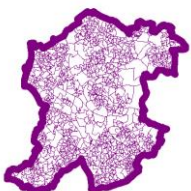
Why do we need Small Area Statistics?

- To enable the targeting of resources
- To enable the definition of priority areas and the provision of baseline data for those areas
- Monitoring and evaluation of programmes

How do we derive data for Small Areas?

We are able to produce socio-economic and operational data for the majority of geographies because most data is geographically referenced in some way – this means it is either allocated to a very small area which can act as a building block to aggregate to match larger boundaries, or it is grid referenced (and so can be pinpointed on a map), or more commonly, it is address based. Postcode or address data can be matched to a directory file such as *AddressPoint* or *CodePoint*, meaning that the data can then be mapped, area boundaries overlaid and then data aggregated to match those boundaries.

Current Geographical Areas in Sandwell



1. Output Areas

These Census areas are among the smallest building blocks in terms of small area data. There are currently 942 Output Areas (OAs) in Sandwell. Some Census data is available at this detailed level (although there is some randomisation of data to ensure that individuals cannot be identified), however other data sources are generally not published at this level due to confidentiality issues.



Prior to the 2001 Census, these small building blocks were known as Enumeration Districts (EDs).

2. Super Output Areas

Super Output Areas (SOAs) are a geography designed for the collection and publication of small area statistics. These are groups of Census Output Areas - two levels of Super Output Areas (SOAs) have been defined by the Office for National Statistics, each nesting inside the layer above.



- There are 186 lower layer SOAs, sometimes known as LSOAs. These nest into the wards that existed before 2004 (see [Wards](#)), and have a population of around 1,500.
- 38 middle layer SOAs (sometimes known as MSOAs) were defined in consultation with Council officers. These are groups of lower layer SOAs, which can cross ward boundaries. Local Sandwell boundaries were taken into account when these were defined.

The aim of Super Output Areas is to provide a consistent set of boundaries with similar sized populations, that will not change over time. This allows comparison across the country as well as within Local Authority areas. The *Office for National Statistics* are gradually increasing the number of datasets that they publish for SOAs – the SOA level chosen depends on the type of data (to avoid disclosure). Most Census data is also available at all levels.

3. Wards

Prior to 2000, wards formed the basis of the majority of operational and socio-economic statistics published in Sandwell. Although these areas have similar populations, making comparisons reliable, they are purely administrative boundaries, which take no account of natural communities or geography. There are only 24 wards in the Borough, which does not provide the level of focus required for targeting of resources, and being administrative boundaries, wards are subject to boundary changes (which did happen in Sandwell in 2004). This makes any monitoring of change over time difficult. However, these boundaries are of obvious interest to elected members.



4. Towns

The six Towns in Sandwell are based on Wards. They were originally defined using pre-2004 wards, but were altered to take account of the 2004 ward boundary changes. The Town boundaries vary in size, and if they continue to be based on wards, are subject to change in the future. The size of the Towns are such that comparisons between town are of little relevance, and targeting of resources on this broad basis is difficult.





5. Parliamentary Constituencies

There are four parliamentary constituencies which cover Sandwell – West Bromwich East, West Bromwich West, Warley and Halesowen & Rowley Regis. The boundaries of these are based on 2004 wards, and each cover seven wards (four of those within Halesowen & Rowley Regis fall within Dudley borough). These are purely administrative boundaries, and very little data is published locally for these areas.

6. Learning Communities

These are groups of Sandwell schools working in partnership. Each Learning Community has regular meetings where they share good practice and discuss issues. The 7 communities are loosely based on the location of a school, but some schools are not part of the community they are geographically located within.

There are no geographical boundaries of the areas as such, but they cover the areas of Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury, West Bromwich Central and West Bromwich North.

7. Other areas

A number of ad-hoc boundaries exist (or have existed) in the Borough, including the Greets Green NDC area (an initiative which finished in March 2010), SureStart areas, and Urban Living HMRA. Whilst some of these have been defined on the basis of local neighbourhoods, others are defined more on the basis of land availability or development opportunities, for example. Another wider area used in health is the Sandwell and West Birmingham CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group), which covers the whole of Sandwell and a small part of Birmingham.

Table 1. Geographical Areas in Sandwell, as at April 2011

	No. of Areas	Population per Area
Census Enumeration Districts	561	10 to 120
Census Output Areas	942	100 to 600
Lower Layer Super Output Areas	186	1,100 to 2,800
Middle Layer Super Output Areas	38	5,500 to 12,100
Wards	24	11,500 to 15,000
Towns	6	37,800 to 75,400
Parliamentary Constituencies	4	87,300 to 92,200

Source: Research Sandwell.



Issues surrounding data collection and publication at different geographical levels

Research Sandwell and other agencies hold a wealth of data at all geographical levels, some of which has been published on [Sandwell Trends](#)

- Much Council-held data is now postcoded, enabling aggregation to any geographical area. However it is necessary to ensure certain criteria are met in terms of disclosure control and data reliability.
- Census data is held down to the Output Area level, and so this wealth of data can only be aggregated using OAs or SOAs as the basis. This can introduce some level of inaccuracy where OAs/SOAs don't nest easily within a larger ad-hoc boundary.
 - This is a particular issue in terms of calculating population bases for ad-hoc geographical areas to enable comparison of rates or percentages. These problems can be avoided if aggregated Output Areas or Super Output Areas are used. Also, population estimates are now produced by ONS at Super Output Area level on an annual basis, enabling much more accurate rate calculation.
- There is increasing demand for data comparison, both within Sandwell (to allow targeting of resources) and with other authorities (to enable benchmarking and evidence of “what works”). To enable this, datasets need to be comparable across areas, both in terms of the actual indicators available, and in terms of the similarity of areas to be compared. The increasing use of Super Output Areas particularly meets this demand – both in terms of the range of data being made available at a national level, and in comparability of areas in terms of size.
- The large number of geographical areas being used across the Borough has a detrimental effect in terms of ease of use and understanding of data – too many areas with similar names only causes confusion as to which geographical scale is being referred to, and this is compounded over time by boundary changes. Any reporting of indicators on a geographical basis should make it clear what type of area data refers to, and on what basis ad hoc boundaries have been created.

