



Work Outline / Terms of Reference

Improving Standards of Re-let Properties Inquiry

Reporting to Homes Overview and Scrutiny Committee

<p>Our key question:</p>	<p>How can the Council improve the quality of its housing for Council tenants?</p>
<p>1. How is O&S adding value through this work?</p>	<p>Context</p> <p><i>In January 2023, the Council declared a ‘housing emergency’ in Birmingham. Shortly afterwards, the Housing Ombudsman published a special report into Birmingham which made recommendations into four key themes: repairs; record keeping; complaints handling, and compensation. A Regulatory Notice was also issued against the Council in May 2023. All Members receive daily complaints from tenants highlighting significant concerns about the quality of their council housing. Local media such as the Birmingham Evening Mail are also regularly featuring stories which also draw attention to real life cases. During the January 2023 debate in Council, it was reported that 29% of the proportion of Council homes in Birmingham do not meet the Decent Homes standard (compared with 7.8% nationally). This year, the Social Housing Regulation Bill has been introduced, which places new responsibilities on landlords such as Birmingham City Council.</i></p> <p><i>To respond to this urgent challenge in service delivery and to provide the standards that social housing providers should meet, the Council’s City Housing service is undertaking a broad transformation programme. This wide ranging programme is being delivered in the specific context of the significant Council’s budget gap and financial recovery programme. It will remain a priority, and the O&S Committee will play an important role in providing oversight and driving improvements in the service.</i></p> <p>Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Framework, 2021</p> <p><i>This framework outlines suggested criteria to ensure inquiries add value. This inquiry meets the criteria listed below:</i></p> <p><i>A high degree of public interest, political importance or sensitivity.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Issue identified by members as a key issue for public.</i> • <i>Public interest issue covered in local media.</i> <p><i>Implications for the City Council’s wider governance role</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>New Government guidance or legislation.</i> <p><i>Service delivery and efficient management processes, where there is:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Concern about service performance.</i> • <i>A high level of service user dissatisfaction with the service.</i> • <i>A high priority afforded to the service by customers/users.</i> • <i>High level of budgetary commitment to the service/ policy area.</i> • <i>Issues raised by external audit reports.</i>



	<p>Improvement Plan and Governance Review</p> <p><i>It is important that all future work carried out by Overview and Scrutiny Committees contributes towards the Council’s Improvement and Recovery Plan. This will incorporate the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Governance (CfGS) Review, November 2023, which highlighted 13 recommendations for the Council to urgently undertake to improve the quality of its decision making.</i></p> <p><i>Recommendation 5 from this CfGS review is: ‘Reframe the scrutiny work programme to focus on the Council’s improvement and recovery priorities’ and outlines 4 specific areas O&S activity should focus on. This inquiry links in with: ‘Critical Performance Issues emerging by “exception”’.</i></p> <p>Focus</p> <p><i>Given the transformation programme in place and the new financial context the Council is operating on, the O&S Committee has considered with City Housing where its work could best add value for improving the conditions of housing stock. As a result, it has been agreed that the O&S Committee will focus how it can recommend service improvements in the Council’s standards for re-letting void properties. This will contribute towards addressing some of the concerns highlighted by the Regulator and Ombudsman, but also importantly also inform the new Housing Repairs and Maintenance contract.</i></p> <p>Adding Value</p> <p><i>Specifically, this inquiry will provide an opportunity to inform the development of a new standards for the reletting of properties and in turn, the future Housing Repairs and Maintenance contract. While City Housing would still have completed this work as part of ‘business as usual’, the work undertaken as part of this inquiry will ensure this is better informed and effective.</i></p> <p><i>Note the intention of this Inquiry is not to duplicate any existing work, but to complement and enhance it. The inquiry presents an opportunity for Members to use their unique insight to consider these challenges in a different way, and as a result make recommendations which can make a tangible difference to the housing for tenants in this city.</i></p>
<p>2. What needs to be done?</p>	<p><i>The Inquiry will receive evidence from a range of stakeholders to consider the following key issues:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• What do we know about the condition of Council properties becoming void? What are our current standards for re-letting? How are we currently performing against these standards? What are tenants telling us about our service and the standard of the property (when they are letting a previously void property)? How are we responding to any complaints and what are the outcomes?</i> <i>• What should our standards for re-let properties be? What are the standards for other Registered Providers and Local Authorities in the region? How do we currently compare to this? How could we meet these standards, in particular given the financial context of the Council?</i> <i>• What are the specific concerns raised by the Housing Ombudsman and Regulator for Social Housing? How are City Housing</i>



	<p><i>responding to these concerns? What progress have they made, and what still needs to be done?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>How does this feature in City Housing’s transformation programme? What is the progress and impact of this programme to date? What are the challenges to overcome in the future? What other areas of the service does this link to? What is our proactive approach towards housing management and residents’ looking after their properties?</i>
<p>3. What timescale do we propose to do this in?</p>	<p><i>As the original agreed scope of this inquiry has been reconsidered, the timescales have been reviewed and revised. The title has also changed to, more accurately, capture its focus.</i></p> <p><i>For clarity, the original Terms of Reference had been agreed by the Committee on 21 September 2023 with evidence gathering to commence in November 2023. On 23 November, the Committee verbally agreed to revise the Terms of Reference to better reflect where it could add value; its revised focus will be specifically on void properties. A revised Terms of Reference will be agreed at a later Homes Overview and Scrutiny Committee.</i></p> <p>Scoping: <i>Revised outline Terms of Reference and delivery plan: to be agreed at O&S Committee on 22 February 2024.</i></p> <p><i>Evidence gathering to commence in December 2023 and conclude in April 2024.</i></p> <p><i>The Homes O&S Committee intends to report and make recommendations to Council. A date will be confirmed.</i></p>
<p>4. What outcomes are we looking to achieve?</p>	<p><i>This inquiry will make recommendations which will contribute towards:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Make Council homes safer for tenants and improve standards (Outcome 1)</i> <i>Improve tenant satisfaction with their Council Homes and the services they receive (Outcome 2)</i> <i>Inform the new Repairs and Maintenance contract for City Housing (Outcome 3)</i> <p>Birmingham City Council’s Corporate Plan 2022-2026 <i>Priority 11: Increase affordable, safe, green housing. Priority 12: Tackle homelessness Priority 13: Tackle health inequalities</i></p>
<p>5. What is the best way to achieve these outcomes and what routes will we use?</p>	<p><i>A Task and Finish Group is the recommended approach by the Committee to gather and review evidence for this inquiry. This Task and Finish group will comprise Committee Members and will be cross party.</i></p> <p>Stakeholders <i>The following stakeholders will be requested to provide information to this inquiry:</i></p>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birmingham City Council's City Housing Directorate • Council's Housing contractors • Local Government Association (LGA) • Social Housing Providers in Birmingham and West Midlands • Tenants <p><i>Other stakeholders may be identified by the Task and Finish Group during the inquiry.</i></p> <p><i>The inquiry also welcomes suggestions for additional stakeholders to seek evidence from all stakeholders listed above and Members of the Council. All suggestions should be highlighted to the lead officer listed below.</i></p> <p><i>Stakeholders will be invited to provide evidence in a variety of formats. This will be finalised as part of the scoping stage. In general terms:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For organisations, this may be information in writing and/or a face-to-face presentation. Organisations will be advised of the relevant format for their evidence individually when invited to provide information to the inquiry. • For tenants, the inquiry group is currently determining the best approach. This will be informed by the current type and nature of the information collected by City Housing. <p><i>The inquiry group also intends to undertake site visits to empty (void) Council properties to support their inquiry.</i></p> <p>Members <i>All Members of the Council will also be invited to provide evidence. In addition to this, all members of the Council may request to attend evidence gathering sessions. If a Member is interested in this, they are invited to contact the lead officer for further information.</i></p>
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Member / Officer Leads

Lead Member:	<i>Chair: Cllr. Ken Wood</i>
Members of the Task and Finish Group:	<i>Councillors Saqib Khan; Mohammed Idrees; Lauren Rainbow; Penny Wagg</i>
Lead Officer and support:	<i>Lead Officer: Amelia Wiltshire</i> <i>Support Officer: Jayne Bowles</i> <i>City Housing are also providing expertise through their Asset Management, Housing Management and Strategic Enabling teams.</i>