



# Birmingham Council Housing Investment Programme 2017/18 to 2019/20

## Call In by the Housing and Homes O&S Committee

### 1 Request for “Call-In”

1.1 On 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018 Cabinet took a decision to:

- Note the update against 2017/18 programme delivery;
- Approve the Full Business Case Appendix 1 for the scope of works to be included in the Council Housing Improvement Programme 2018/19 to 2019/20 including fire suppression systems at an estimated capital cost of £129.890 million, together with adaptations at an estimated cost of £6.905 million over the same period.
- Authorise the Service Director, Housing and Head of Capital Investment to allocate the Housing Investment works and place orders with the recently procured service providers in accordance with the scope of those contracts.
- Note the allocation of £105.913 million for clearance and new build activity included within the Public Sector Housing Capital budget of £242.708 million, with specific scheme details to be the subject of further reports as appropriate sites are identified
- Authorise the City Solicitor to negotiate, execute, seal and complete all necessary documents to give effect to the above recommendations.

1.2 A request for Call-In was made to the Housing and Homes Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee by Councillors Henley and Leddy on 03 April 2018.

1.3 The Housing and Homes O&S Committee met on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2017 to consider the matter. In doing so, Members heard from Cllr Peter Griffiths, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homes, Rob James, Service Director and Martin Tolley, Head of Service. Eddie Howard, Deputy Chair of the City HLB, also attended.



## 2 The Discussion

### Reasons for the Call-In

- 2.1 At the meeting, Cllrs Henley and Leddy stated that the focus of the call-in was the decision to amend the programme to include fire suppression measures (i.e. sprinklers) at a total cost of £31m. They highlighted the following reasons for the request for call-in:
1. *the decision appears to be contrary to the Budget or one of the 'policy framework' plans or strategies* – the decision to spend the money on sprinklers leads to a £7m overspend on the budget;
  5. *the Executive appears to have overlooked some relevant consideration in arriving at its decision* – the scientific evidence supports the case that Birmingham's tower blocks are already safe, in accordance with Building Regulations, so the money could be better spent elsewhere;
  7. *the decision appears to be particularly "novel" and therefore likely to set an important precedent* – the proposal to retrofit sprinklers is novel, particularly as the requirements of the sprinkler system may render other fire protection methods (e.g. compartmentalisation) invalid.
  9. *the decision appears to give rise to significant legal, financial or propriety issues* – an additional spend of £31m is significant;
  11. *the decision appears to give rise to significant issues in relation to a particular District* - the issue is one of significance for Brandwood ward, where there are a large number of tower blocks, many over 50 years old and with many issues (relating to size and maintenance).

### Cabinet Member and Officer Response

- 2.2 The Cabinet Member responded that the Cabinet Report in June endorsed the action taken following the fire at Grenfell Tower and stated that the financial implications would be included in the amended capital programme and budget. The Budget was approved by Cabinet and City Council earlier this year. The decision under consideration today simply seeks to make adjustments to the three year capital investment programme and to allow the allocation of work. The decision has been made with the full support of tenants through the City Housing Liaison Board.
- 2.3 Rob James, Service Director, noted that the budget approved in February referred to funding of £31m for fire prevention methods. The briefing note submitted contained further evidence from different sources on the use of sprinklers, which shows that scientific evidence has been taken into account. There is support for this from a report from the London Assembly, the LGA and the West Midlands Fire Service.

### Discussion

- 2.4 In the ensuing discussion, the following points were made by members of the Committee:
- The evidence presented in the briefing note is not hard evidence, but a series of quotes from bodies with an interest in this area;



- As such it could be questioned as to whether retrofitting all tower blocks was the right approach, or whether each should be assessed on a case by case basis;
- The financial details were further explained, notably that the figures in the report referred to years two and three of a three year programme;
- There was clear support from tenants for sprinklers;
- There was also clear support from the West Midlands Fire Service;
- It was noted that there are many other fire protection measures in place in Birmingham's tower blocks and these have worked well in the past.

2.5 Cllr Henley informed the committee that the scientific evidence from real fires and experiments in full size buildings has been included in the Building Regulations, which do not require sprinklers in buildings less than 30 meters high for new build and do not require any retrofitting to existing buildings.

2.6 Whilst committee members had a number of questions and concerns, nonetheless there was clear support for the retrofitting of sprinklers.

### 3 The Committee Resolution

3.1 The Committee resolved to call-in the decision for reconsideration by Cabinet, on the grounds that:  
*5 – the Executive appears to have overlooked some relevant consideration in arriving at its decision.*

3.2 The Committee therefore formally asks the Cabinet to reconsider its decision; in particular that Cabinet carefully considers all the information and evidence available to assure itself that this large expenditure is wholly justified. An alternative approach might be to consider each case individually, and ensure each tower block has its own particular needs met in terms of safety and saving lives.

#### Housing and Homes Overview and Scrutiny Committee