

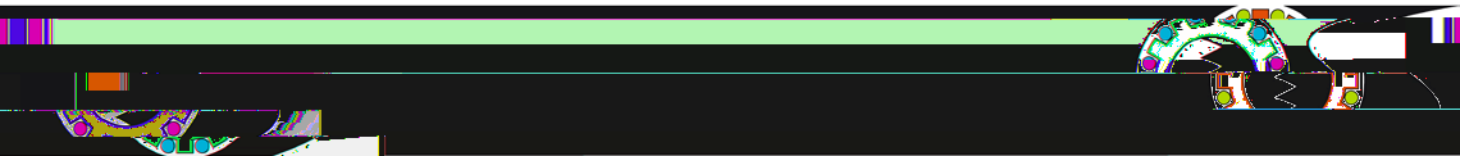
Working with Housing Associations

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A report from Overview & Scrutiny





Working with Housing Associations

Further information regarding this report can be obtained from:

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Preface

Councillor Majid Mahmood, Chairman Partnership, Contract Performance and Third Sector Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Social housing has been a longstanding interest of mine from both my professional life and work as a councillor. In this brief inquiry, Committee colleagues and I have looked at how we can make the most of opportunities to work with Housing Associations. At this time of unparalleled financial challenge for local government, it is essential that we review how we work in partnership to achieve our ambitions while making the most of increasingly limited resources. Our Inquiry has proved to be timely as the government announced plans at the end of January to report on the role of local authorities in housing, including work with Housing Associations, by the end of this year.

We are not able to meet the ongoing housing growth challenge or indeed make the best use of available housing stock alone. Equally we need to work more effectively with other organisations on vital areas beyond bricks and mortar including: health and wellbeing priorities; community safety and improving our neighbourhood environments. In Birmingham we are fortunate in having one of the largest concentrations of Housing Associations in the country. They are important as local employers as well as housing providers and we see their expertise, local knowledge and commitment as central to our future working. We welcome the main message from our Inquiry that all parties are keen to develop and formalise, where appropriate, existing working relationships.

An Inquiry is only as sound as the evidence it receives and I would like to thank all witnesses for the time

Summary of Recommendations

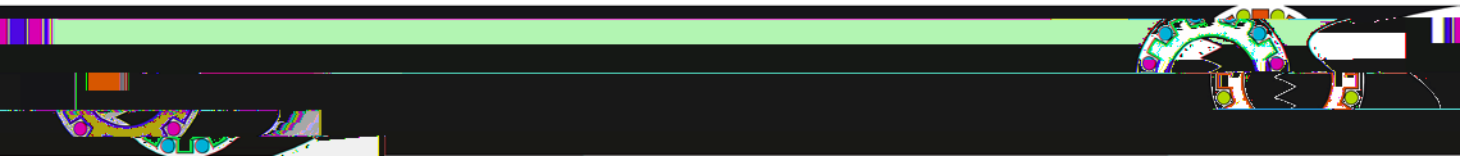
	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	<p>That a clear & integrated framework for partnership working with Registered Providers at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Strategic- District (including District Committees as well as District Housing Panels) and- Neighbourhood levels (including Ward Committees) <p>be agreed jointly with Birmingham Social Housing Partnership (BSHP) members.</p>	<p>Leader of the Council Executive Members for Local Services</p>	

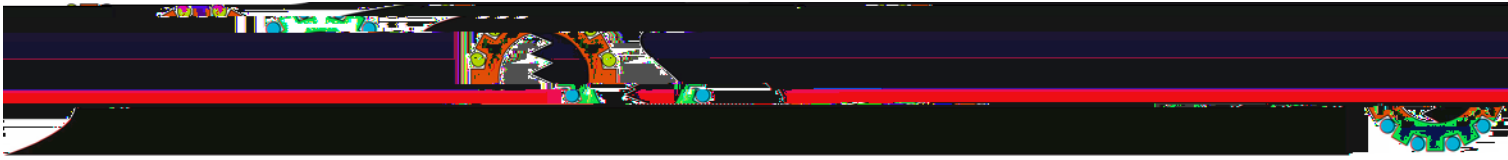
		and Wellbeing Executive Members for Local Services and BSHP Executive Board	
R08	That a joint neighbourhood management scheme be piloted to inform ongoing work on the feasibility of lead neighbourhood managers with BSHP members in appropriate localities	Deputy Leader Executive Members for Local Services	October 2014
R09	That dedicated work on opportunities for joint procurement be undertaken with BSHP members with an emphasis on supporting local economies.	Cabinet Member for Commissioning, Contracting and Improvement and BSHP Executive	October 2014
R10	That an assessment of progress against the recommendations and suggestions made in this report should be presented to the Partnership, Contract Performance and Third Sector Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Housing Transformation Board	Deputy Leader	November 2014

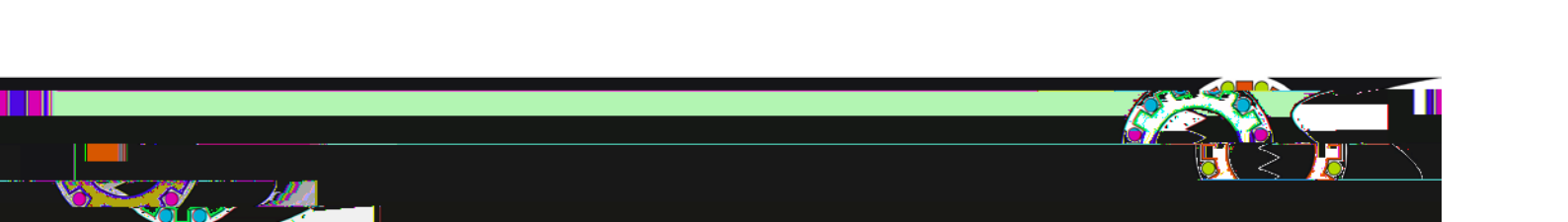
1 Introduction

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Registered Providers or Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), popularly known as Housing Associations, have a long history in Birmingham and play an important role in providing homes and services in neighbourhoods across the city. They are essentially third sector organisations, set up as independent not-for-profit businesses and some are social enterprises. They own over 40,000 properties in the city, which accounts for around a third of all social housing in Birmingham and includes provision for many vulnerable people.
- 1.1.2 Birmingham has one of the largest concentrations of Housing Associations in the country. While each Registered Provider determines its own allocation policy, all are required to select tenants according to housing need. The majority of tenants come through Council nominations from its waiting list or housing register. Accordingly the Council is dependent on its nominations agreement¹ with Housing Associations to house many Birmingham people as well as their investment in new and existing homes.
- 1.1.3 Housing Associations generally offer tenants an assured tenancy whereas the Council provides secure tenancies, but housing associations generally try to ensure that their tenants enjoy similar rights and obligations as council tenants. With an assured tenancy tenants do not have the right to buy but may benefit from the right to acquire (eligibility is limited and is dependent upon the age, location and client group the property was built for²). Registered Providers may also operate shared ownership schemes to help people who cannot afford to buy their own homes outright.
- 1.1.4 However, Housing Associations are not only responsible for properties but many have diversified to deliver other services to Birmingham residents including: employment and training; regeneration and projects with children and young people. They are experienced in providing support to local residents who are facing financial difficulties, which is more important than ever in the current economic climate. As businesses, they also contribute towards Birmingham's overall economic growth.
- 1.1.5 At local level, some





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- x An initial introductory item on national and local developments in housing at our Committee meeting held in November 2013;
 - x Two formal, web-streamed Committee meetings (held in December 2013 and January 2014) which were dedicated to evidence gathering; and
 - x A public call for evidence and invitation to all City Councillors to share their experience of working with Housing Associations.

1.4 Key Lines of Enquiry

1.4.1 Members of the Committee set the following key lines of enquiry for contributors to focus on in evidence gathering sessions

- x What is the current legal and policy framework within which the Council and Housing Associations operate?
- x Which Housing Associations are operating in Birmingham, where and with what types of properties?
- x What are the Council's current ambitions, priorities and plans for housing and how do these align with those of Housing Associations in the city?
- x What are the opportunities for future Council working with Housing Associations?
- x How can Housing Associations work directly with Councillors?
- x What is the potential for alternative service delivery by Housing Associations, what is needed for this to happen and where might it be most feasible?

2 Findings

2.1 Birmingham Context

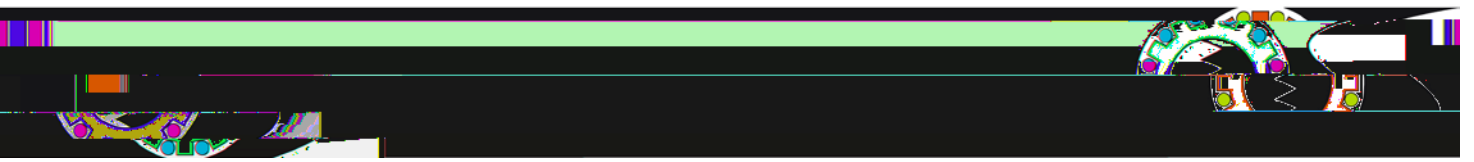
2.1.1 Based on Homes and Communities Agency data from March 2013⁴, there are at least 65 Housing Associations operating in Birmingham. In housing terms they:

- x Manage 'general needs' properties for social rent;
- x Provide low cost, shared-ownership homes; and
- x Offer supported housing or accommodation for older people and other vulnerable groups such as people with learning difficulties, people with mental health problems and young people leaving care.

⁴ See http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/ourwork/registered_provider-information

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- 2.1.2 From 2011 figures⁵, Housing Associations are the principal provider of social housing in sixteen Birmingham wards and have a significant presence in many others as detailed in Appendix 2.
- 2.1.3 The five wards where they have the largest concentrations of stock (over 2000 general needs



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input across several areas of service, where it is typically most difficult to “make things happen”. Registered Providers highlighted particular difficulties in identifying which officers have lead and supporting responsibilities within the Council relevant to their work as more staff leave the authority.

- 2.2.8 Both Housing Associations and Council Officers we heard from recognised the continuing need for a strategic-level partnership structure, in addition to local District or neighbourhood-level arrangements, to coordinate work and to make the most of “the opportunity waiting to happen” which they saw from their renewed commitment to partnership working. They saw a need for any overarching structure to allow for flexible membership to reflect the diversity of providers operating in the city, in terms of size, history and specialisms. It was clear from both Council and Housing Association representatives that a ‘one size fits all’ arrangement would not be effective. Council Officers have undertaken to circulate the draft proposal widely to ensure all interested parties have opportunity to influence the final arrangements.
- 2.2.9 While Housing Associations who took part in themed discussions expressed their wish for closer working in a number of areas, officers emphasised that many Registered Providers work with several authorities across several regions which may limit capacity to meet the engagement aspirations identified in evidence gathering. For example Midland Heart, as one of the largest housing and regeneration groups in the country, operates across 54 local authority areas although over 42% of all its stock is located within Birmingham.
- 2.2.10 Equally all local authorities are seeking to work more closely with Housing Associations at this time of unprecedented financial challenge for local government which requires the City being clear on its offer and terms for engagement. Reduced capacity in all organisations and some sense of historic mistrust between parts of the Council and Housing Associations, potentially linked to misconceptions of Housing Associations resources, particularly surpluses, were identified as issues to be worked through jointly.
- 2.2.11 Nevertheless the willingness of Registered Providers, Cabinet Members and lead officers to develop partnership working was clear from session discussions and the next year was seen as critical to developing relationships and governance. BSHP representatives noted a change in working and willingness to work differently in the last two years which they welcomed,
- We’re hearing very different levels of noise from this administration at all levels and a different sense of political will. ⁶
- 2.2.12 There was no consensus on how Councilors might best engage with a future Strategic Housing Partnership but all partners saw this involvement as an important aspect of the successor body.
- 2.2.13 We were encouraged by collective agreement on the need to alter the focus of joint planning towards strategic working and planning ahead for early interventions over responsive activities. However all witnesses recognised the continued need for neighbourhood-level ‘troubleshooting.’

⁶ Evidence gathering session – 20th January 2014.

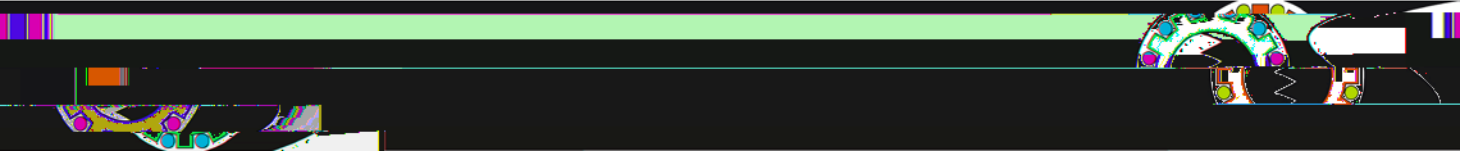


2.3 Devolution and District Housing Panels

- 2.3.1 The Council has identified services at local level as being central to everything it delivers and localism has been identified as a driver for increased co-operation between local authorities and Housing Associations in many parts of the country.

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- x *Community Safety* – for example sharing and aligning tenancy enforcement resources and expertise more cost effectively particularly around Anti-Social Behaviour and more complex cases linked to wider ‘Think Family’ work being undertaken alongside third sector partners and neighbourhood policing teams. There was particular interest in revisiting the involvement of Housing Associations in neighbourhood tasking
 - x *Environmental Co-ordination and interventions* – including clean-ups and maintenance, particularly as part of work under the ‘Our Place’ initiative (previously Neighbourhood Community Budget);
 - x *Making best use of available housing stock and housing mobility* – although this process has already begun with the establishment of the West Midlands Best Use of Stock group in 2012, it was considered that considerable scope remains to develop this further at both neighbourhood level and through tenancy strategies and policies to improve problems of overcrowding and under-occupation.

2.4.5 One example of West Midlands Best Use of Stock Groups success we heard about was joint working between the Council’s Audit function (Birmingham Audit) and Registered Providers which has developed over the last 4 years, to identify and manage social housing fraud. This includes identifying cases of people: having more than one tenancy; sub-letting their property and acquiring a Right-To-Buy property unlawfully. An initial data sharing agreement between Midland Heart and Birmingham Audit developed into an anti-fraud group, through BSHP, which now includes 23 members. Work is underpinned by an anti-fraud strategy for both Birmingham City Council along with other West Midlands local authorities and is currently a unique arrangement in the UK.

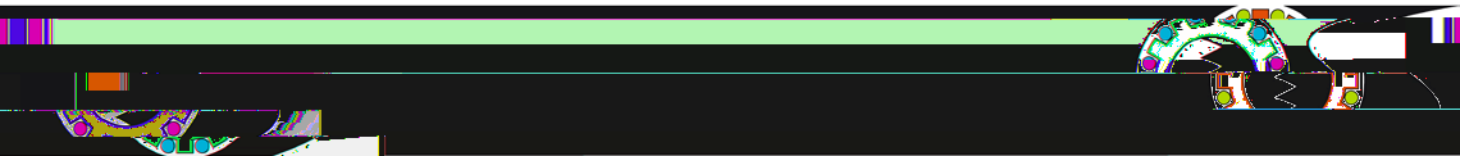
2.5 Health and Wellbeing Links

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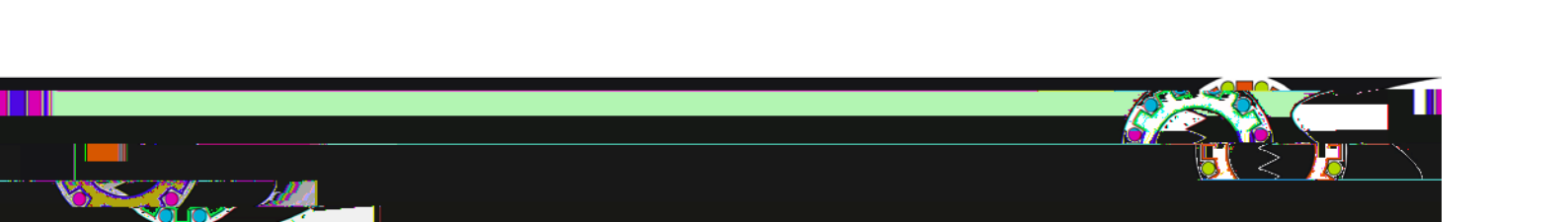
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x Work with people who are homeless.

- 2.5.3 He emphasised that although he had inherited an arrangement whereby the Extra Care Charitable Trust (ECCT) was delivering the city's 4 Extra Care Villages and his assessment was that delivery so far has been impressive, more Extra Care provision (over Sheltered Housing although Extra Care was not the only envisaged model for supported housing) was needed. He saw potential for Registered Providers to be able to deliver equivalent future provision elsewhere in the city.
- 2.5.4 At the same time, the Cabinet Member issued a challenge to Registered Providers in the city to deliver accessible culturally appropriate Extra Care provision that truly reflects Birmingham's cultural diversity. He referenced Panelcroft in Newtown as Extra Care provision (operated by ECCT) for a largely African Caribbean community and stated his interest in possibilities for additional Extra Care models in areas of the city with other particular demographics such as Sparkbrook which has a large resident community from the Asian sub-continent.
- 2.5.5 Housing Associations referenced various recent joint work on health-related provision. This included work with Trident Housing in securing funding for a Housing Pathway project for homeless people who present to A&E departments to help them to move out of hospital into more settled accommodation quickly. Midland Heart highlighted their recent work for Heart of England (NHS) Foundation Trust to provide a reablement service at Good Hope Hospital which provides beds for up to 6 week interventions. Unlike a traditional model of reablement, Midland Heart provides a non-clinical intervention in that all admissions to the service are treated as medically fit and that, if necessary, can access primary care such as GPs through a surgery. They were confident that there is scope for further integrated care schemes of this type to be established and managed across other parts of the city.
- 2.5.6 There was interest from Registered Providers in delivering all or part of 6(h)1(at)-6(.)2(o)-







potential role to support making the most of limited resources and using their purchasing power locally.

2.8 Joint work on tenant engagement

2.8.1 Tenant engagement, via co-regulation, is a statutory requirement for the Council and Registered Providers¹². This includes provider support for tenants to scrutinise services and we heard the potential for the Council to learn from some Registered Providers' approach to this. Nevertheless, even without the legislative underpinning to work, witnesses recognised the importance of tenant engagement in:

- x Enabling housing providers to provide a better service tailored more effectively to tenants needs;
- x Building a partnership with tenants and residents to improve neighbourhoods; and
- x Contributing to developing social capital to build sustainable and resilient neighbourhoods.

2.8.2 All parties, including representatives of existing Housing Associations, should be encouraged to work together to improve the quality of housing and services provided to tenants.

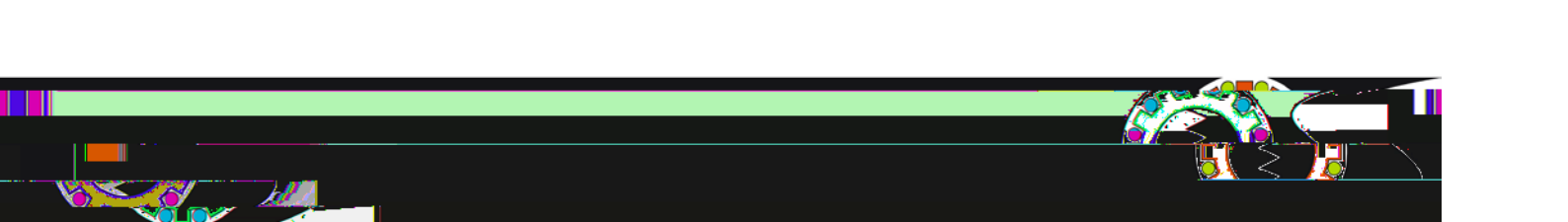
3 Recommendations

3.1 A clear framework for engagement

- 3.1.1 The central theme from evidence gathering was the need for a clear and integrated framework

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3.2.2 There was consensus that consistent joint lobbying of the HCA was needed to ensure that Birmingham obtains its fair share of funds during the 2015 -18 programme. This in turn requires the City and the Associations to be able to demonstrate that their proposed development schemes are both workable and worthwhile. To enable this to happen it is necessary for the City and the Associations to be able to demonstrate that their proposed development schemes are both workable and worthwhile. To enable this to happen it is necessary for the City and the Associations to be able to demonstrate that their proposed development schemes are both workable and worthwhile.



3.3.4 A specific area for joint/shared services which BSHP representatives recommended was joint feasibility work on possibilities for lead neighbourhood managers in selected areas of the city, particularly where partnership working is already well-developed (for example, Lozells and East Handsworth). In these cases, a single organisation would act as lead neighbourhood manager where they are the landlord with the majority of social housing stock in a particular area.

3.3.5 We look forward to early sight of proposal

