

STRATEGIC HOUSING REVIEW

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2 – 4
Background and Key Business Data	5 – 9
Leadership Options	10 – 13
Strategic Issues	14 – 19
Finance (resources and management)	14
Governance	14
Culture	15
Relationship between landlord and tenants	16
Resident Engagement	16
Training	17
Technology	18
Performance	18
Anti-Discrimination, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	18
Employee and Trade Union Engagement	19
Concluding Comments	19
Appendix	
Reference Material	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The job of this review is to look at leadership, management, structure and capacity, of the housing and landlord service at Bristol City council, to assess appropriateness to deliver all housing services and the housing investment programme.

This review considers the contention that leadership of housing services comes from the top of the council (supporting a one council approach) as well as from within the housing department. The review recognises the challenges of being strategic whilst keeping the 'reality in the room' - keeping a focus on priorities (political as well as business, financial and legal) and providing the right structure, clarity of purpose, 'tools for the job', and culture.

Any strategic review of council housing must consider the relevant findings and lessons learnt from the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, phase one and phase two reports and related regulatory and legislative safety obligations. Safety of residents is and must always be the top priority for the council.

What sort of service is 'Housing'? Is it a 'Place', buildings and assets, service, or a 'People' service? This review argues that it is both, which is what makes housing, especially social housing, unique. This review proposes that housing is considered as a unique service that needs its unique voice in the corporate leadership team. There is a 'housing voice' in the CLB at present, which is provided by the executive director, growth and regeneration. This review considers the proposition that a director of housing should bring immediacy, awareness and understanding of issues and resident impact from an operational perspective as well as a strategic one. And, that this will benefit the council and the City overall.

Approximately 14 per cent of Bristol's population live in a home owned by the council (either as a tenant or leaseholder or a member of their family). Good housing is essential for a good start in life and stable family conditions (Children services), it has a profound impact on lifetime health (Public Health services) and the right housing can help older and disabled people to live longer and more independent lives (Adult services).

Ensuring there is a wholly housing focussed 'voice' at the corporate leadership team can be achieved either by,

1. creating an executive director role for housing, reporting to the chief executive, or
2. making the director of housing post holder a member of the CLB or a meeting attendee, remaining as a third-tier officer (i.e. reporting to an executive director).

Two further structural options are examined and considered:

1. If housing services are contained within a larger department, consideration is given to relocating to a 'People' department, Adult Social Care or Children Services, where there are obvious synergies and common purposes.
2. The current broad breadth of services contained within the housing department could be reduced by moving some services to other areas. For example, all or some of the housing development service could move to Regeneration, private sector housing could combine with another team that deals with environmental health and commercial licensing (these services therefore staying in G&R).

This report also considers whether, whichever route is chosen, there should be a phased approach to making structural changes to take into account senior managers (member of the housing senior leadership team) development and opportunities to gain experience.

In considering options and making and suggestions for change, I have looked at practice from councils with a similar sized housing stock and considered the challenges currently facing Bristol as well as the capability and capacity of council staff.

This review has also looked at the structure of senior management within the housing department, considering size (budget and employee number), complexity and range of current challenges.

Ways of working and culture are at least as critical to success as structure and this report reflects on council culture and considers ways of encouraging and supporting a strong positive 'one council' culture that promotes resident focus, delivering with the council's value at heart.

Careful consideration is also given to key subject areas including:

Finance – strengthening medium term budgeting, consolidating finance functions and clarifying governance.

Governance – considering appropriate levels of delegation and senior council oversight of key risks and responsibilities.

Training – consideration of bespoke leadership training and a wider ongoing programme for all housing staff, meeting requirements and expectations relating to skills and qualifications.

Technology – developing a clear strategy to harness the potential benefits of existing and emerging technologies, such as IOT and AI and maximising beneficial use of portable and mobile technology.

Performance – strengthening the focus on robust remedial action plans to ensure targets and standards are met.

Anti-discrimination and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) – ensuring service plans and performance management actively consider the impact of delivery on people with protected characteristics and that remedial plans explain how identified gaps are narrowed and eliminated.

Resident engagement – consideration of how positive and fair engagement is at the core of service planning and delivery. Fairness in this context means that residents understand the distinction between communication (telling residents what they need to know), engagement (finding out what residents think and using the information to help plan) and consultation (giving residents the opportunity to say yes or no to something, or to choose an option, that the council will then implement).

Staff and trade union engagement – consideration of all forms of engagement, looking at leadership roles, ways of delivery and frequency.

The relationship between all the above and organisation structure is dynamic and complementary. In designing different options for the council structure, consideration is given to how the structure ensures appropriate authority and responsibility for critical areas of work, such as building safety and resident engagement, as well as supporting robust governance, decision-making and management of performance.

Implementing learning from the Grenfell Public Inquiry, co-regulation with the Regulator for Social Housing, meeting minimum standards, and other challenges.

The outcome of this review should help to inform and drive a broad programme of improvement, aided by a more appropriate structure.

The council should pay close attention to all the lessons from the Grenfell Inquiry, especially in relation to safety, relationship between the council and its tenants, and anti-discrimination.

In the short-term improvements in critical areas are managed through the Housing and Consumer Standards (HCS) programme, which is focussed on ensuring the council meets its regulatory obligations as judged by the regulator for social housing. However, all the changes that potentially flow from this review could take between one and three years to fully implement and the HCS programme may want to develop broader objectives as compliance requirements are achieved or well on track.

Background and key business data

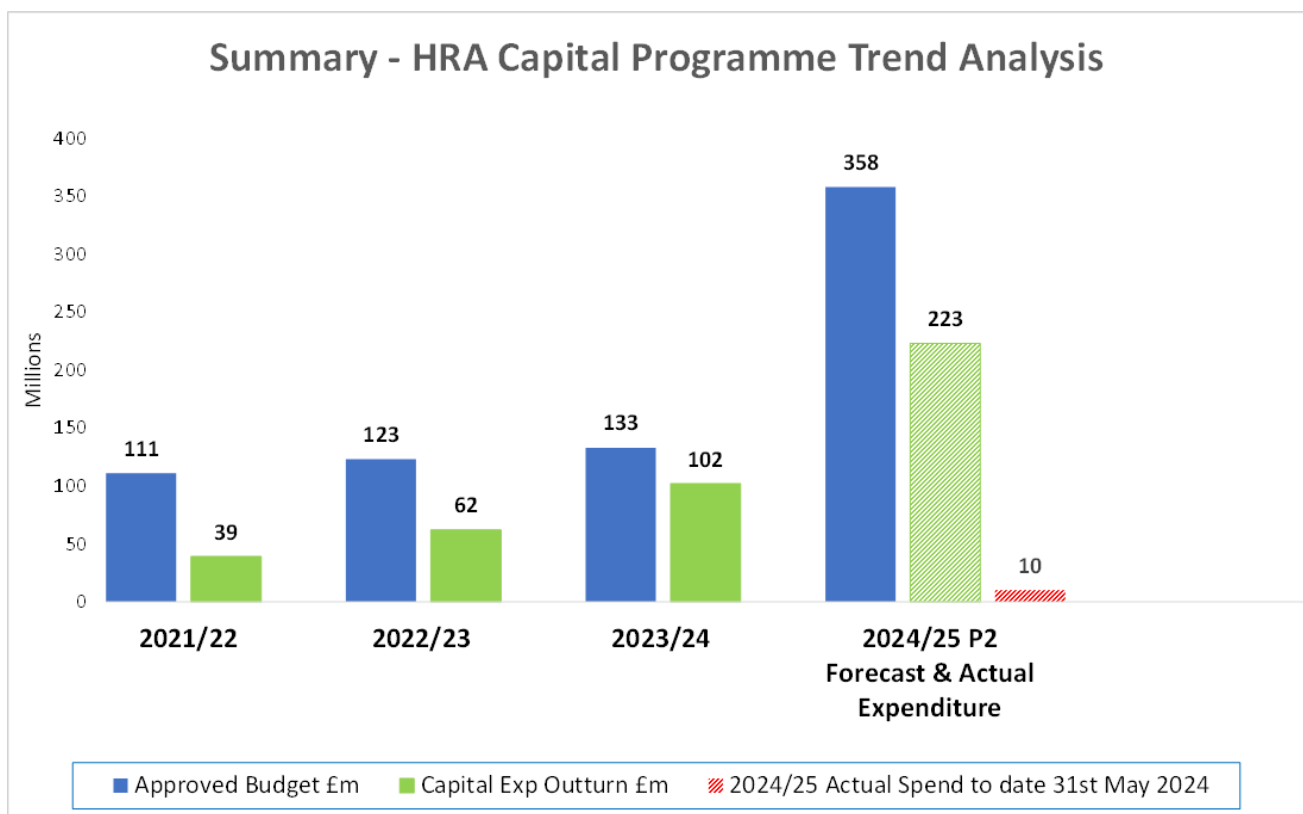
As the brief for this review stated, the Housing & Landlord Services division contains over 1,000 council employees. Reporting to the director are five heads of service: Estate Management, Responsive Repairs and Planned Maintenance, Housing Options, Housing Delivery and Business Development. There is also a Service Manager, Private and Accessible Housing.

The housing department gross budget for 2024/25 (revenue and capital HRA and GF) is close to £600m. The HRA 24/25 total revenue budget is £151m income, £144m expenditure.

As at the beginning of April 2024, Bristol council is landlord of 26,640 rented homes, with a £136.275m rent roll. It is also landlord of 1,867 leased homes, with a £1,305m estimated service charge bill.

The total capital programme for 24/25 currently sits at £355m for 24/25, though P2 forecast identified circa £135m of slippage. Last year (23/24) outturn for capital spend was £102m, which is the highest ever.

Additionally, there is a General Fund Housing Delivery budget for 2024/25 of £60m.



In 2023/24 the council spent £40.2m on homelessness, which included £23.1m on securing temporary accommodation and £5.4m on employee costs.

Fiscal pressures

The above business data give a picture of the major areas of expenditure and the underlying pressures. An increasing sum of money is required for essential investment in the quality and safety of existing council homes. In part this reflects the lack of investment over time and in major part this relates to additional building safety requirements and the attention of the social housing regulator.

At the same time, the council is committed to building 3,000 more council homes over the next five years and must fund this through borrowing, with the housing revenue account (HRA) paying the interest from the same pot that makes provision for capital spend on its existing homes.

Likewise, increasing numbers of homeless households has led to an increased spend on temporary accommodation, which due to scarcity and the increased demand, is now costing more. Work is underway to reduce these costs.

Housing crisis

The essential disparity between supply and demand for affordable housing is at the heart of a housing crisis that affects almost all parts of the country. This is also inextricably linked to the cost-of-living crisis. Bringing forward housing stock investment plans that have a reduced living costs for tenants will help the council's tenants as will investment in insulation and cheaper and greener heating for the private sector housing stock.

The 'crisis' is also about standards and safety. Damp and mould are found in large numbers of homes in the public and private sectors, the energy crisis meant many people choosing between eating and heating and despite rent rises, the income from council rents falls short of providing the investment for the catch-up repairs and improvements needed.

Additionally, higher than expected interest rates for many private landlords has driven them to increase rents to high levels, leading to large demand for homelessness support from households facing eviction or unable to afford new rents when their tenancy renews.

The House of Commons report "The finances and sustainability of the social housing sector", published in May this year by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee details the severe challenges faced by the sector and calls for, amongst other things, greater investment to build new social homes, the same access to building safety funds for the social housing sector as for the private sector. The full report can be found on the government website:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmcomloc/60/summary.html>

Regulatory pressures / Ombudsman

A more active and interventionist Housing Ombudsman and new regulatory responsibilities for the regulator of social housing have increased the level of scrutiny and pressure on council landlords to meet safety and quality standards.

The Social Housing Regulation Act (July 2023) governs, and is intended to rebalance, the relationship between social landlords and their residents through a new, proactive approach to regulating on “consumer”, i.e. tenants, issues. The Act aims to ensure councils (and other social housing landlords) are compliant with the consumer standards by giving the Regulator of Social Housing new powers to tackle landlords who aren’t meeting their commitments to residents.

The Social Housing Charter, published in 2020 as a precursor to the new Act, details what social housing residents should expect from their landlords, including feeling safe in their homes, knowing how their landlords are performing and having their complaints solved quickly. The Act sets out to deliver against each of these commitments:

- Residents to be safe in their home.
- Residents to know how their landlord is performing.
- Residents to have their complaints dealt with promptly.
- Residents to be treated with respect.
- Residents to have their voice heard by their landlord.
- Residents to have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in.

It follows that any structure should be adequate to meet all of the above, preferably with clarity about which post is, or which posts are, ‘in charge’ of ensuring the commitments are met.

Following the coroner’s report into Awaab Ishak’s death, the government announced plans to make major changes to the law on damp and mould.

‘Awaab’s law’ was introduced through the Social Housing (Regulation) Act, with other regulations already planned for the private rented sector. It requires landlords to fix reported health hazards within specified timeframes. This will become an implied term in social housing tenancy agreements and is expected to come into force this year.

Richard Blakeway, the social housing ombudsman, has said social housing landlords must end “parent-child” relationships with tenants and instead “see people, not problems”. The Grenfell Inquiry found that the landlord (Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation) was a “bullying overlord”. Speaking following the publication of the Phase Two report, the ombudsman said he was determined that the landlord and tenant relationship characterised by a culture of disregard for social housing tenants should come to an end. In certain circumstances and where the ombudsman decides the landlord has not satisfactorily deal with wider issues that are highlighted by a number of complaints he can order a special investigation into that landlord.

Change of administrations

A new council administration and a new government both bring new housing policy objectives and opportunities. Nationally the new Labour government is committed to building one and a half million new homes over the next five years.

Objectives (strategic context)

The council's corporate strategy sets out 47 priorities covering all aspects of the council's responsibilities. These include priorities aimed squarely at housing; healthy, resilient, and inclusive neighbourhoods with fair access to decent, affordable homes. Specifically,

- Increasing all housing supply including affordable and council housing.
- Decarbonising housing while improving warmth and benefitting people's health.
- Reduce and prevent homelessness and rough sleeping, tackling the underlying causes.
- Create improved approaches to enable and support disabled people throughout their lives.
- Make sure that more people can actively participate in their community

However, it is also clear that housing services have an important role to play by helping to deliver priorities that are set for other departments, such as

Children and young people: A city where every child belongs and every child gets the best start in life, whatever circumstances they were born into.

Economy and skills: Economic growth that builds inclusive and resilient communities, decarbonises the city and offers equity of opportunity.

Environment and sustainability: Decarbonise the city, support the recovery of nature and lead a just transition to a low-carbon future.

Health, care and wellbeing: Tackle health inequalities to help people stay healthier and happier throughout their lives.

Policy objectives

The Green Party, the largest party in the Green-led new administration in Bristol, acknowledged the housing crisis in Bristol and across the country in its election manifesto, with "soaring rents and the least energy-efficient housing in Western Europe". It aims to:

- Increase the city's target of affordable homes to 1,000 per year
- Introduce rent controls in some parts of Bristol
- Set up an arms-length company to build affordable housing
- Sensitively increase housing density
- Raise energy-efficiency standards for new homes
- Bring empty buildings into use as homes
- Introduce city-wide landlord licensing for private rented homes
- Insulate the city's council homes

Local and national challenges

National Audit Office studies of the financial impact of new social housing, have found it can reduce local and national public expenditure (temporary accommodation costs locally and housing benefit costs nationally). This research led to the creation of the national affordable housing programme. However, a combination of Brexit, Covid and high inflation (especially building cost inflation) and higher interest rates led to building industry stress and some notable business failures. Additionally, sector capacity, in part due to labour shortages and material cost and availability have hampered delivery. A difficult recruitment market for housing officers, particularly in key skilled areas such as specialist surveyors has added pressure to an already stretched sector. New requirements on social landlords to ensure employees are suitable qualified and skilled have also added cost at a time all budgets are under pressure. Bristol council is one of a group of 20 large council landlords which has made representations to the government about pressures on the sustainability of the housing revenue account.

Link to corporate improvement programme (housing and consumer standards programme)

The outcome of this review and any recommendations will need to support and hopefully augment the work that is already underway to improve standards and ensure full compliance with all regulatory requirements.

A strenuous effort is underway to make rapid progress in the essential areas of compliance, particularly concerning data collection and use and all matters of resident safety.

This review therefore will make findings and recommendations designed to sustain and continually improve work that is undertaken through the housing and consumer standards programme.

- **Workstream 1&2 - Safety & Quality Standard (incl. maintenance, landlord compliance and building safety: Data and inspection/works delivery)**
A key component of this work stream is the review of the repairs and maintenance service.
- **Workstream 3 - Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard**
This includes the development of a specific training programme to improve complaint handling, to improve culture and to develop better ways to listen and respond to residents. All three important topics that are considered in this review.
- **Workstream 4 - Neighbourhood and Community Standard and Tenancy Standard**
This review will consider how any recommendations can support and augment the objectives of these work streams.
- **Workstream 5 – Cross Cutting Activities**
This review, culture and standards are all part of this work stream with obvious interdependencies between the two pieces of work.

LEADERSHIP OPTIONS

An essential question considered by this review is the future role, scope and seniority of the director of housing.

Recent recruitment experience demonstrates the difficulty in finding suitable candidates for this important council position (as a director rather than as an executive director).

Potential to create an executive director role for Housing

Evidence from London boroughs and large metropolitan cities is that the director of housing is sometimes a 'second tier' officer, ie reporting into a chief officer (executive director). However, Birmingham (c.59,000 council homes and c.4,200 households in temporary accommodation) and Southwark (c.55,000 council homes), with double or more the scale of Bristol's stock (c.28,500), both have executive level directors. Lewisham, with significantly smaller stock (c.18,500 homes), has an Executive Director for Housing, covering Housing Strategy, Private Sector Housing, Housing Needs, Housing Management, Resident Engagement, Stock Investment, Repairs, Compliance, and Building Safety. Sandwell council (c.28,000 council homes) has an executive director, Place and a director of housing post, with broadly the same services as in Bristol, without housing development. At Lambeth council (c.33,500) the director of housing reports to the Corporate Director of Housing and Adult Social Care.

At some councils eg Hackney (c.31,300 council homes) the role has a significantly smaller scope than at Bristol. Additionally, council's which dissolved an ALMO (arms-length management organisation) and brought back landlord services into direct council control have been considering structural management options in light of new sector challenges.

In seeking to answer the question about what might be right for Bristol, I have considered a number of factors and options.

Is the breadth of the housing department too large and could some services move to other parts of the council?

At Hackney Council (c.31,300 council homes), the homelessness service, new homes delivery and private sector housing are all outside the housing department. At Southwark (c.55,000 homes) the picture is more complicated with homelessness and new homes inside the department, but much of the private sector housing service outside. Leeds council (c.54,000 homes) takes a different approach with a senior officer for housing strategy and a senior officer for housing management and no identifiable director for housing only, other than a director of environment and housing. Camden council (c.33,000 homes) has a director of housing reporting to an Executive Director Supporting

Communities. This post manages senior officers responsible for housing management and housing needs, but not development, repairs and maintenance and private sector housing.

At Lambeth Council (c.33,500 homes, 44,000 on the waiting list, over 3,000 new applications a year) new homes and estate renewal programmes are outside the housing department.

There is unlikely to be a perfect structure that fits all councils, so it is important to consider the particular challenges in Bristol as well as the viewpoint of tenants, homeless people and those threatened with homelessness, and tenants and landlords in the private rented sector. I have set out the challenges, policy and strategic aims above.

This review hasn't conducted any research into the views of those groups in Bristol, so I have drawn on my experience from elsewhere. As well as information from complaints to the Housing Ombudsman from council tenants in Bristol. Recent Ombudsman reports on window safety and leaks point to the continued focus on keeping homes in a good and safe state of repair.

The major concerns from tenants usually fall into three areas, repairs, block and estate cleaning, and anti-social behaviour including neighbour disputes. Residents want their complaints dealt with quickly and with clear communication. They want to know they have been listened to and that their landlord has responded. Above all they want to know there is someone accountable for dealing with their complaints or concerns. There are of course many other important issues such as rent and service charges, support for vulnerable residents and safety. And there is an overall requirement for excellent communication, engagement and involvement of residents in determining how their homes and neighbourhoods are looked after.

Knowing who is in charge and that that person is responsible and accountable for all issues of concern is a driver for consideration of the role and scope of the director of housing. Therefore, the director should have authority (as well as being accountable) to direct appropriate resources (including employees and contractors) to provide services relating to all repairs and maintenance, all building safety standards and compliance, tackling anti-social behaviour, supporting vulnerable residents and being a visible presence on estates and in blocks as an important representation of the council and provider or coordinator of all tenancy services.

The most important responsibility for any landlord is the safety and health of people living in their homes. Bristol has known concerns and issues relating to both. There is a powerful argument for having a senior post that has overall responsibility, and necessary relevant authority, for all residential building safety matters. Similarly, responsibility for health issues, such as the presence of mould, should be a significant part of the role of an identified senior housing officer.

What is the best balance and breadth of services within the housing department?

The council is a landlord by choice, but it is a housing authority by statute and must provide support and advice to ensure those households legally entitled to assistance. Its role is to

prevent homelessness or to ensure when people become homeless, they have access to appropriate temporary accommodation. The landlord duties of the council include allocation of homes in accordance with legally prescribed priorities, designed to ensure scarce public resources are used to meet local need and not for other reasons. One of the priority groups for council housing are those households which the council has decided has a legal right to support. The two parts of the council (housing management and housing options) therefore should work closely together for reasons of efficiency and consistency. There is therefore a benefit from having the two services in the same department to aid business planning and workforce leadership.

Bristol has a large and effective private sector housing team that is closely aligned to the work of the housing options service – assisting with the prevention of homelessness from the private rented sector as well as working with people in very unsatisfactory housing arrangements (vans, tents and caravans). The team is expanding to take on a more interventionist role with local private landlords and should use a proactive approach to increase the use of private renting as an answer to the growing pressure for temporary accommodation while households wait for (or as an alternative to) a council home.

The development team works with other social housing providers and private sector developers. The provision of new council homes is an important part of the council's strategy to tackle the local housing crisis. Some parts of this service meet the test that accountability and responsibility should sit with the director of housing, eg estate renewal (involving demolition and rebuilding of new homes). A critical part of this is the engagement and involvement of residents. Work with the private sector does not necessarily fit with this.

Should support services be inside or outside the housing department?

In my experience, support services that are most critically required to ensure capability to provide the essential tenants services, such as policy and procedure development and data management should be under the direction of the director of housing. However, the exception to this is matters relating to financial control. Whilst budget management will remain a key management requirement and accountability will stay in housing, for several reasons (fiscal discipline, technical and professional oversight, one council strategic planning) the management of finance functions might, for those same reasons, need to be reconsidered carefully with advice from the council's chief finance officer (s.151 officer). Other professional and technical support, IT, HR, CFM, should continue as now being provided as a one-council service. In the case of IT the one-council approach needs strengthening.

Thought needs to be given to strengthening processes and communication between generic council customer services and service specific customer service provision.

If not a Housing Directorate, which Directorate for housing?

In the event that the director of housing post remains at its current level, either permanently or temporarily, there is a good argument for it reporting into a 'people' department.

However, the arguments for change are counterbalanced in Bristol by the costs in time energy and loss of focus of serving residents at a critical time when it is concentrating on urgent issues relating to the regulator for social housing and compliance. Furthermore, the current location in Growth and Regeneration is working well, demonstrably raising the housing profile through the corporate improvement programme (“Housing and Consumer standards programme”).

What can be learnt from other councils?

No councils with a council housing stock of a similar scale to Bristol have a housing department with its depth and breadth. Some council’s which effectively dismantled their housing departments have recently taken steps to bring services back together, eg Camden and Hackney. Other councils split landlord services from strategic and statutory roles through the creation of an ALMO.

The biggest lesson is probably that whilst the wrong structure can be an impediment, it is ways of working, culture and leadership that have the biggest impact. These need to be backed up by clarity of purpose and a motivated staff group that is well equipped with the right tools, training and management.

Potential consequential changes as a result of creating a new executive director post

The council’s staffing structure is a matter for the chief executive and potential wider structural changes which could flow from the creation of any new senior posts will require careful consideration through normal HR and workforce processes as well as by the HR committee, as appropriate.

Posts that report to an executive director are usually, but not always, director posts. There is also a strong case for a senior operational lead to take responsibility for the highest risk areas (building safety, compliance, repairs and maintenance). This would bring in needed additional senior technical and management knowledge and experience. It would also assist the executive director in their strategic role.

Further strategic support to the executive director, and to the directorate, could be provided by creating a new team, under a director or head of service, to lead on strategic support for the directorate, covering policy development, service planning and development, performance and major projects,

There is additionally the opportunity to create further new posts such as a director of resident engagement and estate renewal, to overhaul the quality and strength of the council’s interactions with its tenants and leaseholders.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Resources and financial management

There needs to be greater clarity about the relationship between housing capital and the HRA. HSLT should be paying attention to the annual budget and in-year pressures, but it also needs to be well-advised and on top of the medium term financial strategy for the HRA. Investment plans should concentrate on five to ten-year (maximum) plans. The 30-year HRA business plan should be reviewed for major changes only on an annual basis, probably shadowing the rent setting process, which should be transparent and involve tenant engagement.

The housing department gross budget for 2024/25 (HRA and GF) is almost £600m. The HRA 24/25 total revenue budget is £151m income, £144m expenditure.

The total housing capital programme for 24/25 currently sits at £355m for 24/25, though P2 forecast identified circa £135m of slippage. Last year (23/24) outturn for capital spend was £102m, which is the highest ever.

Related, but not covered in this review are the following, which will need to be considered when developing delivery plans that may arise from this review:

HRA business plan

Revenue pressures, overspend on reactive repairs

Capital programme – year on year underspends including on essential safety requirements,

Debt and reserves

Governance

The Council's annual governance statement says "Good governance is about ensuring that an organisation is effectively and properly run. It is the means by which the council shows it is taking decisions for the good of the people of Bristol, in an inclusive and open way. It is fundamental to showing that public money is well spent, and without good governance the council will struggle to improve services and deliver its objectives." The statement highlights issues relating to Barton House and to regulatory (safety and consumer).

Despite a clear governance framework, performance and financial management issues suggest governance on the ground could be improved. There is a link to culture (housing's separate identity) and training (management skills to identify risks and improve performance).

Greater integration of management decision-making groups, especially in relation to technology, data, and performance could help develop shared understanding and better proposals for decision making.

Strengthening operational management is the first line for ensuring governance is robust. New posts with overall operation control for key areas of concern allow the council the

opportunity appoint candidates with proven track records, substantial relevant knowledge, and skills.

Back up could be put in place with a separate role for collation and checking (quality and accuracy) of performance management information. This role can also be responsible for ensuring a disciplined decision-making process, quality assurance and consistency of business plans, and effective monitoring of delivery during the year.

If a new structure including an executive director of housing is approved there will need to be a significant amendment to the current scheme of delegation for housing decisions. A thorough review, with training where necessary, will help to ensure decisions are taken in the right way.

Culture

A culture of housing (frequently referred to as “the HRA” or “HRA services”) being separate from the council (and vice versa) needs to be addressed and challenged. Housing services are part of the council and all council homes are owned by the council. Tenants are tenants of the council. More joint working and communication across team and department boundaries can help the process. Ultimately this requires clear and unified leadership and training for this is covered in the following section.

Work to promote a culture of working together and avoiding blame should encourage and foster a management culture of openness, honesty and transparency. Actively looking for collaboration, avoiding blame and focussing on remedial actions (timed and measured with a clear and monitored process) should be the norm.

The leadership role in creating a culture is vital. Leaders set the tone, and what they do, how they behave, and what they pay attention to, is seen and understood as ‘the way of doing things’ by more junior employees. For that reason particular attention is given to training the leadership team in the next section on training.

Training will also help to foster and develop a professional culture across all parts of the department. This is not to suggest there is currently an ‘unprofessional’ culture, rather it is suggesting clear professional standards that are measured and tested and kept up to date through continuous professional development, which should be seen as the norm. Standards, and management of colleagues against those standards, should be clear and rigorous for all employees.

Relationship between landlord and tenants

The Grenfell Inquiry heard from residents who said they had voiced fears for their safety or complained about living conditions but were ignored or disregarded by some staff, whose behaviour and attitude, they testified, had been unacceptable.

The Grenfell Inquiry hearing led directly to the government creating a Charter for Social Housing Residents: social housing white paper, and a subsequent government review of professional training and development, concluded that a major culture change was necessary.

The Review's findings made clear that qualifications alone will not fully address the inappropriate behaviours and attitudes some tenants experience in their interactions with social housing staff.

Additionally, significant culture change is needed across the sector in order to improve the professional behaviours of all staff, tackle stigma within the sector and ensure that residents receive a professional and respectful service at all times.

Further, the review said, "landlords need to do more to ensure their staff and the staff of their services providers ... exhibit appropriate behaviours and attitudes towards tenants – such as empathy, reliability, honesty and professional curiosity.

The council should test with residents how they judge the existing culture, the behaviours and respect shown by council staff towards them and whether (and what) might need to be done if changes are identified as being needed.

Resident engagement

Listening to and involving residents in the design and delivery of services is central to the regulatory requirements and fundamental to the mission of the council as a provider of social housing. Engagement with residents can be highly effective so long as tenants and leaseholders believe it is meaningful and undertaken with good intent. It is important, for example, to distinguish between communication, engagement and consultation, so that people know how their input (and their time) will be used. It is critical that people are told how their contributions were used. The Leader has stressed the central importance of gaining and maintaining trust in the council from residents, especially in estate regeneration.

Additionally, good governance requires an understanding of how decisions will benefit the people of Bristol.

Options to consider:

1. Paying for residents to commission an independent tenant adviser (ITA) to take on the role in certain circumstances of communicating between residents and the council and holding the council to account.
2. Establishing tenants and leaseholders groups to review and monitor performance in key areas such as repairs, leaseholders services, anti-social behaviour.

Training

In March 2024, the government announced plans to consult on “competence and conduct” of social housing staff, especially for those in leadership and management roles. Evidence presented to the Grenfell Inquiry, showed how a lack of appropriate staff training contributed to the tragedy.

Government proposals intend to “equip all social housing staff with the skills, knowledge and experience needed to provide tenants with a high quality, respectful service – helping to ensure that tragedies like the Grenfell fire and the death of Awaab Ishak never happen again.”

Further, the government review recommended qualifications for senior staff, “given that leaders and managers shape the culture of organisations.”

The government concluded that relevant professional qualifications had an important role to play in driving up professional standards in the sector, and that qualifications requirements should be focused on senior managers and executives, given the key role they play in setting and embedding organisational culture and in ensuring service delivery staff across the organisation have the skills and knowledge they need to carry out their roles effectively.

For Senior Housing Managers, a Level 4 qualification is required, while for Senior Housing Executives, a foundation degree or Level 5 qualification is necessary. These qualifications must also be regulated by Ofqual.

Consideration should be given to a leadership training programme for the senior leadership team in Housing. This should focus on generic leadership skills, within a public sector and council context. It should also have an element of bespoke content that considers the mix of strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the knowledge, experience and skillsets of the personalities involved.

An assessment of existing qualifications of all senior housing staff should be used to develop a bespoke training needs analysis for each manager. This should lead to individual training plans to ensure managers reach the required standard.

Separately a Bristol housing officer course, possibly with NVQ accreditation, should be explored and an appropriate syllabus developed and delivered to ensure the service is professionalised in line with current expectations and requirements.

Any new training can build on existing and planned training, such as that already delivered to the tenancy management team (building trust and improving communication) or sessions that were developed from the 2023 Review of Housing Management & Estates Service report last year (management of productivity, communication, productivity and attendance). It will also need to fit with the leadership behaviours framework (subjects include, finance, digital, sustainability, equalities).

The way training is delivered is almost as important as its content and strenuous effort should be made to engage the workforce and the trade unions in developing a vision for the rounded professional council housing officer that is intended to be the outcome of all the training. Remembering that large parts of the housing workforce are not located within the

department (citizens service) or do not have an office base or regular access to email (trade operatives).

Technology

Bristol has not fully exploited the advantages to be gained from technology that could assist many of its services and responsibilities. For example, smart stock ordering and automated processes to sign off or reassign works orders, use of geo-tracking for repairs to assist efficient deployment of operatives and urgent store-to-site delivery of parts or materials not in van stock. Automated, wireless and internet linked monitoring systems can also be deployed widely to detect issues before problems arise, thus allowing interventions that prevent the outages or failures. Recent advances in artificial intelligence should also be explored and harnessed if and where appropriate, particularly in areas where processing is rules-based, such as applying for housing.

In the immediate short term, careful attention and effort needs to be given to implementing the NEC housing system. This is a critical council (corporate) system, which delivers housing services and feeds directly into corporate systems (eg, finance) as well as linking to Benefits and other services for children and families and adults receiving. or close to receiving, council social care services.

Arguably the selection and implementation of a housing IT system should be a corporate programme, with resources and expertise dedicated to the change management element of the programme as well as to the corporate way of doing things (eg taking payments, booking appointments, handling workflow, storing and retrieving data, etc). Some of this has been done, but service leadership has arguably made this more difficult.

Performance

Insufficient attention is given to managing performance. Measuring and monitoring key indicators needs to be backed up with sharper management focus on improvement. Service dashboards should be reviewed, along with remedial action plans, on a quarterly cycle at HSLT.

A performance and high productivity culture needs to be nurtured and encouraged through strong management and leadership at all levels in the organisation.

Slow progress in dealing with regulatory standards shortfalls demonstrate there is further work to do in this important area.

Anti-Discrimination, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

People with protected characteristics tend to be over-represented within those who are homeless or seeking help from the housing options service. The same is often true for those living in council housing and private sector poor quality and potentially, or actually, unhealthy housing. Awareness, measurement and active management to mitigate and end

the existence and consequences of discrimination is critical. This should be a key component of all training proposed.

Close work with Public Health, Children's and Adults' social care and the corporate equalities lead will help to develop a focus on this important area.

The Phase Two (final) report from the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry said, "We should say at once that we have seen some evidence of racial discrimination in the way in which some of those who survived the fire were treated in the days immediately following it at a time when they were at their most vulnerable and we have described what happened in Part 10 of this report. We have also seen evidence that the TMO failed over the course of years to treat residents of the tower and the Lancaster West Estate more generally with the courtesy and respect due to them." People of non-white heritage were disproportionately affected by the fire and the vast majority of victims were from and Black, Asian or minority ethnic heritage. This led to understandable question from survivors and from the community about racism in the allocation of poor-quality council housing homes.

Understanding the cultural, age or disability related needs and being sensitive to cultural diversity in the way people live can be important in providing healthy and safe housing. This should influence the way the council assesses the urgency and type of repair, or the suitability of housing options for example.

Options to consider

1. Review outcomes for people with protected characteristics who live in council homes and use children or adult social services.
2. Commission public health report on healthy housing equalities.

Staff and TU engagement

The council recognises the GMB, Unite and Unison as formal representatives of employees who are their members. It recognises the valuable role unions can play in collective as well as individual discussions, negotiation and dispute resolution. And the council welcomes the positive contribution to service and policy development at a service, departmental and whole council level.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I have felt welcomed in Bristol and all the officers I have asked for help and worked with over the last six months have been open and helpful. This is especially true of the senior leadership team in housing and the director of housing. My sincere thank you, therefore, goes to all Bristol colleagues, across the whole council, who have kindly found time to meet me, answer questions and make helpful suggestions about my review and report.

This is possibly the most challenging time for council housing in a generation. The challenges facing council landlords like Bristol are immense. The long list, which includes rising homelessness, a shrinking private rented sector, insufficient affordable housing,

ageing council housing stock in need of urgent safety and health investment, paints a bleak picture.

My review is intended though to inspire and encourage the council to see this as an opportunity to refocus and, with the help of the many able and committed people working in the council, reset its relationship with residents.

There's already a sense of urgency and an understanding that things need to change, not least because of the involvement of the Social Housing Regulator and the great pressure on budgets. Bristol can develop the culture, collective sense of purpose, professional leadership, good performance and standards that its residents deserve. Collaborative working between council officers, Members and Bristol residents, setting aside individual interests in the wider interest of common goals, can shape and drive the overall direction of change.

I was asked to look at the structure of senior leadership of housing. I have done that, and my report makes several recommendations. If accepted, I think these will help to create the right conditions for success.

Michael Scorer

September 2024

APPENDIX

Reference Material

Comparative Information for Council Landlords and Housing Authorities

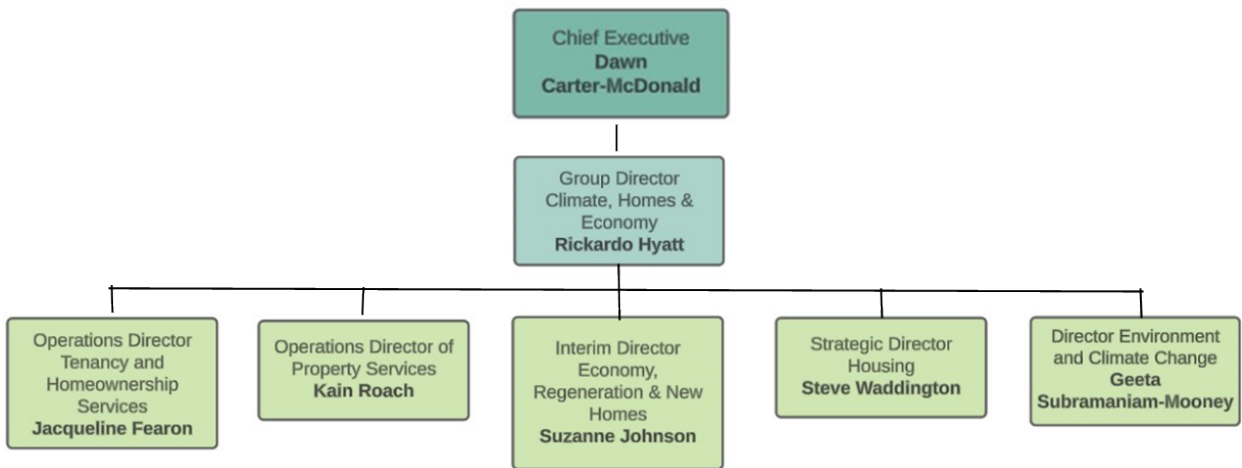
A small sample of stock holding councils taken from the 'top 20' list below were examined to provide comparative information to inform the potential options for restructuring housing services in Bristol.

Two councils were kind enough to provide detailed information, on the basis of confidentiality, and I was able to talk to their staff in greater detail to understand their pressure and responses.

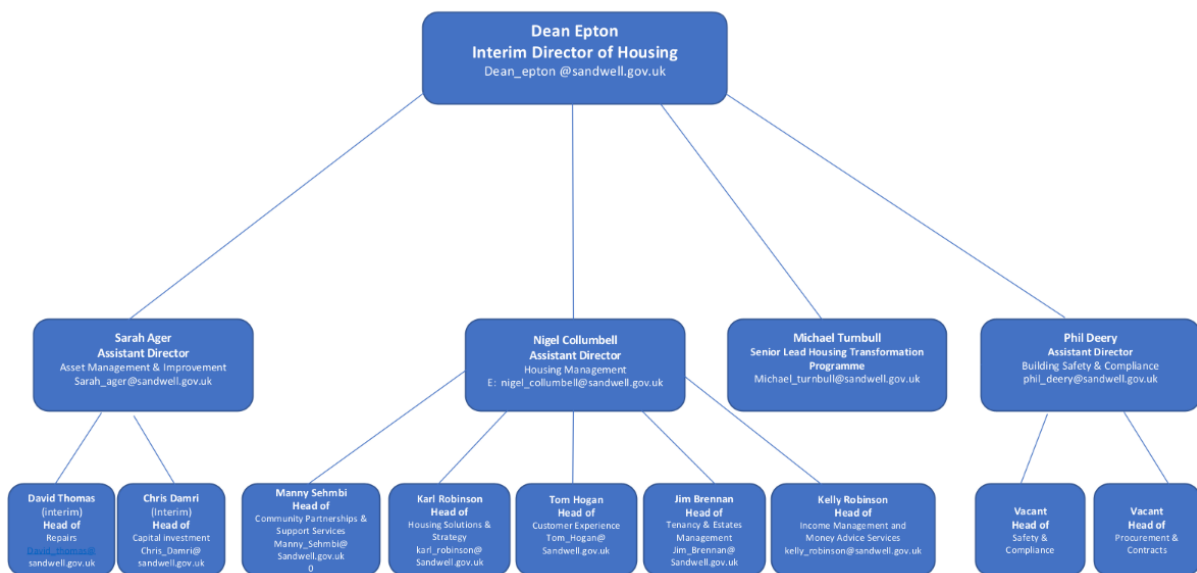
Top 20 council landlords, by stock size

Council	Total council homes (rent, leasehold and freehold paying a service charge) - approximately
Birmingham City Council	59,000
Bristol City Council	28,500
Camden Council	33,000
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	21,000
Royal Borough of Greenwich	26,000
Hackney Council	31,300
Hull City Council	23,000
Islington Council	33,000
Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council	21,500
Lambeth Council	33,500
Leeds City Council	54,000
Leicester City Council	19,000
Lewisham Council	18,500
Newcastle City Council	24,000
Nottingham City Council	26,000
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council	20,000
Sandwell Council	28,000
Sheffield City Council	38,000
Southwark Council	55,000
City of Wolverhampton Council	21,500

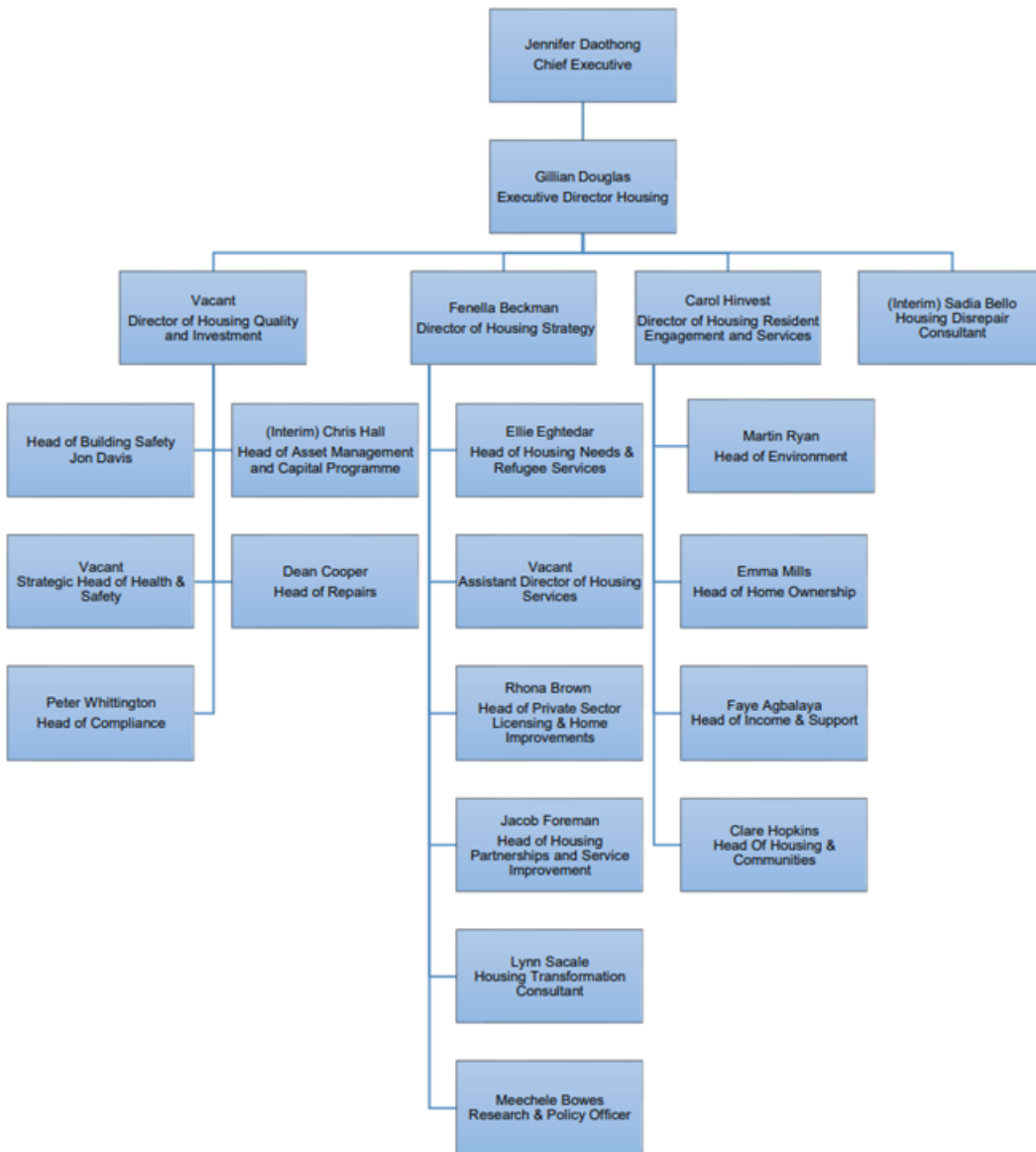
Hackney



Sandwell



Lewisham Council



Sheffield

Director of Housing

Neighbourhood and Tenancy Management

Management of the Council’s housing stock, estates and related assets, including the Housing Revenue Account and HRA Business Plan, Capital Investment, Fire Safety Compliance and Building Safety (joint responsibility with Director of Operational Services)

Delivery of Housing Strategy and Policy

Registered Private Providers of Social Housing – strategic planning partnerships and social landlord relationships.

Tenant, Resident and Leaseholder Engagement (including supporting Tenant Governance & Scrutiny roles)

Rehousing, Allocations Policy

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Services

Management of Refugee Resettlement programmes

Supported housing (specialist, emergency and temporary accommodation, Gypsy and Travellers sites)

Housing Related Support Accommodation Services

Older Persons Independent Living and Extra Care

Leaseholder services including support and enforcement

Home Ownership and Revenue Services including Regional Homes and Loans Service and Administration of Right to Buy

Private Sector Housing regulation, licensing, tenant support services and enforcement including Building Safety and Fire Safety Compliance

Housing and Estate Regeneration

Net Zero investment for existing homes in Council housing and private sector

Directorate Safeguarding lead

Responsible officer to Regulator of Social Housing

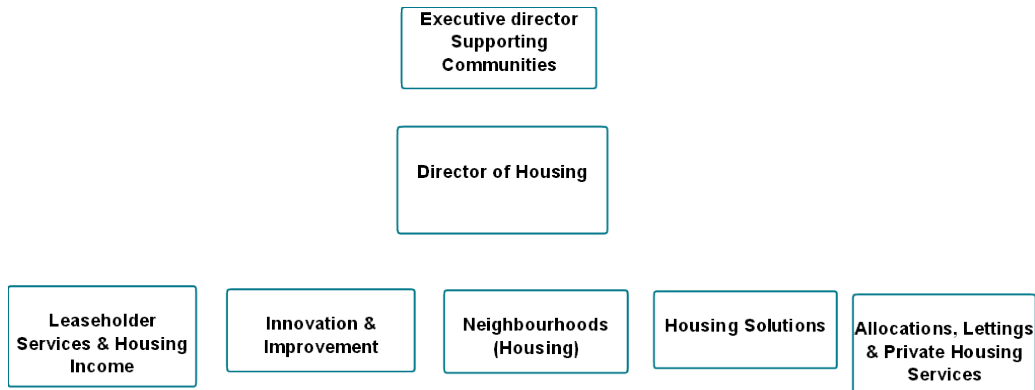
Lambeth Council

Housing Structure



The council receives over 3,000 new housing applications a year, and there are currently over 40,000 people already on the list. Each year, the council houses about 800 people

Camden Council



Sector challenges

The House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee published its report “The finances and sustainability of the social housing sector” on 8 May 2024. The full report is available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmcomloc/60/report.html>.

Its published summary is below:

“The social housing sector is crucial for providing shelter and support for millions of households. The sector is, however, under serious financial pressure, although it remains resilient for the time being. The sector has been presented with massive bills for decarbonisation, fire safety and regenerating old homes. At the same time, the maximum rent social housing providers can charge has been unexpectedly capped by the Government.

In order to deal with the financial headwinds, social housing providers have cut the amount they plan to spend on building new social homes. This reduction in new building has been necessary for social housing providers to remain financially secure.

However, this comes at a time when the country needs to build significantly more social housing and if this continues it will present a major problem for individuals that need social housing. Moreover, all stakeholders are clear that England has been facing a chronic shortage of social housing which must be addressed.”

Regulation

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) regulates standards that set the outcomes that social landlords in England must deliver for tenants.

- Neighbourhood and Community standard
- Safety and Quality standard
- Tenancy standard
- Transparency, Influence and Accountability (including Tenant Satisfaction Measures)
- Consumer standards Code of Practice
- Rent standard

The RSH and councils are obliged to take a co-regulatory approach to compliance.

Councils are responsible for ensuring they are managed effectively and that they deliver the outcomes of our standards. This means Bristol must, amongst other things, tell the Regulator “in a timely way about any material issues that might result its failure to deliver the outcomes” of the Regulatory standards. This is call ‘self referral’ and is that the council did in relation to building safety matters in March 2024. Subsequently the council created an improvement programme to ensure timely and effective progress towards meeting its regulatory obligations.

Landlords must provide tenants with information so they can understand how well their landlord is performing and enable them to shape and scrutinise service delivery

The RSH takes a ‘risk-based’ approach, ie how likely it is that a poor outcome will happen and what impact it would have if it does happen. The safety and quality of tenants homes is at the top of the list and the RSH is looking for evidence to assure them that this standard is fully met, or that robust plans are in place that mean the standards will be reached in an acceptable time.

The Social Housing Ombudsman

The Ombudsman service provides a free, independent, and impartial service to investigate complaints and resolve disputes involving the tenants and leaseholders of social landlords, including local authorities. The council must follow the requirements set out in the Ombudsman’s complaint handling code.

The report for Bristol council for 2023 can be viewed at the following web address:
<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/10/Landlord-Report-Bristol-City-Council.pdf>

Broader issues relating to social housing

There is a wealth of evidence and research covering the importance and impact of social housing on wellbeing, health, opportunities for work and social impact. Examples of some of the reports looked at for this review are set out below:

<https://www.thinkhouse.org.uk/site/assets/files/2215/cache0920c.pdf>

and

<https://www.cih.org/media/ngxjhgb/new-approaches-to-social-value.pdf>

The causal link between poor housing conditions and poor health outcomes is long established. The independent Marmot Review (2010) said housing is a “social determinant of health” meaning it can affect physical and mental health inequalities throughout life. The Marmot Review 10 Years On – Health Equity in England, recorded an expansion in research on the relationship between poor housing and health:

Poor-quality housing harms health and evidence shows that exposure to poor housing conditions (including damp, cold, mould, noise) is strongly associated with poor health, both physical and mental. The longer the exposure to poor conditions, including cold, the greater the impact on mental and physical health. Specific physical effects are morbidity including respiratory conditions, cardiovascular disease and communicable disease transmission, and increased mortality. In terms of mental health impacts, living in non-decent, cold or overcrowded housing and in unaffordable housing has been associated with increased stress and a reduction in a sense of empowerment and control over one’s life and with depression and anxiety. Children living in overcrowded homes are more likely to be stressed, anxious and depressed, have poorer physical health, attain less well at school and have a greater risk of behavioural problems than those in uncrowded homes.