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This response to the APPG on Housing and Social Mobility’s Call for Evidence is based on the findings of the [Democratic Foundations of the Just City](#) project, a collaboration between the University of Birmingham and University of Zurich. The research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation within the International Co-Investigator Scheme, in cooperation with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK.

In my role I have collected data on the city’s housing, interviewed housing stakeholders across Birmingham, and produced a recent [policy report](#). The aims of the project were to establish the role of local government in implementing policies that achieve the aims of the socially and spatially “just city”. This means a city in which ghettoisation, or the involuntary spatial concentration of marginalised groups, is avoided, and gentrification, or the transformation of working-class or vacant areas of a city into middle-class ones, is mitigated against. These patterns depend on the spatial distribution and social allocation of affordable social and private housing and its quality, but also on a city’s spatial strategy for urban renewal.

Executive summary

A legacy of historical discriminatory housing policies, coupled with disinvestment, demolition, and privatisation of council housing since the 1980s (Right to Buy), has catalysed enduring patterns of social and ethnic segregation in Birmingham. Deprived residents are concentrated in low-quality private rented housing and the remaining council estates. With the most attractive council stock long since having been sold off, public perceptions of social housing have greatly decreased. Today, this housing is increasingly seen as the last resort for citizens with no other alternatives. Long waiting lists mean only those with the most acute, complex needs are typically offered social housing by their local authority.

- Social housing increasingly functions as emergency accommodation for those in severe need owing to having complex needs that are poorly managed. Without targeted support services address these needs, many tenants will continue to be unstable and thus find it difficult to move into work, or progress in existing work.
- Policy responses need to be trans-sectoral (housing, urban renewal, transportation, support services to deprived residents) and tailored to counteract social segregation, while considering the particular opportunities and challenges for social housing residents in different city areas. For instance, the needs of residents on inner-city housing estates in Birmingham, which are highly ethnically diverse, are different to those living in large housing estates on the urban periphery that are poorly integrated into the wider city and are disproportionately of White British ethnicity.
- Citywide plans oriented towards spatial justice can help counteract further segregation, while multi-agency working and use of tried and tested community

research methods can help local government better respond to the needs of social housing residents. However, this requires financial support from central government and the greater devolution of powers, to enable cities to create responses to their problems with interventions that are rooted in the specific conditions on the ground.

Response to selected inquiry questions

What is the relationship between social housing and employment? What factors affect social renters' work chances?

1. We interviewed council officers in housing, planning and central leadership, along with a city councillor, housing association representative and major property developer. A theme that emerged in the interviews was the “residualisation” of social housing in the city. This is the process whereby areas with many social housing units are not seen as desirable places to live. This means that the only people who remain in the area are those with the most limited means to move. While the percentage of social rented households in Birmingham is still markedly [above the average for England](#), the city’s social housing stock is largely used to house only those with multiple, complex needs. There is a significant overlap between those who are likely to be allocated social housing (given the long waiting list in the city) and those who end up homeless. This includes severely deprived individuals and families, those with chronic mental health problems, history of substance abuse, experience of domestic abuse, or having spent time in prison. Social housing therefore disproportionately houses citizens who are most in need of support from the state. The withdrawal of services owing to austerity has exacerbated the problems that residents in social housing experience in trying to rebuild their lives. A city councillor we spoke to said that because of austerity, “we’ve got a whole host of broken systems” that are no longer able to assist these vulnerable individuals in tackling their problems and moving into work.
2. Providing accommodation for those in crisis removes the immediate risk of rough sleeping, but without associated support targeted to their individual needs, it is difficult for these individuals to succeed across a wide range of metrics, including accessing skills training and education, finding employment, and in-work progression. A housing association officer commented how “we’re not actually solving the [homelessness] problem; we’re just moving it around”, and described a cycle of homelessness, allocation of housing, tenancy failure, and subsequent return to homelessness. According to this participant, many tenancies fail because the tenant does not receive the support they need in order to learn how to manage their needs, for example mental health treatment or substance addiction services. It is therefore unsurprising that many residents in social housing have issues with accessing and maintaining employment, resulting in [higher deprivation rates](#).
3. Alongside this trend of housing only those with the most complex problems, the mono-tenure of many social housing estates, along with their often poor integration into the

city's infrastructure, reinforces negative perceptions of living there. The poor public transport connections that of Birmingham's peripheral large housing estates also impacts upon the employment opportunities available to residents. A senior officer in the local authority commented that "the concentration of poverty [in large housing estates] leads to mindsets that are just around poverty, crime and anti-social behaviour", suggesting a need for more social housing mixed into developments for private rent and sale. Another participant, a housing officer in the local authority, commented that housing large numbers of people with complex needs in one place, without sufficient funding to provide the auxiliary support they require, makes social housing estates dysfunctional, leading to "isolation, disengagement, and the breakdown of community".

How can the social housing sector be the catalyst for closing the social housing employment and earning gap?

4. The sector cannot alone solve the deep-rooted issues facing residents living in social housing, nor does our research suggest that the ideal solution is likely to come from central government that is far removed from the reality of the situation on the ground. Social housing can however be a platform for building the foundations of a more inclusive economy and democracy. Devolution, making use of tried and tested community research methods to drive decisions, and fostering a culture of multi-agency working are likely to be part of a successful policy mix in tackling this problem.
5. Although Birmingham's social housing stock has declined over time, there continues to be a ring of housing estates around the city centre, well as on the urban periphery. The distribution of social housing overlaps with spatial distribution of those with low qualifications and incomes. To counteract social segregation, housing policies should envision mixed-income developments in current areas of concentrated deprivation, while building new subsidised units in less deprived areas. Ideally, such policies would be complemented with active land-banking in gentrifying areas and citywide plans oriented towards incremental redevelopment of deprived areas and their connectivity to opportunities for work.
6. The populations of inner city housing estates are highly diverse, meaning that [English language knowledge](#) may be a significant barrier to employment for residents. In contrast, populations of peripheral housing estates are much more likely to be White British, meaning that language is not a main barrier to accessing work. This means that the provision of support for those in social housing needs to be tailored according to the social reality it is targeting. One Birmingham-based initiative that has been encouraging in this regard is [USE-IT! Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together](#). This is a major ERDF-funded intervention working in Ladywood, a deprived inner-city ward, to test new strategies to help residents develop resilience and overcome poverty. Academics at the University of Birmingham devised an accredited research training programme, coupled

with mentoring, that upskilled over 100 residents while at the same time gathering rich data to inform the decisions of public organisations in the city. 27 projects were funded, with one community research project helping to secure a £300,000 grant to [understand and tackle childhood obesity](#). This successful model of including marginalised residents in urban change is being continued by [Dr Peter Lee](#), who is supporting residents in setting up a social enterprise using the community research model. Rolling out this method to other deprived areas of the city would help root interventions in the reality of the situation they address and better understand the real and perceived barriers that residents face.

7. There are encouraging signs that a culture of multi-agency working in Birmingham could integrate public services to provide responses that are both more holistic for citizens while also being more fiscally efficient. Interviews conducted with key stakeholders in Birmingham City Council found that the local authority is making tentative steps towards multi-agency working. For instance, one participant talked to us about a partnership with thirty different agencies in the city to tackle the rough sleeping crisis on the streets of Birmingham. The city council has also launched additional support for social housing tenants to gain basic tenancy skills. However, this embrace of new ways of working is being undermined by the high turnover of staff due to austerity. Several council officers commented that repeated cuts have undermined the capacity of their departments to carry out core functions, let alone experiment with new ways of working. They also claim that staffing churn due to austerity negatively impacts on the quality of decision-making, with one participant describing Birmingham as being “like a beached whale”. The local authority has lost 48% of its staff since 2010, and [by the end of the 2022/23 financial year](#) it will operate on less than half of the funding it did before austerity began. This suggests that a shortage of resources will hold back moves towards multi-agency working. Targeted funding to support the joining up of public services, such as social housing providers, drug and alcohol addiction services, mental health treatment and adult education providers, with local discretion on the balance of spending between different partners according to information gathered about the needs of residents in different estates, could be a positive means of helping social housing residents move into employment and progress at work.

What can different tiers of Government do to support the social housing sector and tenants, to reduce the social housing employment and earnings gap?

8. The poor employment and earnings outcomes for residents in social housing requires thinking about housing, urban renewal and access to employment not in a silo, but rather making more broad considerations on the state of the UK economy and the centralisation of decision-making power. As the national government begins winding down support schemes that have kept people furloughed during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a strong possibility of significant unemployment in the months to come that could exacerbate the already high unemployment rates of those living in social housing. [Research by Shelter](#) found that while those in social housing are disproportionately more likely to be

unemployed, this is not in and of itself inherently connected with the housing itself. Instead, complex factors are at play. For instance, in the Birmingham context, many of the peripheral large housing estates are poorly connected to the city's public transport network, which in any case is weak and largely dependent on buses. With high fares and infrequent services, coupled with the city's traffic congestion that [greatly contributes to Birmingham's underperformance](#) on productivity measures, this transport problem makes it difficult for residents in estates on the urban periphery to reliably commute to the more plentiful work opportunities in the urban core.

9. The issue of unemployment among social housing tenants must be tackled as part of a coherent, joined up policy response. This must consider not only the need for skills training and education, mentoring, and support in finding jobs, but also a wider programme of investment in public transport, parity of esteem and funding for mental health and substance addiction services, and greater support for new businesses and social enterprises that regional cities like Birmingham require to "level up" their economies. Further devolution to city regions would also bring benefits in this regard, both [addressing the UK's democratic deficit](#) and creating a [marketplace of policy responses](#) in tackling the housing crisis that are differentiated according to local nuances. Further devolution will also likely bring a [significant economic boost](#). One senior leader we spoke to at Birmingham City Council commented that "unfortunately, Brexit has derailed devolution. I think we've bought into this narrative that it's all too difficult and the government aren't in a position to devolve any more". Greater funding for the combined authorities is required; at present, their small budgets [do not balance out the depth of cuts](#) made to the areas they cover. In the Birmingham context, the granting of further powers (e.g. around urban planning policy) to the West Midlands Combined Authority would better enable the city region to integrate the knowledge of the community, gained through lived experience, into policy.
10. The government's "levelling up" agenda is focused on improving regional productivity and economic output. However, to avoid growing inequality, it is important that future [economic growth is inclusive](#), with steps taken to ensure that those who are marginalised benefit. This includes residents in social housing, who are at greater risk of poverty. [Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) has found that social housing tenants have been disproportionately affected by the past decade of austerity measures. This includes issues with paying for adequate heating and electricity, increased debt, shortage of food and reliance on food banks, and mental and physical illnesses associated with increased stress and anxiety. A housing officer who participated in our research commented on the relationship between austerity, poor health, and increased difficulty in finding employment among social housing tenants, but felt there was little that Birmingham City Council could do to help people in this position. Several other participants echoed this sentiment, saying, for example, "the system is the system". Many felt that central government is "attacking" councils, despite their value as [anchor institutions](#) supporting local economies. It would therefore be of great benefit to the region if further planned

budget cuts to Birmingham City Council were cancelled and fresh consideration were given to the possibility of supporting the construction of new social housing units, which participants in our research were supportive of.

Summary and recommendations

In summary, our research in Birmingham found a “residualisation” of social housing stock, which is increasingly used only to house those with the most acute needs. However, without funding to maintain access to the support services that such individuals require, such as mental health or substance addiction treatment, the instability of a significant number of tenants makes it difficult for them to enter employment and become more self-sufficient. The concentration of large numbers of deprived individuals in social housing estates, many of whom have complex needs, also has implications for the wider area and community. Participants in our research suggested that mixed tenure developments and the construction of new social housing in less deprived areas would be a positive step to overcome this concentration of deprivation. There also needs to be an acknowledgement that residents in different kinds of social housing have different needs, and local authorities should be empowered to gather information on communities and tailor their responses accordingly.

- **Recommendation 1:** additional funding for support to social housing residents that is tailored to their specific needs, for example mental health and substance dependency services. This will build the stability required to work or access skills training.
- **Recommendation 2:** further devolution, for example of urban planning and housing policy to the combined authorities, so that the city regions can develop responses to their own problems incorporating local knowledge and expertise.
- **Recommendation 3:** recognise that different types of social housing estates have different needs. Inner-city estates in Birmingham are more ethnically diverse and barriers to work can include insufficient knowledge of English, thus necessitating funded or subsidised language classes. Estates on the urban periphery typically have issues with accessing reliable and affordable public transport in order to commute. Community research models, such as the [USE-IT! model](#) developed in Birmingham, can enable local authorities to gather information on the needs of residents at a relatively low cost but with high impact.
- **Recommendation 4:** local authorities are often best placed to lead the response to issues faced by social housing residents, or to facilitate collaborative multi-agency working projects. However, the instability of staffing and attrition of expertise, both caused by continued austerity cuts to council budgets, makes creating preventative platforms difficult. Levelling up the UK requires renewed financial support for local government, cancelling planned further budget cuts, and greater recognition of councils’ role as [anchor institutions](#) supporting the local economy in their areas.
- **Recommendation 5:** participants in our research confirmed that the mono-tenure of social housing estates has exacerbated the problems faced by tenants. Local government should be supported to invest in new developments with a mix of tenures, bringing more social mix into currently deprived areas but also to less deprived and gentrifying areas.