

IMPORTANT - PLEASE READ

Somerstown Housing Office
Somerstown Central
Tyseley Road
Southsea
PO5 4EZ
023 9284 1311

Dear resident

Tuesday, 5 June 2018

I am writing to explain about work we need to do to your building and the impact this will have on you. I appreciate that this will come as a shock but want to reassure you our staff will be available to support you over the coming weeks and months.

We will need to move you out of your home. I know many of you have lived in your properties for some time and the prospect of moving is likely to be unsettling, but we will be working with you to find you a suitable new home.

The purpose of this letter is to explain why we will be moving residents and what will happen now, and to explain the support we will provide as we want to do all we can to help you through the process.

As part of our work looking at options to replace cladding, we commissioned an assessment of the structure of both Leamington House and Horatia House. The blocks were built in the 1960s and the report on the buildings has concluded that the quality of the original construction isn't as strong as expected. This means we need to do further work, which won't be possible while residents are living in the blocks.

Our main priority is the safety of residents and we have worked with a range of experts and the fire service to make sure we are certain the building is safe for people to live in for the moment, while we start the process of moving people to new homes.

There is no immediate danger from day-to-day living in your building. The problem is the strength of the concrete creates a risk if there was an explosion inside a flat. This is very unlikely to happen because there is no mains gas in the buildings and residents shouldn't have anything like gas heaters as tenancy agreements don't allow them. We will be putting additional security measures in place to make sure items that could create a risk of explosion are not brought into flats.

As you know, your block has had security officers since we started removing cladding. This role was introduced so we had a 24-hour presence to act as a fire-watch, keeping residents safe. The security officers will now be present at entrances to the buildings to make sure people aren't bringing in anything that could be dangerous, and that the only people coming in are those who live in the block or are visiting residents.

Following the expert advice we have received, we want to keep residents safe by making sure things like gas bottles or cylinders are not in the building. Although medical oxygen tanks are fine as they don't contain flammable gas.

We will need to speak with residents from every flat to find out more about each household so we know what you need from a new home. Our staff will be visiting every flat to talk to you and explain more about how the process will work.

We have worked closely with colleagues in the fire service to make sure they are happy with the situation. They are satisfied with the measures being put in place and have confirmed that there is no change to their existing fire safety advice.

Fire service officers will be talking to residents with us over the next few days and together we would like to visit every home and shed in the blocks to help check there is nothing in the building that would be a concern. Our staff will talk to you about arranging this.

The fire service has also asked us to remind you personalised fire safety advice is available at www.hantsfire.gov.uk/safeandsound where you can complete an online home safety checker.

I appreciate this news will come as a shock and you will have a lot of questions. There are a number of ways you can find out more:

- talk to our staff, we'll be visiting every flat today and coming back over the next few days to speak to anyone who wasn't at home
- come to one of our drop-in sessions in your building's ground floor community room, we'll have staff there from 9am to 8pm Tuesday 5 June to Friday 8 June and will update you on times of future sessions as they're arranged
- visit our community information point in the housing office in the Somerstown Hub, which will be open
 - 8.30am to 8pm Tuesday 5 June to Friday 8 June
 - 9am to 4pm Saturday 9 June
 - 10am to 3pm Sunday 10 June
 - Normal working hours 8.30am to 5pm Mon-Thurs and 8.30am to 4pm Fri
- speak to your housing officer
- call our helpline on 023 9284 1311
- email towerblocks@portsmouthcc.gov.uk
- read the additional information included with this letter
- go to portsmouth.gov.uk and search 'tower blocks' for a fuller list of frequently asked questions on the situation
- we will also be displaying information on the notice boards in the community rooms

I know this will be a difficult situation and we are working to rehome everyone as soon as possible. We are very grateful for your understanding and co-operation and will be updating you with further information as soon as it is available.

Yours faithfully

James Hill
Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services
Portsmouth City Council

Frequently Asked Questions

General questions

Q. What is happening with Leamington House and Horatia House?

A. As part of work to look at options to replace cladding we commissioned an assessment of the structural safety of the blocks. Tests have shown we need to do work to strengthen the buildings because their concrete isn't as strong as expected. Because of this we are going to move residents to other accommodation.

Q. What is wrong with the building?

A. A structural report on the buildings has shown the concrete used in the original construction is not as strong as would be expected. There is no immediate danger to the buildings but concrete samples tested by leading experts show that if there were a severe explosion inside a flat it would cause more damage than would be expected.

Q. What sort of explosion do you mean?

A. The risk would come from an incident inside a flat involving the sort of explosion associated with pressurised gas, such as that found in gas bottles or cylinders. There is no mains gas supply in the building for heating or cooking which significantly reduces the risk of an explosion. There shouldn't be anything like gas heaters in flats as our tenancy agreements don't allow them, and we have put extra security measures in place to make sure things like gas bottles or cylinders are not in the building.

Q. How likely is an explosion?

A. As far as tower blocks are concerned, Leamington House and Horatia House have less risk of an explosion than most because there is no gas supply within the buildings. Our tenancy agreements don't allow things like gas heaters in flats, and because we visited every resident when we started removing cladding we have seen inside every property recently. We are also enhancing the current fire warden role to make the buildings even safer. As well as patrolling the buildings they will be a 24-hour security presence at entrances to make sure no one who shouldn't be in the blocks is allowed in and checking nothing dangerous is taken into the buildings like gas bottles or cylinders.

Q. Is it safe for residents to stay in the buildings?

A. Your safety is our priority and if it was not safe we would be emptying the buildings immediately. The structural reports on the buildings show that it is safe to stay in the building while we find alternative accommodation. These reports were done by industry experts.

Q. Will everyone move at the same time?

A. It isn't possible for us to move everyone at the same time and it will all be based on people's individual situations. Different people need different types and sizes of property and this has to be factored in for when people move.

Q. Why aren't residents being evacuated immediately?

A. Residents aren't being evacuated because it is safe for them to stay in the buildings while we find them alternative accommodation. This is partly because of the way the buildings are designed. Flats are separate compartments, designed to contain fires or other hazards. And the buildings do not have a gas supply. It is also because of the extra precautions we have in place like the 24-hour wardens in both buildings. We have worked with the fire service on this and they agree that with the measures in place the buildings are safe to live in.

Q. How do we know it is safe to stay in the building?

A. Resident safety is our priority and if it was not safe we would be emptying the buildings immediately. We have had structural reports from industry experts. Based on the information in these, there is no danger from normal day-to-day living in the blocks. In addition there is no gas supply and we've put extra security in place so it is safe to stay in the building while we find alternative accommodation. We have also spoken to the fire service who are satisfied with the measures we are taking.

Q. Who has decided it is safe for residents to remain in the buildings?

A. Letting residents stay in the building while we find alternative accommodation was a decision we took following discussions with a range of experts including the fire service, government and the Building Research Establishment (BRE), which is a world leading building science centre and the organisation the government recommends for testing. They are experts in this subject and we can be confident in the information and advice we have been given.

Q. If it is safe why are you moving people out so quickly?

A. We are moving people out because, while it is safe for people to stay in the blocks, it is important we move residents to eliminate the risk. Residents' safety is always our priority and we do not want to delay things and risk the situation getting worse. We are in a fortunate position at the moment with a number of new and refurbished properties becoming available we can use to rehome some residents. We need to act now as we wouldn't necessarily have this supply of homes available if we waited. We anticipate other homes will be found through the usual flow of residents moving and council properties becoming available.

Q. Why have you introduced extra security in the buildings?

A. Both blocks have had security in since we started removing cladding, this was introduced so we had a 24-hour presence to act as a fire-watch. We have now increased their role to include being present at entrances to the buildings to make sure people aren't bringing in anything dangerous and that the only people coming in are those who live in the block or are visiting residents.

Q. What aren't people allowed to bring into the blocks?

A. We don't want anything like gas bottles or cylinders brought into the buildings and the security staff will prevent this from happening.

Q. Why do you need to look in people's flats and sheds?

A. We just want to check there is nothing in the building that would be a concern. Officers from the fire service will be with us in the blocks in the first few days following this announcement and we thought it would help reassure people for us to jointly check everything is okay.

Q. Does this affect fire safety in the two blocks?

A. No. Fire safety advice from ourselves and the fire service remains the same but we would ask all residents to take extra care at all times. The fire service have also asked us to remind you that personalised fire safety advice is available at www.hantsfire.gov.uk/safeandsound where you can complete an online home safety checker.

Q. Is the stay put policy correct?

A. Yes. After the council and fire service inspected the building it was agreed the stay put policy is still the best advice for residents to follow. The safety measures, within the building design, to contain fires within a flat are still in place.

Q. Why do I have to move out?

A. Tests have shown we need to do work to strengthen the buildings because the concrete used in the original construction isn't as strong as expected. Because of this we are going to move residents to other accommodation.

Q. Am I entitled to compensation?

A. All tenants that are being moved will be entitled to a home loss payment of £6,100 per household. We will also help cover moving costs such as:

- Removals
- Reconnection of appliances
- Curtains
- Carpets
- Decorations
- Assistance for people who need additional support

Q. How do I find out about getting moved to a new home?

A. Just talk to our staff and they'll explain what will happen. We'll be making visits to every flat in the blocks, or come to one of our drop-in sessions in the buildings' community room, we'll have staff there from 9am to 8pm Tuesday 5 June to Friday 8 June and will update you on times of future sessions as they're arranged.

Q. Where will I be moved to?

A. You will have the opportunity to tell us the area you want to live in and we will try to find the type and size of home you need in that area. While we will do everything we can to home people in the area they want, it may not be possible, but your new home will be within the city boundaries unless you agree otherwise.

Q. How long will it take to get a new home?

A. We hope to have moved all residents to new homes by spring 2019.

Q. Can I choose the type of home I move to?

A. Generally residents will not get a choice in the type of home they move to and we will look to find them something the same as they are currently living in. There may be some exceptions if we do not have a like-for-like property available in which case we'll talk to residents about alternatives.

Q. How many properties will be offered to me?

A. Only one offer of accommodation will be made to each household. We understand that this may be difficult for people but it is necessary so we can empty the blocks quickly.

Q. Can I turn down a home offered to me?

A. No. Residents will only be made one offer. If you are not happy with the home you are offered please discuss the reasons with the rehousing team. If the offer is suitable and reasonable for you and your household to occupy, in these circumstances the property must be accepted.

Q. Will I have to go on the council housing waiting list?

A. No. Because of the special circumstances regarding Horatia House and Leamington House we are able to allocate residents of these blocks new homes outside of our usual policy.

Q. What impact will this have on people already on the council housing waiting list?

A. Unfortunately moving people out of Horatia House and Leamington House will have some impact on other people waiting for homes, but we are only anticipating using certain

areas to rehome from these blocks so there will still be some homes available for those on the waiting list.

Q. What if I don't want to move out?

A. The work we will need to do can't be done with people living there so unfortunately you will have to move out, but we will do everything we can to try to find you a new home that you like.

Q. How did you find out about this?

A. As part of work to look at options to replace cladding we commissioned an assessment of the structural safety of the blocks.

Q. Why were they built with weak concrete?

A. The problem with the concrete goes back to the mix used when the two blocks were built in the 1960s. It is impossible for us to know now why it was not made as strong as it should have been. While the concrete isn't as strong as it should be there isn't a risk associated with normal day-to-day living in the buildings. The test results only suggest there would be a problem if there was a severe explosion inside a flat.

Q Is this related to the previous cladding issues?

A. This is not related to the cladding that was on the buildings. The only connection is that we found out about the need for strengthening work when we were planning what the cladding should be replaced with.

Q. What will happen to the buildings?

A. At the moment we don't know. We need to do some further investigation to find out exactly what work needs to be done. Our priority is to find new homes for the residents.