



Portsmouth

CITY COUNCIL

HOUSING AND SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

REVIEW OF THE EXPERIENCES GATHERED AFTER THE DECANT OF RESIDENTS FROM TOWER BLOCKS

Date published: 11 November 2020

Under the terms of the Council's Constitution, reports prepared by a Scrutiny Panel should be considered formally by the Cabinet or the relevant Cabinet Member within a period of eight weeks, as required by Rule 11(a) of the Policy & Review Procedure Rules.

PREFACE

The discovery in June 2017 that Horatia House and Leamington House had the same type of cladding as Grenfell Tower made front page news in Portsmouth.

Although the cladding was removed PCC decided in 2018 the blocks were not structurally viable and that residents should be permanently moved. PCC had moved residents before but not on such a scale.

Moving home can be a stressful and disruptive experience, even more so when it is involuntary.

The decision to move 252 residents from Horatia House and Leamington House made headline news in Portsmouth in the summer of 2018.

We would like to thank everyone who has taken part in the review. Panel members have heard from a range of organisations and residents about the experience of the decant.

The Panel would like to thank Paul Fielding, Assistant Director of Housing, Neighbourhood Services for providing information and arranging meetings with residents and organisations, and all Housing officers involved in the decant.

The Panel would like to thank residents who participated in the review by sharing their experiences of the decant, an eventful time in their lives.

I would like to thank all the panel members who have taken part: Cal Corkery (Vice-Chair), Chris Attwell, Leo Madden, Hugh Mason and Steve Wemyss.

Councillor Luke Stubbs
Chair, Housing and Social Care Scrutiny Panel.
Date: 11 November 2020

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to present the Cabinet with the recommendations of the Housing and Social Care Scrutiny Panel's review of the experiences gathered after the decant of residents from tower blocks. Initially the cladding would be replaced but a structural survey showed that the blocks would have to be emptied.

BACKGROUND

The Scrutiny Management Panel agreed on 28 January 2019 that the Housing & Social Care Panel should review the experiences gathered after the decant of residents from the Horatia House and Leamington House tower blocks. The review was started by the Housing and Social Care Scrutiny Panel which comprised:

Councillors Luke Stubbs (Chair)
Cal Corkery (Vice-Chair)
Chris Attwell
Leo Madden
Hugh Mason
Steve Wemyss

Standing Deputies were: Councillors Hannah Hockaday, Benedict Swann, Neill Young. At the Full Council meeting on 19 May 2020 Councillor Jason Fazackarley was appointed to the panel in place of Councillor Hugh Mason; Councillor Ben Dowling was appointed as a Standing Deputy. At the Full Council meeting on 13 October 2020 Councillor Will Purvis was appointed to the panel in place of Councillor Chris Attwell.

At its meeting on 30 July 2019, the Housing and Social Care Scrutiny Panel (henceforth referred to in this report as "the panel") agreed the following objectives for the review:

1. To investigate the level of corporate knowledge the council holds from previous decants.
2. To ensure the correct plans are in place to respond to a situation requiring a rehousing emergency response of any scale.
3. To understand the legislation regulating the response (decanting vs permanent rehousing).
4. To evaluate the robustness of the council's plans to cope with a large scale issue.
5. To review the lessons learnt from past experiences.

The panel met formally on three occasions between 30 July 2019 and 11 November 2020. A list of meetings held by the panel and details of the written evidence received can be found in appendix one. The minutes of the panel's meetings and the documentation reviewed by the panel are published on the council's website.

The panel also met residents from Horatia House and Leamington House to learn about their experiences of the decant.

TIMELINE

14 June 2017 - Grenfell Tower fire

22 June 2017 - tests find similar cladding in Portsmouth

22 June 2017 - Civil Contingency / Emergency Planning Team draw up plans in case of emergency evacuation and re-housing

23 June 2017 - removal of cladding starts

7 August 2017 - architects appointed for feasibility study

January 2018 - removal of cladding finishes

March 2018 - result of feasibility study

4 June 2018 - operational staff informed; local media briefed

5 June 2018 - residents informed

End of July 2018 - residents start to move out

Early April 2019 - majority of residents have moved

1 August 2019 - rehousing phase was completed for Horatia House

9 August 2019 - rehousing phase was completed for Leamington House thereby completing the rehousing of 245 tenant households from the blocks

OBJECTIVES

To investigate the level of corporate knowledge the council holds from previous decants.

Decant is a legally derived term from the Land compensation Act 1973 and Planning & Compensation Act 1991 and is used to explain the process where residents are required to move from their homes. Decants can be temporary or permanent. They may be needed due to reasons such as major works, redevelopment or sale of housing stock. For example, there were decants from Leamington House and Solihull House for refurbishment and in emergency situations, and from Nickleby House due to flooding resulting in temporary housing for a few households.

The reason for the decant will influence the options available to the tenants and the council. There are times when the council needs to undertake major work to the property and it is not possible for tenants to remain in the property while it is being done. If this happens tenants are normally given the option to either leave on a permanent or temporary basis (returning to their original accommodation once the repairs have been completed). In most cases the tenant has a choice about a temporary or permanent move. However, there will be occasions, such as the potential of future rent arrears, where a permanent move is not agreed.

A permanent decant (also referred to as permanent rehousing) is where the council requires someone to leave their home permanently and does not allow them to return. This is usually only used where demolition and redevelopment will take place. The focus of the council's team is in assisting tenants to move permanently where necessary and there is a business need.

Small scale decants take place when stock is given to the council by Housing Associations and need refurbishing before a tenant can move in. This can take between one week and three months to complete.

The Housing team prepare for approximately four to five decants per year but it can vary. In 2018/2019 there was one temporary move, five permanent moves, one of which included a Home Loss Payment, and one returned tenant. Decants can happen in any part of the city, in both houses and flats, and are mainly due to major repairs which cannot be done while the property is occupied.

Therefore, the council has experience of decants. In 2017 a plan was in place for decanting tenants from Horatia House and Leamington House but it was not needed as it was decided at that point not to move people out as a result of a joint inspection by the council and the Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service in June 2017.

To ensure the correct plans are in place to respond to a situation requiring a rehousing emergency response of any scale.

After the Grenfell Tower tragedy on 14 June 2017 the government set up a testing process for identifying Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding materials. Horatia House and Leamington House (both built in 1965) were identified as having this type of cladding so samples were sent for testing. The blocks are both 18 storeys high and each contain 136 flats comprising one, two and three-bedroom properties. Each block has eight flats on each storey (but none on the ground floor) with two escape stairwells in each block. When the decant started some flats were unoccupied (void).

On 22 June 2017 test results confirmed the cladding to be ACM of the same type found on Grenfell Tower so the council may have needed to prepare for an emergency evacuation of all households in the blocks.

The Civil Contingency / Emergency Planning Team prepared for and set up a response on the same day and gave assurance that Housing could provide emergency temporary accommodation. The Civil Contingency Team covers both Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council and part of a wider network linked with Hampshire and UK civil contingency planning.

The council and the Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service (HFRS) undertook joint inspections to determine if the residents could remain in the blocks. The inspection focussed on the fire safety measures and the impact of additional measures put in place, for example, a 24-hour fire watch.

The inspection helped inform the decision that residents could be assured of their safety and could remain in the blocks whilst the cladding was removed.

Whilst the activity around the inspections took place plans were made in the event that all residents had to be evacuated. The Civil Contingency / Emergency Planning Team mobilised the response and prepared rest centres which would provide a means of rehousing all households temporarily. Preparation was also made to deal with a scenario where residents would want to be rehoused despite assurances from the council and HFRS about the safety of the blocks. Any such requests could be dealt with via the Housing Service. No rehousing requests were received.

Cladding removal began on 23 June 2017 and was completed in January 2018. On 7 August 2017 ECD Architects were appointed to undertake a feasibility study to investigate options for recladding the blocks including structural surveys. ECD Architects incorporated the structural report conclusions into the final feasibility study report that was issued to the Council on 26 March 2018 and published on the Council website on 2 July 2018. These can be found at www.portsmouth.gov.uk/ext/housing/leamington-house-and-horatia-house

The conclusion of the feasibility reports was that extensive major structural works within the properties were deemed necessary, including strengthening of internal walls and floors throughout the buildings that can only be undertaken when both blocks are empty.

The following council teams were involved in planning the decant: Corporate Communications, Emergency planning, HNB Housing Options, HNB Local Authority Housing, HNB Planned Maintenance, HNB Business Growth, Relationships and Support.

A project team of officers were created, drawing staff from other areas, comprising:

- Engagement – gathered information from the tenants and worked to inform and calm the situation
- New Tenancy – Focussed on taking the initial information gathered and looking for suitable available properties within the PCC stock
- Rehousing – Focussed on removals, disturbance payments
- Area Housing Offices – signing up tenants into their new homes

No staff had been made redundant nor new staff recruited as a result of the decants. It would not have been appropriate to recruit new officers to support the project because experienced staff were required. Some staff had been transferred from other areas; as a result some other work may have slowed down, but nothing was stopped.

The stages of the decant were:

- Planning and mobilisation
- Inform tenants and staff
- Plan and undertake moves
- Making it business as usual
- Finishing the decant

During the decant the Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Building Services, and a support team, were based in the Civic Offices to co-ordinate an emergency response, if it was required. If any residents who had heard about the concrete defects wanted emergency temporary accommodation the civil contingency/emergency plan (rest centre) would have been invoked (rest centre). If any residents requested emergency temporary accommodation it would have been managed by the housing service. Neither scenario arose. Emergency Temporary accommodation at the rest centre would have been an immediate bed for the night. If people had wanted to move permanently then they would have been offered temporary accommodation for more than one night, probably in a B&B.

Communication

A communications strategy was vital. Release of information was carefully planned to ensure tenants were the priority. Communications were prepared in advance, including:

- Frequently asked questions (including draft responses to possible questions on social media)
- Use of a dedicated webpage on the council's website
- Range of letters targeted to specific audiences
- Media briefing/media release

In addition, through the project a number of other communications have been provided including:

- Regular letters to tenants
- Drop in sessions, and meetings with Housing officers
- Update to councillors
- Reporting through Governance & Audit & Standards Committee
- Monthly update emails to councillors, MPs and fire service

The decision was made to inform tenants on Tuesday 5 June. Operational staff, including a range of front line teams (who would comprise the project team) with experience of working with tenants, were told on Monday 4 June. Key local media were briefed on 4 June, under strict embargo until 5 June, so that staff and tenants were informed by the council first. Information on the council's website went live on 5 June at 8 am and social media was monitored to respond to questions and comments. Officers were in the blocks delivering the news from 8 am on 5 June.

Letters (appendix 2) were created for tenants of the blocks, other similar blocks and surrounding areas. The FAQs included in the letter advised that one offer of accommodation would be made to each household. This was to minimise unfounded fears arising outside of the main blocks. The project team and managers were in both blocks to hand deliver the letters and have initial conversations with tenants. Teams were based from the common rooms to answer questions and provide feedback to the support team.

It was important that every tenant had the ability to have one-to-one conversations with a member of staff who listened to their concerns. By doing this support was able to be focussed on the most vulnerable residents. Interpreters were on hand during the first week and available for meetings. Officers met 182 tenants on first day and within the first week had met all tenants in Horatia House and all but 23 in Leamington House. They worked in the evenings and weekends to ensure that all tenants had been reached.

New homes

Officers from across HNB co-ordinated knowledge about the current tenants, their needs, and property sizes within the blocks. Using this information, and knowledge about the rate of availability of different types of property, Housing Options were able to predict how long it would take to fully decant both properties although predictions depended on the number of suitable properties that became available. It was understood the decant would reduce the number of empty properties available on the waiting list.

An Initial Visit Checklist was used to gather initial information about tenants and their needs to ensure needs were prioritised, namely:

- families with children
- urgent medical need and residents requiring adapted properties

Information was collated into a single, controlled place which was used to track progress for the families and the overall project.

A high number of residents wanted to stay in Somerstown but understood there was a limited number of properties in that area. The tenants who moved out of the city (Paulsgrove and Leigh Park) received council support contacting schools.

No residents were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation or any other form of temporary accommodation as a result of the decant. Neither were any residents made homeless. Only seven or eight residents have moved again since the decant and five have taken advantage of the right to buy.

To understand the legislation regulating the response (decanting vs permanent rehousing).

Legislation specifies what payment should be made to residents when they have to move out of their home.

Payments for disturbance and home less will be paid in all circumstances in accordance with the Land Compensation Act provisions (section 38) 1973.
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1973/26/section/38>

The Housing Act 1985 (Part II S.26) outlines disturbance allowances
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1985/68/section/26>

Home Loss Payments (Prescribed Amounts) (England) Regulations 2018
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2018/915/made>

Disturbance payments

Tenants who are asked to move are eligible to claim for disturbance payments. These payments are not fixed and should reflect “reasonable” costs incurred as a direct result of moving home. Tenants could qualify for the following items:

- Removals
- Disconnection/reconnection of domestic appliances/showers
- Telephone/Sky/cable/internet connection
- Flooring
- Replacement curtains/blinds
- School uniform - if tenants' children have to move school as a result of the move.

Home Loss Payment

If the tenant meets the criteria set out in the relevant legislation they are entitled to a statutory payment which is fixed according to the current legislation. This is a figure set by government and was £6,100 at the start of the process is currently £6,300 per tenant. The HRA has a budget of £94,500 pa for home loss and disturbance payments

Security of tenancy

For the tenant there is continuation of secure tenancy and they cannot be provided with any form of tenancy demotion if it is a permanent decant. The tenant is moved to a new property with a new secure tenancy and retains the length of occupation (for any future right to buy).

If it is a temporary decant, the current tenancy stays in place and a licence is normally granted to occupy the temporary accommodation, clearly showing the intention is to return to the principal home.

Leaseholders

The council holds limited information about leaseholders in council blocks. If they let out their flat, the council does not know the tenants' details. There are relatively few leaseholders in tower blocks, often because the service charge is fairly prohibitive. The council bought back the single leaseholder's flat at a market value but was not responsible for rehousing any sub-tenants, although as a responsible landlord they investigated if they had a duty to the tenants. However, the tenants moved out of the area so the flat was purchased with no occupants.

Normally the bill for works on Local Authority blocks would be charged to (and shared between) the leaseholders with a cap of £15,000. However, the cap does not apply if they are not living in the flat as their principal home.

Following a decant of residents from a council housing block of flats in Eastern Road, the tenant of a leaseholder was offered alternative accommodation due to their personal circumstances.

Eviction

The sole eviction that had taken place during the decant had been due to rent arrears. The tenant had been made aware of the financial compensation available but had not engaged with Housing staff. The tenant concerned has been rehoused.

To evaluate the robustness of the council's plans to cope with a large scale issue.

Fire safety and security

Justin Turner, Watch Manager, Fire Safety Policies, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service had been informed of the situation by his line manager at the end of the first week of June 2018. He was involved until the end of March 2019 and a colleague took over the role. He did not know how many officers knew earlier. He prepared his team for the briefing which took place on the following Monday.

He was in regular contact with Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance, at the council who was very insightful. Steve Groves ensured that the operational procedure was in place in case of any incidents.

The fire service had teams in both buildings on 5 June 2018. They left telephone numbers available for any queries and were only 30 seconds away if needed. They did not receive as much contact as expected. Most people were concerned with moving rather than safety.

The fact that there was no piped gas in these blocks meant that the likelihood of an explosion was slim. People visiting the blocks had their shopping bags routinely

checked and camping gas stoves were removed two or three times and stored off site until the tenants needed them.

Justin Turner would have preferred the floors to be emptied systematically but this was not possible. However, he was satisfied that if there was an incident, it would not have been different from a normal one. There were a number of small incidents business as usual.

There was no particular concern that the anti-social behaviour happening in other council blocks would spread. Having security on site was a deterrent. Security was already on site at both blocks and continued during the decant. The blocks were patrolled every two hours. Access to the buildings was controlled with tenants and visitors signing in. There were no squatters in the blocks. As soon as the flats were vacated, the locks had been changed and the electricity disconnected.

Personally and professionally he stated that all council blocks of flats should have sprinklers installed. There is an element of over engineering in some buildings which can cause problems. Their location is very important. It is better to have them in flats rather than in the stairways as these are already sterile areas. The student blocks in the city have sprinklers in the flats.

His role is to keep an eye on those sorts of aspects of high rises. He regularly walks around council buildings with housing officers carrying out a range of checks. The team understands the issues and repairs are carried out promptly. Council blocks are very safe even without sprinklers installed because of the way they were designed and monitored by the team.

Residents' views

Residents' survey

Housing officers carried out a survey of residents in October 2019 to find out their views on how well all aspects of the decant worked from informing residents to being rehoused. Twenty responses were received from the 252 residents who were decanted; 16 were received by the post and four online. Residents had three weeks to respond. The views of those who replied may not represent all residents. Housing staff checked the surveys to see if there were any individual comments that might need a response and these were sent to Area Offices to follow up.

Q1 - How satisfied were you with how the council told you the news that everybody was being found a new home?

Q2 - How satisfied were you with how the council kept you informed about finding a new home?

Q3 - How satisfied are you with the financial support you were given to move home?

Q4 - How satisfied were you with the moving process and setting up your new tenancy?

Q5 - How satisfied are you with your new home?

Q6 - Overall how satisfied were you with the way the council handled the whole process?

Areas most satisfied with:

- Q3 - with financial support given to move home - 55%
- Q5 - how satisfied with new home - 45%
- Q2 - how PCC kept informed about finding new home - 40%
- Q4 - with moving process and setting up new tenancy - 35%
- Q6 - overall with way PCC handled whole process - 35%
- Q1 - how PCC told news that everybody was being found new home - 25%

Areas least satisfied / most unsatisfied with:

- Q1 - how PCC told news that everybody was being found new home - 30%
- Q6 - overall with way PCC handled whole process - 20%
- Q4 - with moving process and setting up new tenancy - 15%
- Q5 - how satisfied with new home - 15%
- Q2 - how PCC kept informed about finding new home - 5%
- Q3 - with financial support given to move home - 0%

Meeting with residents

The panel met three residents who had moved from Horatia House and Leamington House to hear about their experiences. The meeting was also attended by a member of the Residents Consortium who was not a tenant of the blocks but represents tenants. It should be noted that their views are their personal opinions and may not be representative of all residents who moved. Two of the residents were members of the Residents' Consortium and so represented views of other residents. To preserve anonymity the residents are referred to as:

- Resident A - former resident of Horatia House, member of Residents' Consortium
- Resident B - member of Residents' Consortium (not an ex-tenant of either block)
- Resident C - former resident of Horatia House
- Resident D - former resident of Leamington House

Residents felt pleased with the way the blocks were gradually emptied. There were fire and council officers there 24/7 which reassured them as any problems would have been dealt with quickly. Overall residents were happy they had moved out. Resident C "couldn't fault" the council when she moved; they "couldn't have done better." She would have been too frightened to stay in Leamington House while the cladding was there. Resident A, who lived on the 16th floor of Horatia House, thought he might have been moved first as he is disabled.

Communication

Resident D and her husband found moving was stressful, particularly as they have health problems. Resident C "found out about the move when she saw people standing at the front of Leamington House and also from Facebook. It might have been better to have knocked on doors or written to residents. Perhaps some staff could have explained the situation more clearly."

Flats in Horatia House and Leamington House were quite large and it might have been the case that tenants may not have been expecting in the new accommodation to be of the same size.

The Assistant Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services advised that Housing officers did everything they could to speak to residents directly and persisted in trying to contact all of them. Officers found that social media also can spread news quicker than traditional methods of delivering communication. Officers did have a presence in the building on the ground floor to engage residents as they came in and out of the blocks and to deal with concerns from residents hearing news before we had a chance to knock on their doors. However, some residents ultimately did not want to engage with officers.

New homes

The experience of the residents the panel met have with their new homes varied. Resident A is happy in his new flat, which is more suitable for him as it is on the ground floor and he is disabled. Both he and Resident C miss the views from their previous homes. Resident A felt the council acted in "a quick, orderly fashion" and "straightaway." He thought about a quarter of residents were unhappy but they might have got another property if they had insisted.

Resident D and her husband are now on the first floor of a block in Portsea. They wanted Somerstown or Buckland but were given a property in Portsea; they are OK, they are not unhappy.

Although Resident C was happy with the process of moving out of Horatia House she had no complaints until afterwards when she felt that the situation deteriorated. She was offered a flat with a very tiny kitchen but was told she would not be offered anything else. She was then offered another flat which was nicely decorated but the previous tenant had recently died and their furniture was still there. Although the council laid carpets the kitchen and bathroom were not in such good order. The location was not ideal as the flat was at the end of the road and the only view was a brick wall and a balcony. However, she then moved to a "lovely" flat in Portsea.

The Assistant Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services acknowledged there may have been the occasional problem in allocating properties in the past but in the last six to nine months the voids process had changed. Sometimes new tenants might want the previous tenant's furniture, for example, a wardrobe though personal effects should always be removed. If deceased tenants have no relatives Housing has a responsibility to keep furniture for a certain amount of time before disposing of it.

Seven of the tenants who were decanted have moved again, and another five have exercised their right to buy their new property so the majority of the 252 residents have remained in their first moves. The FAQs included in the letter sent to residents on 5 June advised that one offer of accommodation would be made to each household. Area Offices try to be accommodating as ideally they want people to be where they want to be. However, this can be a difficult balancing act and Housing officers acknowledge that some tenants were not happy.

Members of the panel said that they had received very few adverse comments from residents.

Financial matters

Although Resident C's new flat in Portsea is lovely there was work to be done but she had to pay for everything which she felt was unfair; the council "didn't pay a

penny to help." Heating was included in the Horatia House rent but now she pays for it.

Resident A said his rent had increased from £90 to £154 per week in his new flat and was going up in April 2020. He thought high rents in residents' new properties could be a problem down the line. Resident A's rent increased as the property is a "new build" and "affordable housing" rather than "social housing." Housing officers always do a financial appraisal with tenants to help them make a decision about taking a property as it is not in anyone's interest to put tenants in a property they cannot afford. Some tenants who could not afford the property offered to them were offered somewhere else.

Question 3 in the residents' survey - How satisfied are you with the financial support you were given to move home? - had the highest satisfaction rate (55% very satisfied, 30% satisfied, no-one unsatisfied or very unsatisfied). The displacement sum was £6,100-£6,300 depending upon the time the resident moved.

To review the lessons learnt from past experiences.

As noted by one of the panel members, the decant was "a difficult logistical exercise", and on the whole it proceeded smoothly. However, some aspects could be built on for future decants.

Lessons Learned

During the review the panel heard how officers have reviewed the lessons learned from the decant process. They presented the following areas:

Confidentiality

- It was vital to maintain confidentiality whilst technical reports were being understood and then decisions made.
- One side effect of this was many of the front line staff who would be involved in delivering the news to residents were not involved in the confidential preparatory work.
- This did not impact on major decisions of the project, but had some negative impacts upon how efficiently the right staff were told about their role.
- What was positive was how quickly the team did pick up what was required from them.
- Whilst it is hard to get around the need for confidentiality in such a project, the need to inform the front line staff and managers at the right time needs to be taken into account for future.

Knowledge about tenants

- The information kept on file about our tenants is the right amount to manage a tenancy, but not enough needed to understand the requirements of a move.
- This is usually done by the Housing Needs, Advice & Support team at the point that a tenant requests a move. This is over the course of one or more meetings and goes into details about household number, age, schools, disabilities, vulnerabilities etc.

- The nature of this decant meant we were having to learn a lot about a large number of tenants in a short space of time, and at a time when they were not necessarily expecting to move.
- It would be inefficient and undesirable to keep such detailed information on residents all of the time, especially as it can change regularly and may clash with data protection legislation. However it does mean that we will be unaware of the full extent of the tenants needs for a new property in a similar case in the future.

Project management

- It is important that all of the issues within a project are considered, not just those which impact the tenant. Procurement and financial monitoring are vital as they are part of the project and it is important that these are considered at the earliest stages of project planning.

Communications through social media

- As with all communications, it is vital that we are writing them with the tenant in mind. Whilst the letters produced were very professional, well written and complete, some tenants felt that they needed less in a single hit.
- It will always be hard to strike the right balance between brevity and providing detailed information, and a different approach is likely to have not been popular with some tenants.
- We also need to ensure that we are using all of the various social media tools available, and that this will be a significant tool for tenants to use.

IT flexibility

- Not all staff had laptops to take to the blocks to enable systems to be accessed live. This has now changed, but the use of WiFi/4G access needs to be available the staff are going to be able to truly work in a wireless way.

Staff resourcing

- The scale of the rehousing required dedicated resources to work on the project full time. We used resources from within the directorate and covered the roles flexibility. As the rehousing phase progressed the resources were then released back to their substantive positions.
- This resource requirement needs to be planned and communicated at the earliest stages so that the right number of staff with the right skills are available of the length of the project.

Move the process at the right pace

- The timetable for completing the decant was based upon an expected rate that properties would become available and the availability of new build properties which we were fortunate to have coming available. The realities of the tenants, and especially some with a complex range of needs, meant that the timetable was ambitious and, whilst we achieved the 'target' of providing an offer of alternative accommodation for all households within the original timescales there were a few households that took longer to rehouse.

- By setting such a timetable it focussed the team on delivering the project and gave some the tenants, members and media some clarity on our aims and commitments.
- Having clarity about what will be offered as part of a void move is vital, as is ensuring that the contractor can deliver the relevant works within the needed timescale.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence and views it received during the review process the panel has come to the following conclusions:

1. Noted that the decant was an unprecedented major logistical exercise which Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services carried out smoothly with no residents becoming homeless or being placed in temporary accommodation.
2. Noted that Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services successfully engaged with residents by making comprehensive efforts to engage with all residents. The panel noted a small number of residents received information by other means but with a large number of people this is very hard to prevent.
3. Noted that having on-site security, regular patrols and controlled access successfully prevented anti-social behaviour, an approach which the Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service had commended.

Recommendations

The panel made the following recommendations:

1. To request the Leader and the Chief Executive to thank James Hill, Paul Fielding and all other Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services officers involved in the decant.
2. To ensure that the lessons learned are recorded and embedded so that they can be used in the event of similar projects in the future.
3. To ensure that the voids process is sensitive to viewing of properties which have been vacated due to a tenant's death.
4. To ensure that residents involved in any future decants are aware that there is one offer of alternative accommodation. Exceptions will be considered on a case by case basis if there are legitimate reasons and subject to sufficient housing stock.

7. Integrated Impact Assessment

An integrated impact assessment would be carried out when the Cabinet makes its decisions based on the recommendations set out in this report.

8. Legal comments

As set out in the Report, the legislation governing the payment of home loss payments and disturbance allowances is set out in Part III of the Land Compensation Act 1973, Part II of the Housing Act 1985 and the Home Loss Payments (Prescribed Amounts) (England) Regulations 2018.

There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report. Section 21 of the LGA 2000 empowers the overview and scrutiny committee (or any sub-committee thereof) to make reports and recommendations, either to the executive or to the authority, upon any aspect of council business or other matters affecting the authority's area or the area's inhabitants.

Part 3 - Scrutiny and Review Panels (Overview and Scrutiny) Procedure (in Section 11) of the Council's Constitution requires that once a final scrutiny review report has been agreed, the Cabinet or the relevant Cabinet Member will consider and respond to the report within 8 weeks.

9. Finance comments

There are no direct financial implications as a result of the recommendations within this report.

Budget and policy implications of the recommendations

The following table highlights the budgetary and policy implications of the recommendations being presented by the panel:

	Recommendation	Action By	Budget & Policy Framework	Resource Implications
1	To request the Leader and the Chief Executive to thank James Hill, Paul Fielding and all other Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services officers involved in the decant.	Cllr Luke Stubbs	Within existing framework	None
2	To ensure that the lessons learned are recorded and embedded so that they can be used in the event of similar projects in the future	Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services	Within existing framework	None
3	To ensure that the voids process is sensitive to viewing of properties which have been vacated due to a tenant's death	Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services	Within existing framework	None
4	To ensure that residents involved in any future decants are aware that there is one offer of alternative accommodation. Exceptions will be considered on a case by case basis if there are legitimate reasons and subject to sufficient housing stock.	Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services	Within existing framework	None

Appendix 1

A list of meetings held by the panel and details of the written evidence received

Meeting Date	Witnesses	Documents Received
30 July 2019	Jo Bennett Head of Business Relationships, Growth & Support Paul Fielding Assistant Director, Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services James Hill, Director Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services Charlotte Smith Assistant Director Community & Communication	Letter sent to residents on 5 June 2018
20 September 2019	Paul Fielding Assistant Director, Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services Mark Fitch Head of Local Authority Housing Jonathan Coulson Housing Officer, Somerstown Area Housing Office Justin Turner Watch Manager, Fire Safety Policies, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service John Wright Estate Manager, Somerstown Area Housing Office	
28 January 2020	Residents: A - Horatia House, Residents' Consortium B - Residents' Consortium C - Horatia House D - Leamington House Paul Fielding Assistant Director, Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services	
11 November 2020	The panel signed off the report.	

Appendix 2 - Letter sent to residents on 5 June 2018

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

IMPORTANT - PLEASE READ

Tuesday, 5 June 2018

Dear resident

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.