

Homes and Housing Delivery Policy Committee Supplementary Information



Date: Friday, 20 September 2024

Time: 10.00 am

Venue: The Council Chamber - City Hall,
College Green, Bristol, BS1 5TR

6. Public Forum

Details of public questions and statements received for this meeting are enclosed.



Homes and Housing Delivery Policy Committee
20 September 2024
Public Forum – Questions



Public forum questions have been received as listed below (full details are set out on the subsequent pages):

1. Joanna Booth: Bristol housing festival
2. Nigel Varley: Cladding remediation costs compensation
3. Fadumo Farah: Barton House
4. Shaban Ali: Barton House



1. QUESTION FROM JOANNA BOOTH

Can you please let me know what is the status of the Bristol Housing Festival considering the MOU signed with BCC, BBRC and Shaftesbury Partnership was meant to have been for five years from 2018?

Response:

The Bristol Housing Festival continues under the Housing Festival brand run by the company Housing Festival. The original MOU between Housing Festival, BCC, BBRC and Shaftesbury Partnership was intended to create a non-binding working agreement between the parties to support the initiation and development of Bristol Housing Festival as a 5-year project. That informal partnership is no longer operating. The Housing Festival has continued to operate outside of the MOU and has evolved into a nationwide-facing organisation known as Housing Festival working with local authorities and national partners to help drive innovation and process change to tackle the housing crisis and deliver social rent housing at pace and scale. More information can be found on their website www.housingfestival.org.uk.

BCC continues to work with Housing Festival most recently through our Strategic Partner, to deliver support and leadership for the Tackling Homelessness Transformation Programme.

2. QUESTION FROM NIGEL VARLEY (Chair, Gilton House Tenants' Association)

Will the Chair of the Homes & Housing Development Committee provide the following information regarding cladding remediation costs compensation?

The amount to be paid per household in the financial year 2024/25.

When it will be paid.

Why there has been such delay.

If compensation will be offered to all tenants who suffer additional heating costs in the current programme of cladding remediation and, if not, the reasons.

If the Council will take into account the additional cost of heating for many of its older tenants because of the means testing of the winter fuel payment and the increase in energy prices and note that the increase in the state pension will not be until April 2025, after the winter period, and will not cover the money lost by many older people.

If compensation for the costs to tenants is included in Bristol City Council's bid for £64 million from Central Government towards the cost of cladding remediation.

Response:

The amount of discretionary payment is £147 per household. Payments will be made as soon as administrative arrangements are made; this is likely to be later in the autumn. It has taken a considerable amount of work to finalise the arrangements for administering the scheme as we've had to take several factors into account.

This scheme is not a compensation scheme, and therefore is not intended to offset any specific increase in costs which may have been experienced as part of Planned Improvements to our stock. Multiple factors contributed to the increase in costs associated with heating. This is a good will payment for residents affected by the costs of cladding removal and will be paid for the 24/25 financial year only.

The decision to include provision for a discretionary payment scheme was made in the 24/25 business plan, predating recent HMG policy decisions. The discretionary payment scheme is not government funded nor does it form part of funding applications made to support cladding remedial work.

3. QUESTIONS FROM FADUMO FARAH

1. What support or help, such as mental health services or groups has been put in place for residents of Barton House, particularly children, who continue to struggle with anxiety and other mental health challenges after their evacuation?

Response:

Children and families can access support through their schools. Education settings have access to Primary Mental Health services and have been offered additional bespoke support from the Safeguarding in Education Team and the Education Psychology Service.

Bristol City council takes its duty of care to residents, including those at Barton House, very seriously, and we endeavour to support our residents where we can. It is often the case that the support required is best provided by other agencies, such as GPs, mental health or drug addiction support organisations, where this is the case Housing Officers can either make referrals and or signpost those requiring assistance, or their carers/guardians. These matters are responsive in nature and dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

2. Will there be an independent investigation into how Barton House residents were treated?

Response:

The Green party made a pre-election commitment to an investigation into Barton House. This has not progressed, in part due to the urgent challenges the housing sector faces and our response to the regulatory changes that came into place in April. Particularly building safety and fire safety, which take priority for us as well as our response to the regulatory judgement. The commissioning of an independent investigation remains an aspiration; however, our resources are being redirected at this moment in time.

3. Can you provide a detailed breakdown of the money spent on Barton House, including costs related to residents' hotel stays, food, transport, and any other associated expenses, and any compensations put in place for Barton House residents?

Response:

As you'll be aware, the evacuation of Barton House resulted in significant costs being incurred by Bristol City Council. Some of these costs were Revenue in nature and associated with the actual decant, whilst others were Capital and related to works undertaken within the block in order to make it safe for residents to return.

Due to the differing nature of the costs, they are not all recorded in one place within the ledgers of the Council as such the detail provided should be seen as an indicative figure which may vary slightly by way of increase.

Revenue Costs £3.7m

Capital Costs £0.3m

Total Costs £4.0m

4. QUESTIONS FROM SHABAN ALI

During the structural repairs at Barton House, I requested that not only my door but also my neighbors' doors be replaced. I emphasized to Fiona Lester that it's the smoke, not just the fire, that endangers lives. Although my door was changed, my neighbors' doors remain as they are, with large gaps that risk our safety. This shows the council's willingness to gamble with our lives by forcing us to return to Barton House under unsafe conditions.

Outstanding Concerns:

- Windows:

When will the windows be replaced. They have gaps, allowing smoke and wind to enter the flats, further compromising our safety.

- Cost of Heating:

The gaps in the windows are also costing residents—many on low incomes and with 50% of children living in poverty—huge amounts of money to heat their homes.

Key Questions:

1. Will there be an independent investigation into the handling of Barton House?

Response:

As part of the reoccupation of Barton House 98 promise certificates were issued to residents committing to completion of identified repairs as people returned home. With the exception of two homes, which are scheduled to complete over the next five week period, all promise certificates are complete. If any residents have any outstanding repairs please report through the website, via email or call centre.

2. What happened to the promise of urgent rehousing made during the campaign?

Response:

Bristol City Council are exploring options as there was a pre-election pledge from the Green Party to support Band One priority for Barton House residents who want to move away from Barton House following the evacuation.

There was not a commitment from Bristol City Council at the time to promise urgent rehousing by allocating band 1, as the HomeChoice Bristol policy does not have provision to do this. The Head of

Housing Supply is providing a briefing for the Committee Chair, which will in turn be shared with the residents of Barton House.

3. How will this committee ensure it listens to residents' safety concerns, unlike the previous administration that ignored those fearful of returning to a building that should have been demolished long ago?

Response:

In February 2024 Bristol City Council carried out a citywide building safety survey with residents living in high-rise blocks. The aim of the survey was to give all residents over the age of 16 the opportunity to raise any safety concerns, and to tell Bristol City Council about residents understanding of the safety measures in place.

Following telephone surveys, our Resident Engagement Team conducted a pre-survey drop-in event, so that we could hear directly from residents. Drop-in events took place on Wednesday 21 August 2024 at Barton House and two door-to-door surveys took place on Thursday 29 August 2024 and Monday 9 September 2024.

We remain committed to providing decent and safe council homes for our residents and their safety continues to be our number one priority. We want to thank residents for their continued engagement with officers and cooperation.

Homes and Housing Delivery Policy Committee

20 September 2024

Public Forum – Statements



Public forum statements have been received as listed below (full details are set out on the subsequent pages):

1. Nigel Varley
2. Shaban Ali

Please note: The views and information contained within these public statements are those of the individuals concerned and not of the Council.



Statement 1 – Nigel Varley

In the wake of the report on the Grenfell Tower disaster, Bristol City Council needs to consider its relevance and whether we have not had a similar disaster is more a matter of luck than judgement.

Words used to describe the causes of the disaster are incompetence, neglect, dishonesty and indifference. To what extent do they apply in Bristol?

Since the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, questions had been asked by Bristol Council about the safety of the cladding on Bristol's tower blocks. We were assured that the cladding was safe because "it was not the same type and design" as that on Grenfell Tower. As late as July 2022 the following statement was in a letter I received from the BCC Asset Management Team.

"We would like to take this opportunity to reassure you that the cladding system for Gilton House is very different from the type used on Grenfell Tower. We have not used the aluminium composite material (ACM) and it is not the same design. We are confident that our cladding systems perform well in real fire situations, and past experience has tested this on a number of occasions."

BCC Asset Management Team 13/07/22

Not being the same type as that on Grenfell Tower is no guarantee that it is safe. 38 blocks in Bristol have EPS cladding. One look at EPS is enough to see that it is not safe and plenty of expert evidence supports that. The argument is that it is safe if encased in concrete but there has to regular maintenance to ensure that it is not cracking or flaking.

To refute the charge of incompetence and neglect, BCC must show that it carried out regular checks on EPS-clad blocks. To refute the charge of indifference it must explain what detailed investigations were made when questions were raised by tenants. Were the reassurances based on evidence or wishful thinking? Or was it based on an attitude towards council house tenants that we could easily be fobbed off?

On the charge of dishonesty, there needs to be an investigation as to why, when the dangers of EPS cladding were known, was it fitted to 38 Bristol blocks of flats? Did council officers know of the risks of EPS cladding and still go ahead in ordering it? If not, what efforts did they make to check? Did they know that the assurances they gave to tenants were not true?

Two fires at the Twinnell and Eccleston blocks in the autumn of 2022, resulting in one death, showed that the cladding was not safe. Then that the Council decided to replace it in 38 blocks over a 10-year period. Extra interim safety measures, including a very expensive 'waking watch', were put in.

This raises further questions. At what rate is cladding removal taking place? How many have been done so far? How safe are the blocks which still need to be done? Could fire marshals cope with a fire which spread like the recent one in Dagenham and could the Fire Service evacuate up to a hundred or more people, some with restricted mobility, from blocks many of which have only one staircase? Why is there confusion about "stay put" or "get out now" evacuation policies? Are the Fire Service ladders and cherry-pickers big enough to reach the highest block of flats?

Inflammable cladding creates the risk of fire spreading externally at blocks. There are serious questions about the dangers of it spreading internally. Do flat doors fit and close properly to be resistant to flame and smoke for 30 minutes? If not, then the "stay put" advice is a death trap. Are there refuges and

emergency exits? Is the new mobility scooter policy achievable? What progress is being made with installing sprinklers?

Bristol City Council will say that it has policies on all of these. How long will it take to implement them and how will risks be mitigated in the meantime? Why has it taken a disaster to deal with fire safety risks? That they were not dealt with years ago raises the charges of negligence and incompetence.

There is a further matter which endorses the charge of dishonesty and indifference. Blocks of flats have, by law, Fire Risk Assessments every year. Bristol City Council does not make its tenants aware of their existence or make them easily accessible. For a time, the Council withheld access to them altogether on the spurious and dishonest grounds of data protection. FRAs identify risks and give a deadline to remedy them, usually six months. In at least one case, and probably many others, the recommendations have not been implemented after two years. When the Fire Service was requested to enforce an FRA, it did so only for breaches of building laws. A risk is risk. Avon Fire and Rescue Service is the body responsible in law for enforcing fire safety on the local authority so why is it not more proactive?

I believe that the charges of dishonesty, indifference, neglect and incompetence apply to Bristol City Council and it is by luck rather than judgement that there has not been a disaster on the scale of Grenfell Tower here. In its defence, the Council will claim poverty and that is the reason why Bristol and every other public housing provider in the country has neglected its housing stock and looked for the cheapest option. The chickens of years of austerity and under-funding have come home to roost. My problem with Bristol City Council is that its officers and councillors have been unwilling to be up-front about problems and join with tenants to campaign for proper funding to make our homes safe. Instead, they have tried to cover up. This shows a dishonesty and a disdain and disrespect for its tenants which, in the end, puts our lives at risk.

Statement 2 – Shaban Ali

During the structural repairs at Barton House, I requested that not only my door but also my neighbors' doors be replaced. I emphasized to Fiona Lester that it's the smoke, not just the fire, that endangers lives. Although my door was changed, my neighbors' doors remain as they are, with large gaps that risk our safety. This shows the council's willingness to gamble with our lives by forcing us to return to Barton House under unsafe conditions.

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