

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN		WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Response to Independent Review of the Evacuation of the Chalcots Estate (SC/2018/45)		
REPORT OF Executive Director Supporting Communities		
FOR SUBMISSION TO Housing Scrutiny Committee Cabinet		DATE 23 rd July 2018 25 th July 2018
SUMMARY OF REPORT This report details the Council's response to the Independent Review of the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate. It sets out the Council's formal response to the findings of the review. It also describes how the Council has responded to the evacuation over the last year including significant efforts to learn lessons and improve its processes to ensure readiness for a future emergency incident. Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information No documents that require listing were used in the preparation of this report. Contact Officer: Oliver Jones, Acting Head of Strategy, Strategy and Change, 5 th Floor, 5 Pancras Square, London N1A 4AG Oliver.Jones@Camden.gov.uk Tel: 020 7974 62756275		
RECOMMENDATIONS The Housing Scrutiny Committee is asked to: I. note the Independent Review of the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate and the response to its findings detailed at section 3 The Cabinet is asked to I. receive and note the Independent Review of the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate and the response to its findings detailed at section 3		

Signed: Jenny Rowlands, Executive Director

Date: 11th July 2018

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

On 23rd June, following advice from the London Fire Brigade (LFB), the Council evacuated four of the five blocks on the Chalcots Estate. The process and experience of evacuation was a period of tremendous disruption for residents involved, as well as for the wider community. It was also a major undertaking by the Council, involving the mobilisation of the entire organisation to deliver what was one of the largest peacetime residential evacuations in London's history. It is therefore extremely important that there is a full understanding of the reasons for the decision to evacuate, the way in which the evacuation was carried out, and to have clarity about the lessons that can be learnt.

The Council has rightly, from the very beginning, sought to learn lessons about its operational response and to develop future plans to responses to similar incidents. It has also been very clear on its intention to develop a new approach to resident safety, working with residents to develop a gold standard of safety and assurance. To support this process, the Leader of the Council pledged to commission an independent review of the circumstances of the evacuation. Officers of the Council also commissioned an internal "lessons learned" review of staff experience identifying resource and expertise gaps for the Council's future. The internal review was conducted in autumn 2017, and the results were provided to the Independent Chair Marian Harrington to inform her enquiries.

This report formally receives and responds to the review.

1. Background to the Independent Review

- 1.1 The Leader of the Council announced in July 2017 that the Council would commission an independent review of the evacuation. The review was to consider the events and decisions that led to the evacuation, and the management of the evacuation itself, including the decision to invite residents to return. The review was led by Marian Harrington, a former Director of Adult Social Care at Westminster City Council, with experience of leading elements of humanitarian response to major incidents. The lead reviewer was supported by an advisor with relevant engineering and construction knowledge. Biographies of Ms Harrington and other relevant personnel involved in the review are set out in the appendix of the review document (which itself is included as Appendix 1 to this report).
- 1.2 The review's lines of enquiry and the full terms of reference are included within the appendices of the full Independent Review report included as Appendix 1. These questions were developed in conjunction with residents who were given the opportunity to submit questions and lines of enquiry by email, in writing, through elected members and their tenant and resident representatives.
- 1.3 A key theme emerging during the engagement with residents was a desire to see that the Council was being transparent about reviewing its previous decisions, and actively involving residents in future decisions that affected them and their homes. The Council has sought to be transparent, open and responsive to resident feedback in all its decisions in relation to the Chalcots Estate.

1.4 The Council has committed to a further second phase of the review which will consider the refurbishment and maintenance of the blocks before the evacuation, including the decisions as to the cladding system used and the management of the blocks between 2006 and 2017. The Council is exploring legal options around the work that was done to refurbish and maintain the blocks prior to the evacuation. The timing of the second phase of the review may be impacted by the progress of any Council legal action.

2. The Council's response to the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate

2.1 The evacuation of the Chalcots Estate was an unprecedented challenge for a local authority-led emergency response. The Council did a number of things well during the operation, and there are also areas where we know we could have responded more effectively. The Council, taking action in response to the clear advice of the London Fire Brigade, evacuated four blocks which housed 2103 known residents, with only a few hours to plan and mobilise an emergency response. This took place on a Friday evening during peak tourism season, which made the block booking and purchasing of hotel rooms and temporary accommodation challenging.

2.2 There is no doubt that in the immediate period before an agreement was reached on the approach to the evacuation, relationships on the ground between Council and LFB officials were sometimes strained. However, both partners worked closely at a senior level to arrive at an agreed approach to the evacuation which secured the safety of all residents and allowed plans to be put in place for the most vulnerable. The LFB provided senior experts on the ground to support the evacuation and assist with the safe return of people to their homes.

2.3 During the operation, over 600 Council staff were engaged in different roles supporting residents in the evacuation and ensuring they could return home safely, as quickly as possible. A number of residents (some known and some not known to the Council's adult social care teams) required individual support in order to access appropriate alternative housing. Some residents had health and care needs that meant that a decision was taken, following an individual assessment, that evacuating them was a higher risk to their wellbeing than remaining in their home with dedicated support. In order to provide appropriate support to residents, the Council co-located housing, adult social care and children's services staff on the estate in order to ensure residents were able to access support quickly.

2.4 Camden's voluntary sector was integral to the Council's response to the evacuation. Many groups and individuals, already part of the community, immediately volunteered to help residents, for example by providing hot food to the Swiss Cottage rest centre. Other organisations supported individuals through their existing work and activities, for example, the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust provided fast-track access to mental health support services for any Chalcots Estate residents who needed support. Others opened up their spaces and put on activities for children and families, and the Council's advice partnership providers located themselves at St Mary's Church and offered

additional support and drop-in sessions. Community organisations such as the Somali Cultural Centre, worked with the Council to provide translation and advocacy services – reassuring residents and helping ensure that accommodation packages were suitable for household needs. The Volunteer Centre Camden (VCC) coordinated volunteers from Camden’s voluntary groups to provide additional capacity in managing the rest centre and working with residents in hotels from the first Sunday onwards.

A summary of the high-level timeline of the operation is shown below:

Timeline of operation			
23rd to 24th June	23rd June to 11th July	12th to 25th July	25th July onwards
The first 24 hours, evacuation of residents, commencement of works at Blashford	Majority of residents evacuated, works underway at all five blocks to address the LFB requirements	Reoccupation of the blocks on a floor by floor basis	Ongoing fire safety works across Camden and follow-on works at the Chalcots Estate such as door replacement and cladding removal
Emergency management overseeing volunteer staff to deliver the response		Formal secondment of staff to the Chalcots Estate operation	

- 2.5 The Council’s response to Chalcots Estate evacuation has been characterised by a strong focus on residents’ safety and a commitment to transparency and resident involvement in decisions. Working with residents, we are continuing to develop a new standard for resident safety and ensuring resident oversight to ensure accountability and enable a genuine partnership between Camden tenants and leaseholders and the Council.
- 2.6 Within seven months of the Building Research Establish (BRE) testing results (by January 2018), the Council had removed all the cladding across all five blocks and consulted with residents on replacement cladding options. On the basis of this consultation and the advice of specialist engineers, the Council has taken a formal decision on an alternative cladding system committing to an A1 fire rated system (a Euroclass rating system where A1 is the highest standard, where all components are rated individually and collectively as "non-combustible").
- 2.8 At the same time as this ongoing work at the Chalcots Estate, the Council’s key strategic response is ensuring we put in place policies and processes to prevent this from happening again. A key aspect of this transparent and partnership-focused approach has been the establishment of the Fire Safety Advisory Panel (FSAP), jointly chaired by a council tenant and the Cabinet Member for Better Homes. Membership of the FSAP includes residents, Council Members, London Fire Brigade Officers and a senior officer from the Council. The Panel met for the first time in January and is committed to working collaboratively to ensure the safety of tenants across the Council’s housing stock.

- 2.9 The Council employed a Director of Resident Safety to lead and champion this work inside and outside the Council. This was the first role of its kind in local government, to help the organisation review all fire safety processes and ensure we are robust and timely in our management of risk. The Director is building up our in-house capacity to assess risk, embedding safety and ensuring that resident voices are heard at every part of the process.
- 2.10 The Council's operational programme has been extensive, both on remedial works on the Chalcots Estate, and across the wider housing stock.

Chalcots Estate

There has been further long-term work and support at the Chalcots Estate following reoccupation in the summer of 2017:

- Fire Wardens were provided in all blocks while the ACM cladding was still in place as an added mitigation. This was reduced to a smaller patrol once the cladding was removed following a risk assessment process that confirmed the risk level had been reduced and the fire warden presence could be reduced accordingly. A reduced safety and security presence remains in place whilst the scaffolding and mast climbers remain on the building and the concerns remain about the integrity of some of the windows in high winds.
- The majority of fire doors have been upgraded to provide 60 minutes of resistance to smoke and fire, with the exception of four flat doors where access is still to be arranged with the resident. All Chalcots Estate homes were offered free testing of portable household appliances and a fire blanket. As an added safety measure, the Council has installed smoke detectors and heat sensors in all Chalcots Estate flats, except where access is still to be arranged with the resident.
- The Council has employed technical experts to undertake investigations of the building in advance of replacing the cladding, and they identified deficiencies in the curtain wall that means the Council is required to replace this alongside the cladding. The residents have been involved in the process of agreeing the choice of replacement cladding for the outside of the building, and have been able to ask detailed questions on the proposals for new windows on the blocks.

Our wider housing stock

- The Council now undertakes intrusive Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs) that are being conducted in conjunction with residents, tenant and leaseholder representatives and ward members. These look at both communal areas and within dwellings.
- Comprehensive FRAs have been completed on all high-rise blocks over ten storeys in the summer of 2017, and the Council has published all of these on our Open Data website¹. The Council has committed to publishing all future FRAs across the Council's housing stock as they are completed. All Council blocks requiring an FRA are due to have an assessment commissioned during 2018 (over 2300 blocks).

¹ <https://opendata.camden.gov.uk/Housing/Camden-Fire-Risk-Assessments/g7pt-6m5r/data>

- Since March, a programme of enhanced FRA on purpose-built blocks between six and nine storeys and sheltered schemes and hostels has been conducted. The Council continues to make regular checks of communal areas of our housing to ensure they are not blocked by clutter. Our caretakers continue to inspect across the housing stock removing items obstructing corridors and fire exits and highlighting to residents the risks of not keeping areas clear.
- The Council has worked with Government on the testing of fire doors in Council-owned properties across the borough. The Council is committed to a comprehensive programme of installing fire alarms to those Council buildings that need them and the improvement/replacement of fire doors to ensure they are providing a minimum of 30 minutes of resistance to smoke and fire. Other works include improvement to compartmentation or 'fire stopping' and works to repair or replace communal fire doors. This programme of work is ongoing and a large number of properties are due to receive work in 2018/19 and 2019/20.

2.11 As well as delivering its operational response, the Council has also sought to actively learn lessons from its emergency response. The Council is proud of the way staff and the community came together to respond to an unprecedented event. However, it is always the case that there are lessons that can be learnt and officers and elected members have actively engaged in a process of reflection and constructive challenge to review our policies, effectiveness and readiness. These have focused primarily on our emergency planning response and on the data and information infrastructure required to effectively discharge our responsibilities to respond in the instance of civil emergencies. This includes incorporating data specialists into the crisis response team and rolling out a programme of training to ensure a strong understanding of roles and responsibilities amongst senior managers during an incident. These are issues that have also been identified in the course of the Independent Review.

3. The Council's response to the Independent Review

3.1 The Council welcomes the findings of the Independent Review. Independent scrutiny of this nature provides a robust basis on which to ensure that the authority understands and is able to act on all learning points arising from the evacuation and improve any future response to a civil emergency. Emergencies are inherently complex and unique events, and no response will be perfect. There are important lessons to be learnt should the Council ever be in a position where it has to evacuate one of its blocks as well as more general issues in relation to our readiness for emergencies.

3.2 The Council recognises the comprehensiveness of the review as well as the speed with which it has been completed. The Council welcomes the good practice it identifies, noting the review's recognition of the strength of leadership from councillors and officers and the willingness of Council staff to go well beyond their ordinary duties to support the response. The review acknowledges the general effectiveness of communications with residents, the quality of support to vulnerable residents, and the use of independent assessors to validate the safety

of remedial work and provide assurance to residents during the process of re-occupation.

- 3.3 In general, the learning points identified are accepted by officers. The Council regards the most significant findings as relating to its general preparedness to respond to civil emergencies including having appropriate data and information systems which enable rapid and appropriate support to those affected. The resilience of the core emergency planning team has been improved, including additional staffing and stock. Additionally, a cross-council group is taking forward work to respond to specific learning points around data, including the potential to procure a bespoke case management system to support data management during an emergency incident.
- 3.4 There is one significant point where officers disagree with the conclusions of the review. This centres on the suggestion that there was a lack of clarity around a requirement on residents to evacuate their homes. The review's judgement is that the letter does not explicitly state whether the evacuation was voluntary and that residents should have been provided with absolute clarity and enabled to make their own minds up as to whether to stay or leave.
- 3.5 However, the letter to residents was informed by unequivocal advice by the London Fire Brigade that residents were in danger and could not risk staying another night. It was the Council's understanding that the choice was to evacuate immediately with the flexibilities afforded by a voluntary evacuation or be compulsorily evacuated in the event of an Article 31 notice being issued by the LFB. The Council accepts the LFB's position that the blocks were not safe and the Council made the decision to voluntarily evacuate the blocks based on that firm advice and stands by that decision. Camden and the LFB worked closely at a senior level to arrive at an agreed approach to the evacuation which secured the safety of all residents and allowed plans to be put in place for the most vulnerable.
- 3.6 The Council made clear during discussions that a more planned or staged evacuation would be the preferred option and was ready to commit to any mitigations to make this possible. Safety must always come first but we continue to believe that the first choice should be for mitigations to be put in place to allow residents to remain safely in their homes for a short period while a more planned process is organised, taking account of vulnerable residents. We would welcome more joint working about the kinds of mitigations that might make this possible if a local authority was in a similar situation.
- 3.7 There was a lack of clarity about how an Article 31 notice compelling residents to evacuate would be enforced and which agency would be responsible for putting this into effect. The letter issued by the Council did not tell residents that they had a legal right to stay because, in reality, this right was not clear. The Council is of view that what was set out in the letter was reasonable and appropriate given this context.
- 3.8 The Council is clear that residents should never have had to go through the distress of an evacuation and that there are wider lessons to be learnt. This is

why we have already taken steps to hold our PFI partners and their subcontractors to account and to review and improve our internal processes. The Council is engaging with the London and national debate around fire safety and is committed to continue to learn lessons and work with our residents.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS (comments of the Borough Solicitor)

4.1 The Borough Solicitor has been consulted, and his comments have been incorporated into the report.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (finance comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services)

5.1 There are no direct financial implications to this report, however, the evacuation and remedial works will have a significant impact on the Council's finances. The evacuation, waking watch and remedial repair work to the Chalcots Estate cost £19.6 million. This expenditure was funded from Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Reserves. The cost of removing and replacing the cladding along with all associated work on the buildings in the Chalcots Estate is currently forecast to be £73.3 million.

5.2 Any significant changes the Council makes to its structure, practises or procedures in response to the recommendations in this report will be subject to separate reports to Members. The financial implications of any changes will be detailed in any separate future reports.

6. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – The Independent Review of the Evacuation of the Chalcots Estate

REPORT ENDS