



June 2026

Bristol City Council Barton House Evacuation: Independent Review and Lessons Learned

 Altair

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction

- 1.1.1. Altair Consultancy and Advisory Services Ltd (Altair) was commissioned by Bristol City Council (BCC) to conduct an independent review and lessons learned in relation to the evacuation of Barton House, Bristol. The evacuation took place on 14 November 2023.
- 1.1.2. The scope of this review was agreed in December 2025 following engagement with stakeholder groups, including residents of Barton House.
- 1.1.3. Barton House is a residential tower block owned by BCC in the Barton Hill area of Bristol, built in 1958. Barton House has 15 floors including a non-residential ground floor and has design similarities to a LPS (Large Panel System) block.

1.2. The external context

- 1.2.1. This review focusses on the period between 5 September 2017 and May 2025, when significant regulatory change affected local authority landlord services in response to the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy. Key changes include the introduction of the Building Safety Regulator (BSR), and enhanced powers for the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH). The changes introduced new standards for, and improved knowledge of, complex and high-rise buildings. In addition to regulatory changes, landlord services were affected by Covid-19 pandemic measures.

1.3. Timeline

- 1.3.1. Within the body of the report, we set out a detailed timeline of key events in relation to Barton House, which is supported by a graphical timeline in Appendix 3. A summary of the points in the timeline is set in table 1 below.

Table 1: summary timeline

Date	Event
5 September 2017	Letter sent by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) regarding concerns about LPS buildings.
October 2019	Report received from Easton Bevins ¹ on the findings from an investigation into the external wall insulation system (EWIS) and fire containment provisions.
August 2021	Urgent roof replacement works commissioned which delayed further inspections recommended in the Easton Bevins report.
May 2022	Waking watch introduced at Barton House.
July 2022	Ridge ² Structural Robustness Assessment report (“The Ridge 2022 Report”) finalised. The report concludes “The conclusion is therefore that the block in its current state is inadequately robust to prevent disproportionate collapse in the event of an internal gas explosion” and for BCC to commission a risk analysis with a cost-benefit analysis for strengthening works.
25 September 2022	Fire at Twinnell House, where one resident died trying to escape and eight people were hospitalised.
06 October 2022	Fire at Ecclestone House where three people were hospitalised.
14 September 2023	The Lead Member for Housing (Cllr) requested a meeting in the afternoon of 15 September 2023 with BCC officers after reviewing the “Barton House – Option Appraisal” report sent ahead of the planned Cabinet Member Briefing meeting on 20 September 2023. The Ridge 2022 Report was appended to the options appraisal.
15 September 2023	A meeting was held about Barton House. It was agreed that the next steps were to commission a peer review of the Ridge 2022 Report.
Friday 10 November 2023	A letter ³ was sent from Arup (from here referred to as the “Arup letter”) to BCC. The letter outlined Arup’s preliminary advice and concludes that:

¹ Easton Bevins (2019) Investigation and review of external cladding and internal fire separation at Barton House [Easton Bevins Report 2019](#)

² Ridge and Partners LLP (2022) Barton House Structural Robustness Assessment [Structural Robustness Assessment](#)

³ Arup letter to Bristol City Council (10 November 2023) [file](#)

	A fire could result in progressive failure of the structure presenting a risk to life and the safety of occupants. The letter states: "it is our preliminary opinion that a fire event within a single flat could result in a localised structural failure that immediately escalates to disproportionate progressive collapse of a vertical stacked section of the building" [...] This would present a risk to life-safety of occupants present within the impacted area of the building." Arup states that the information on which their opinion is formed is limited and they strongly recommend that further survey work is undertaken immediately.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Report shared with key stakeholders. The covering email presented options for next steps, including: Maintaining and enhancing risk-management measures Immediate evacuation.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	BCC holds a call with the Chief Fire Officer at Avon Fire and Rescue Service in relation to the risks highlighted in the Arup letter.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Decision made to conduct an emergency evacuation at Barton House.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Emergency evacuation carried out at Barton House
November 2023 – December 2023	Further detailed structural investigations carried out at Barton House by Ridge, with Arup conducting a peer review of structural findings.
14 February 2024	Ridge Structural Robustness Assessment – Phase 2 report ⁴ received by BCC which concludes that, when the proposed works are complete, the building is at a relatively low risk of disproportionate collapse after meeting the relevant assessment criteria.
16 February 2024	New fire alarm installation completed at Barton House.
19 February 2024	Arup Barton House Structural and Structural Fire Review ⁵ received by BCC which agrees with Ridge's conclusion.

⁴ Ridge (2024) Barton House Structural Robustness Assessment – Phase 2 [Barton House Robustness Assessment - Phase 2](#)

⁵ Arup (2024) Barton House Structural and Structural Fire Review [Barton House Structural and Structural Fire Review](#)

20 February 2024 | Phased return of residents to Barton House.

1.4. Decision-making and governance

- 1.4.1. During the period of this review, BCC transitioned from a mayoral system to a committee system. The committee system started on 6 May 2024. The majority of decision-making in relation to Barton House was carried out under the former system.
- 1.4.2. Ahead of the decision to evacuate we found that capacity at leadership level was inconsistent and stretched. Landlord services lacked a dedicated executive lead, and the role of Director: Homes and Landlord Services was over-extended. This was acknowledged by BCC and a review was commissioned to look at the leadership, management, structure and capacity of the landlord service in 2024. Which then led to additional leadership capacity brought in by interim roles with a permanent executive lead appointed in 2026.
- 1.4.3. Initial risks with the building were identified through two reports, the Easton Bevins Report and the subsequent Ridge (2022) Report. Based on the information we have reviewed, until 5 September 2023 neither report was circulated outside of the Homes and Landlord Services Directorate, although there was a range of mechanisms to do so.
- 1.4.4. BCC's perception of the Building Safety Board (BSB) was found to be varied, with some perceiving it as a stakeholder board and some perceiving it as providing assurance on the safety of homes.
- 1.4.5. Gaps still remain with legal and procedural oversight of the landlord service. BCC has acknowledged these and is currently introducing a Housing Strategy and Assurance Division.
- 1.4.6. Our assessment of the governance of the decision to evacuate shows that all parties acted within the scheme of delegation. The decision was made in accordance with the duty of care to residents of Barton House, consideration of the two serious fires that had occurred in high-rise blocks in the city the previous year, and the material escalation of risk highlighted in the Arup letter. At the time of the decision the extent of the social, welfare and practical impacts on tenants was not fully understood, however BCC's statutory duty to prioritise life-safety was rightly prioritised.

1.5. Building safety and technical risk

- 1.5.1. A letter was sent from the Department for Communities and Local Government to local authority CEOs in September 2017 which identified a wider pool of LPS type blocks that might have safety issues and advised of steps to be taken to assure local authorities of the safety of such buildings. BCC circulated this letter internally, but we did not see any direct evidence of an operational response. The lack of documentation in this area indicates that it may have been a missed opportunity prior to the evacuation. We have identified that BCC still lacks a formal process for responding to such advice.
- 1.5.2. Three reports about Barton House were provided to BCC before the evacuation. The Easton Bevins Report (2019) focussed on external cladding and internal fire separation at the block,

and was one of 27 surveys commissioned across the city. The response to this report was influenced by two factors, emergency roof works at Barton House and Covid-19, meaning that BCC was not aware of fire safety issues within the block until 2019. Further abseil surveys following this report were carried out, and BCC introduced a waking watch in May 2022 in consequence.

- 1.5.3. The Ridge (2022) Report focussed on checking the structural elements of Barton House, it being a LPS-type block. A range of methods was used to make an assessment of the building, including intrusive opening-up works in three flats. The report speaks of the limitations of the survey. A limited number of flats was assessed and none of them was at roof level; there was no external or communal area investigation; and it was not possible to obtain core samples from floor slabs for testing. The report concludes that “the block in its current state is inadequate to resist disproportionate collapse” and recommends strengthening works and several risk reduction measures.
- 1.5.4. The report was only shared within BCC’s housing property division; officers questioned its credibility based on a drafting error within the report, and that it did not seem to consider strengthening works carried out around 1970. The report’s credibility was also questioned based on the limitations of the number of intrusive surveys carried out in properties. We found that, in response to the report, there were no decant initiatives applied at the time. We also found that the engagement between BCC and Ridge in understanding the risks within Barton House was poor and we have not seen any evidence of further discussion with Ridge to understand the immediacy of any risks.
- 1.5.5. We did not find any risk assessment carried out in response to the Ridge (2022) Report. The absence of this meant that the conclusions of the report were not translated into clearly defined risk ratings, mitigations, ownership or timescales. The lack of a documented risk assessment also reduced organisational learning and weakened the audit trail, making it difficult to evidence how professional judgement had been exercised.
- 1.5.6. The Ridge (2022) Report did, however, form a basis for an options appraisal focussed on the redevelopment of Barton House and was appended to a report provided to the Executive Director Meeting and then to Cabinet Member Briefing in September 2023, where the decision to commission the Arup peer review was made. Prioritising option appraisal over risk management conflicted with sector norms and showed a lack of focus and competence from the housing property division. The delay in highlighting risks had a significant impact; organisational knowledge about the risks associated with Barton House was over a year old, and the approach of reporting that risk was not transparent. This tended to undermine the trust that leadership had in officers.
- 1.5.7. After concerns were raised by leadership, BCC engaged Arup to peer review the Ridge (2022) Report. This resulted in a letter which identified that information was limited in nature, but indicated there was a risk to life-safety. The Arup letter was reported to leadership and the decision was made to evacuate Barton House.

1.5.8. Our review has found that there was a lack of cross-team working between the property and housing management divisions, an approach to risk which is out of step with sector norms, and of interest being disproportionately focussed on redevelopment opportunities.

1.5.9. A number of individuals from the team have since left BCC and officers have reflected on changes including better use of the BSB. BCC has identified that the planned Housing Strategy and Assurance Division will provide a stronger and more risk-orientated approach, supported by clearer governance pathways.

1.6. Resident experience and impact

1.6.1. A range of resident engagement activities have been carried out to deliver this review. We observed a resilient and strong community at Barton House. We engaged with residents through a range of methods set by a resident engagement strategy.

1.6.2. Each resident we spoke to could recall in detail their experience, and that of their family on being told they needed to leave the building, with many finding out about the evacuation through social media, media reports or other residents. Many described a period of chaos on the evening of the evacuation, which was markedly challenging for parents and children.

1.6.3. Residents talked about a range of health impacts at different phases of the evacuation and after the return to the building. Residents staying in the hotel reported outbreaks of illness and infectious disease. Many residents spoke about the impact on sleep, including months of unsettled sleep for some children staying in the hotel and difficulties in sleeping on the return to Barton House due to concerns about the building's safety. Residents consistently spoke of severe mental health problems since the evacuation, and many attributed this to uncertainty about their safety and the future of the building.

1.6.4. Post-natal and pregnant women talked about the health impact, with one mother that was evacuated shortly after having a baby. Women who were pregnant at the time talked about anxiety that they may give birth before they could return home. Some parents talked about developmental delay for babies, which they attributed to a lack of space in hotel rooms for babies to roll, crawl and sit up.

1.6.5. Residents were not fully informed of the technical reasons for the evacuation until a meeting at City Hall on 18 December, the length of time before this had a significant impact on the relationship between residents and BCC.

1.6.6. Messaging about the evacuation was complex with some residents seeking information from other bodies. There was a failed attempt at setting up a formal resident group alongside misinformation affecting what residents understood about the building.

1.6.7. We have not seen evidence of direct discrimination or unfairness in the decision-making about the evacuation. However, we did find that certain groups were more negatively affected than others, including those who stayed at the hotel, residents with limited English, pregnant and post-natal women, families with children with special educational needs and disabilities, and those with large families.

- 1.6.8. BCC has not yet made a decision on the future of Barton House. We recommend that BCC works in partnership with residents about the future of the building. BCC has put in place a change to the allocations policy offering residents of Barton House or those who have had similar experiences to have their priority raised on the housing register.

1.7. Operational response and resident support

- 1.7.1. BCC stood up their major incident protocol on the day of evacuation, which was supported by a range of mechanisms. A core team from housing management was put together to allocate hotel places on the night of evacuation. Some of the housing management team were only notified of the evacuation on the day and there was limited data about who was living in Barton House at the time, which impaired the quality of the operational response.
- 1.7.2. BCC did not fully estimate the complexities of the evacuation of many households, which resulted in a reactive approach, where residents were obliged to voice their needs rather than all needs being considered at the outset.
- 1.7.3. Media outlets released stories about the evacuation of Barton House before some residents were informed of the need to evacuate. This had a significant operational impact on the ability to carry out a calm and structured evacuation, resulting in significant distress for residents and an additional pressure for the operational team to manage the press presence at the time of the evacuation. Changes in the BCC approach to media presence have been made in learning from the evacuation.
- 1.7.4. BCC continually liaised with the hotel throughout the evacuation process and responsively put in place additional facilities. Support for residents developed over time. Officers responsible for support and temporary accommodation reported a range of learnings, including taking more proactive steps to meeting need. These learnings are important and, to avoid loss of corporate memory, we make a recommendation to further develop scenario planning for the major incident protocol.
- 1.7.5. Twice-daily letters were committed to at an early stage, which reduced over time. These were translated to community languages and provided links to a range of support, but did not fully consider those who were not staying at the hotel, young people or adults with communication difficulties. Housing officers were placed in a liaison role, however, they were not fully equipped with information about technical assessments, limiting messaging about the evacuation and adding to the uncertainty for residents.

1.8. Learning and future preparedness

- 1.8.1. Our review found that BCC has made improvements in response to both the Barton House evacuation and BCC's engagement with the RSH, leading to significant changes in landlord service oversight and governance with further improvements planned. However, some lessons from residents' experiences are not yet fully embedded, and it is crucial for BCC to capture these for future incidents. The relationship between residents of Barton House and BCC is fraught and there is work for BCC to do to recover this relationship, we identify two key points

for BCC and residents to work together on – the future of the building and developing scenario plans.

- 1.8.2. For the social housing sector, this review sadly brings out three points often referenced in RSH guidance, knowledge of tenants, knowledge of properties and the management of risk. We identify in the report that there is active regulation for private registered providers for knowledge of tenants, properties and management of risk. However, we discuss the gap that exists for local authority registered providers, with governance, oversight and risk management not being proactively assessed at a landlord level by statutory bodies. Therefore, we raise an important learning for local authority registered providers to regularly reflect on their governance, oversight and risk management arrangements to assess whether these are sufficient to meet legal and regulatory standards.

1.9. Our conclusions

- 1.9.1. The decision to evacuate was made appropriately and rightly prioritised life-safety. However, at the time of the decision, the extent of the social, welfare and practical impacts on tenants was not fully understood.
- 1.9.2. Leadership capacity was stretched, which contributed to a lack of prioritisation and oversight of landlord service risks.
- 1.9.3. Ways of working within the housing property division were out of step with sector norms, which resulted in risks not being acted on fully and promptly.
- 1.9.4. The evacuation had a severe and, for some, disproportionate impact on the residents' wellbeing.
- 1.9.5. BCC mobilised a major incident response at pace, however this was not fully resilient to media presence and gaps in resident data.

2. Introduction

2.1. About this review

2.1.1. Altair Consultancy and Advisory Services Ltd (Altair) was commissioned by Bristol City Council (BCC) to conduct an independent review and lessons learned in relation to the evacuation of Barton House, Bristol. The evacuation took place on 14 November 2023.

2.1.2. The scope of this review was agreed in December 2025, following engagement carried out by Altair with four key groups:

- Residents of Barton House
- BCC Officers
- Current BCC political leadership
- Stakeholders (community and activist groups).

2.1.3. The scope was shared with residents of Barton House and stakeholders in January 2026.

2.1.4. This review considers six thematic areas:

- Decision-making and Governance
- Building Safety and Technical Risk
- Resident Experience and Impact
- Operational Response and Resident Support
- Role of Stakeholders
- Learning and Future Preparedness.

2.1.5. This review will not:

- Make detailed recommendations in relation to the future of the building
- Independently assess structural integrity or fire safety
- Make judgements on the current safety of Barton House
- Replicate or duplicate the role of statutory regulators.

2.1.6. To assess the thematic areas of the review, Altair has been given access to documents and data from BCC, carried out resident engagement, discussed good practice at an experts' roundtable and carried out stakeholder interviews for those involved during the period being reviewed (2017 – 2025). Our full scope and methods are available as Appendix 1 of this report.

2.1.7. In drafting our report, the thematic area of the 'Role of Stakeholders' has been embedded into the other five chapter of our report. The findings sit prominently in our chapters on Resident Experience and Impact, and Operational Response and Resident Support. We also discuss the focus area of Safety and Evacuation Strategy in our chapters on Operational Response and Resident Support.

2.1.8. Our scope and methods were supported by a Resident Engagement Strategy which is available as Appendix 2 of this report.

2.2. About Barton House

2.2.1. Barton House is a residential tower block in the Barton Hill area of Bristol. Barton House was built in 1958. The building has 14 residential floors and a non-residential ground floor. The building has a total of 98 flats. The building is owned by BCC.

2.2.2. Barton House was built using a precast system utilising in-situ concrete walls⁶ and was not defined as a Large Panel System (LPS) block upon assessment by Ridge and Partners LLP (property and construction consultants) (Ridge). However, the building has similarities to a LPS block and therefore Ridge's assessments of its structural integrity were made against LPS assessment criteria.

2.2.3. On 14th November 2023, residents were evacuated from Barton House due to concerns about the safety of the building. Residents of Barton House returned in a phased approach from 20 February 2024.

2.3. Our thanks

2.3.1. We thank the residents of Barton House for giving their time to this review and for sharing their personal experiences of a very upsetting situation.

2.3.2. We also thank BCC officers for giving their time to this review and for sharing their reflections on lessons learned.

2.3.3. We also thank other stakeholders for their time and input.

⁶ Ridge (2022) Structural Robustness Assessment: Barton House [Structural Robustness Assessment](#)

3. External context for this review

3.1. Grenfell fire tragedy

- 3.1.1. The Grenfell fire tragedy is a key contextual milestone for any review of this kind. Post-Grenfell there has been a heightened awareness of risks associated with the building, refurbishment and management of high-rise buildings nationally.
- 3.1.2. Landlords of high-rise buildings nationally have sought to better understand the buildings within their responsibility. We have observed that, post-Grenfell to date, guidance to landlords has not always been clear and there have been various national policy shifts. We have observed stronger understanding of the risks associated with complex and high-rise buildings over time, understanding which continues to mature.
- 3.1.3. Post-Grenfell many residents of high-rise buildings experienced a distinct shift in how they perceived their building, their landlord and, crucially, their feeling of safety. Many experienced heightened anxiety, loss of trust, trauma, a feeling of being ‘trapped’ and cynicism regarding safety policies and their landlord. The perception of safety for residents of high-rise buildings was assessed by Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government in research published in 2025⁷.

3.2. Regulatory context

- 3.2.1. This review is carried out over a period of significant regulatory change which presents a complex and dynamic operating environment for all social landlords and providers of higher-risk buildings over the last seven years.
- 3.2.2. We outline the inception of and introduction of significant regulatory changes between 2017 and 2025 in table 2 below.

Table 2: Regulatory context

Date	Overview
17 May 2018 – Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety: Hackitt review (Independent Review of Building	Initial prompt to begin reforming building and landlord regulations.

⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) Feeling safe: Subjective perceptions of fire safety among residents of high-rise buildings ([Feeling safe: Subjective perceptions of fire safety among residents of high-rise buildings - executive summary - GOV.UK](#))

Regulations and Fire Safety: final report - GOV.UK	
14 August 2018 – A new deal for social housing: the “social housing green paper” (Social housing green paper: a ‘new deal’ for social housing - GOV.UK)	Consultative paper with the opportunity to submit views on proposals for the future of social housing.
October 2019 – Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 Report (HC 49-IV – The Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 Report - Volume 4 of 4)	Makes several key recommendations aimed at improving fire safety and emergency response protocols.
1 September 2020 – Revised Housing Ombudsman Scheme (Ombudsman’s new powers take effect including working with the Regulator - Housing Ombudsman)	Introduction of the Complaint Handling Code, ability to issue complaint-handling failure orders and to conduct systemic or thematic investigations.
April 2022 – the Building Safety Act (2022) (Building Safety Act 2022)	Brings in a range of regulatory bodies to oversee the building safety regime: the Building Safety Regulator, the National Regulator of Construction Products and the New Homes Ombudsman.
17 November 2022 – The charter for social housing residents: social housing white paper (The charter for social housing residents: social housing white paper - GOV.UK)	Sets out the actions that the government would take in relation to safety, tenant voice, home quality and complaints.
July 2023 (in force April 2024) – Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 (Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023)_	Removes the ‘serious detriment test’ and establishes proactive consumer regulation to be delivered by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH).
1 October 2023 – The Building Safety Regulator (BSR) started its activities (About us - Building Safety Regulator - GOV.UK)	The BSR starts its role as the Building Control Authority for all higher-risk buildings in England (including for Barton House).
29 February 2024 – New consumer standards published (Proposed Consumer standards)	New consumer standards, replacing the previous consumer standards from April 2012.

3.3. Covid-19

- 3.3.1. Landlord services were affected by measures attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, including a nationwide lockdown on 26th March 2020. This constrained landlords' ability to operate as normal due to a range of national and local restrictions in place for essential and non-essential work.

4. Barton House: timeline

4.1. Introduction

4.1.1. During our sessions with residents in developing the scope for this review, it was made clear to Altair that residents wanted to understand a timeline of activity in relation to the Barton House evacuation. Residents identified a letter written to chief executives of local authorities and housing associations on 5th September 2017⁸ about the safety of LPS buildings as a point from which to start the timeline activity.

4.2. Timeline

4.2.1. This timeline is based on the documents reviewed by Altair and key public information in table 3 below.

Table 3: Barton House timeline 2017 – 2025

Date	Event
14 June 2017	Grenfell Tower Fire.
5 September 2017	Letter sent by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) regarding concerns about LPS buildings following an investigation by the London Borough of Southwark on the Ledbury Estate.
December 2017	BCC produced a brief for an independent assessment of clad multistorey blocks and cladding system compliance with fire safety standards in Building Regulations, and an assessment of internal fire safety including effectiveness of compartmentation against current and historic regulations and British Standards.
January 2018	Ocuair appointed to undertake thermal image surveys of priority blocks, including Barton House.
October 2019	Report received from Easton Bevins ⁹ on the findings from an investigation into the external wall insulation system (EWIS) and fire containment provisions.

⁸ Department for Communities and Local Government (2017) Letters on the safety of large panel system buildings [Letters on the safety of large panel system buildings: 5 September 2017 - GOV.UK](#)

⁹ Easton Bevins (2019) Investigation and review of external cladding and internal fire separation at Barton House [Easton Bevins Report 2019](#)

	The findings showed that there were essential differences between the EWIS at Barton House and at Grenfell Tower, that the cladding system was generally in good condition, and that additional fireproofing was required in some parts of the block and renewing in others. It recommended a fire detection and alarm system or alternatively a sprinkler system. It also recommended further inspections to confirm cladding fire-break positions.
March 2020	Covid-19 pandemic results in national lockdown and a range of measures in place until 21 February 2022.
July 2020	Ridge commissioned to carry out structural survey undertaking intrusive surveys in Barton House. The brief was in response to the letter written by the Department of Communities and Local Government with advice to seek further assurance in relation to LPS blocks.
August 2021	Urgent roof replacement works commissioned in response to the age of the roof, number of roof system failures and the number of repairs. The roof works delayed further inspections (abseil surveys) as recommended in the Easton Bevins report.
2020-2022	Intrusive surveys completed by Ridge in properties when vacated in suitable locations in Barton House. A total of three properties were accessed for intrusive surveys.
5 May 2022	Outcome of referendum to move from a Mayor and Cabinet model to a committee system.
May 2022	Waking Watch was introduced at Barton House due to concerns about defects identified by the abseil surveys being carried out by an external company at the time.
June 2022	Abseil survey report received which outlined that no fire breaks or fixings could be found in the areas intrusively assessed.
July 2022	BCC confirmed only gas supply in Barton House was to the laundry and it was agreed that this would be removed. Order raised to remove the gas supply from the laundry.
25 July 2022	A briefing note was provided at the Cabinet Member Briefing (CMB), "Barton Hill Blocks – cladding repair options – an update". The note indicated that a further, more detailed, option appraisal report will be presented in due course following receipt of LPS survey results for Barton House.

July 2022 (as report dated)	Ridge ¹⁰ Structural Robustness Assessment report (“The Ridge 2022 Report”) finalised. The report concludes “The conclusion is therefore that the block in its current state is inadequately robust to prevent disproportionate collapse in the event of an internal gas explosion” and for BCC to commission a risk analysis with a cost-benefit analysis for strengthening works
August 2022	The Ridge 2022 Report was issued for comment (16.08.2022) and final report issued (18.08.2022).
September 2022	A report was provided to the Growth and Regeneration Executive Director Meeting: “Barton House Blocks – Remedial Options Paper”. The paper referenced findings in relation to defects across four blocks including Barton House in the Barton Hill area. The authors recommend a comprehensive refurbishment programme. The report did not outline the findings from the Ridge Structural Robustness Assessment report.
25 September 2022	Fire at Twinnell House due to an electric bike being charged within a residential dwelling. One resident died while attempting to escape and eight people were hospitalised.
September 2022	Acorn ¹¹ start a campaign for BCC to introduce fire detection and alarm systems and sprinklers across all high-rise blocks, including Barton House.
06 October 2022	Fire at Eccleston House due to arson, three people were hospitalised.
20 December 2022	An update was provided at the CMB on the Barton House actions and options, showing that the cost appraisal comes back at £22m, and that a further report is being created to consider demolition and rebuild.
January 2023	Cabinet publish decision to introduce fire detection and alarm systems and sprinklers for all high-rise blocks, including Barton House.
13 March 2023	“Barton House – Initial Investment Appraisal” report provided to the Housing Senior Leadership Team with recommendations for next steps for Barton House including a costed appraisal of demolition and rebuild, consideration of refurbishment (including providing additional accommodation in the basement area of the block), starting cladding system removal, and assessing the deliverability of decanting residents for the duration of a refurbishment

¹⁰ Ridge and Partners LLP (2022) Barton House Structural Robustness Assessment [Structural Robustness Assessment](#)

¹¹ [ACORN – union for the community](#)

	programme. The report states that the building is “currently at a heightened risk of disproportionate collapse in the event of a large explosion”.
April 2023	Gas removed from the Barton House laundry room.
April – June 2023	Options appraisals prepared for Barton House.
29 June 2023	The Lead Member for Housing (Cllr) requests that the Barton House refurbishment options be brought to them earlier than the planned date of 19 September. The operational team responded to say that more time was needed to gather the information required to bring a full report to the Lead Member for Housing.
5 September 2023	“Barton House – Option Appraisal” report taken to the HSLT outlining three options for the future of Barton House: refurbishment and structural repair; refurbishment and major improvement; and demolition and redevelopment. The Ridge 2022 Report was appended to the report.
13 September 2023	“Barton House – Option Appraisal” report presented face to face to EDM. Agreed that officers were to do further costed work on the three options as well as introduce an option of ‘do nothing’, noting demolition and development was the preferred option at the time.
14 September 2023	The Lead Member for Housing (Cllr) requested a meeting pm 15 September 2023 with BCC officers after reviewing the “Barton House – Option Appraisal” report sent ahead of the planned CMB meeting on 20 September 2023.
15 September 2023	The Lead Member for Housing (Cllr) sent an email to the operational housing team and the executive. The email outlined the views of the Lead Member for Housing (Cllr) prior to the meeting due to be held in the same day, the email highlighted a range of points including: • The accuracy and reliability of the Ridge 2022 Report (due to some incorrect references to another local authority and different building) • The need to separate the redevelopment options from the immediate safety decisions • Acknowledgement of the complexity and limitations of current structural knowledge • Concern about disproportionate collapse and explosions, noting that a lack of tenancy audits and challenges with access reduces confidence in the ability to manage risks • Recommending emergency decant and requesting no further tenants were rehoused in Barton House.

15 September 2023	A meeting was held about Barton House. It was agreed that the next steps were to commission a peer review of the Ridge 2022 Report.
19 September 2023	“Barton House – Option Appraisal” report was provided to CMB with an addendum “Barton House – Option Appraisal Addendum”. The Addendum focusses on immediate priorities of a secondary desk-top survey, establishing a cross-service working group, investigating the routes and feasibility of decanting the block, and establishing essential priorities for critical work programmes. The Addendum states that discussions with a potential partner for the desk-top survey are underway.
25 September 2023	Initial meeting with strategic partner for commissioning an urgent assessment of Barton House.
7 October 2023	Arcadis (working for Arup, from here referred to as “Arup”) were commissioned to review the Ridge 2022 Report, with a view “to clarifying possible sources of risk that might lead to a disproportionate collapse”.
8 November 2023	A workshop was carried out to consider other possible hazards to the building and potential mitigations, including those relating to fire safety.
Friday 10 November 2023	A letter¹² was sent from Arup (from here referred to as the “Arup letter”) to BCC. The letter outlined Arup’s preliminary advice and concludes that: A fire could result in progressive failure of the structure presenting a risk to life and the safety of occupants. The letter states: "it is our preliminary opinion that a fire event within a single flat could result in a localised structural failure that immediately escalates to disproportionate progressive collapse of a vertical stacked section of the building. [...] This would present a risk to life-safety of occupants present within the impacted area of the building." Arup states that the information on which their opinion is formed is limited and they strongly recommend that further survey work be undertaken immediately.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Report shared with key stakeholders presenting options for next steps in the email body which included: • Maintaining and enhancing risk-management measures • Immediate evacuation.

¹² Arup letter to Bristol City Council (10 November 2023) [file](#)

Tuesday 14 November 2023	BCC holds a call with the Chief Fire Officer at Avon Fire and Rescue in relation to the risks highlighted in the Arup letter.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Decision made to conduct an emergency evacuation at Barton House.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Strategic actions were assigned to individuals for delivery of the evacuation including: • Preparing a relocation plan • Preparing a communications plan • Identifying the staff to support the evacuation • Drafting messaging to residents • Identifying vulnerable tenants • Cancelling Full Council (which was to be held the evening of 14 November 2023) • Working with local community locations to provide overnight accommodation.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	Emergency evacuation carried out at Barton House.
Tuesday 14 November 2023	At evacuation, a letter was sent to residents of Barton House advising that a “recent building survey at Barton House has shown us there is a risk of building collapse if there was, for example, a fire, explosion or large impact”. The letter asks residents to stay with family or friends for a “short period of time” and for those who cannot stay with family and friends to speak to BCC staff. The letter advises residents that BCC could not say how long residents will need to be away from home for and gives a dedicated freephone helpline for help.
15 November 2023	BCC started twice-daily Tactical Coordination Group meetings, actions arising from meetings were logged on a central decision log. This was in place until 23rd February 2024.
15 November 2023	BCC set up a Strategic Coordination Group, meeting regularly to: • Set strategic direction • Coronate responding teams and agencies • Prioritise resources
15 November 2023	BCC started providing twice-daily update letters to residents of Barton House. Twice-daily letters were:

	• Sent over the first weekend after evacuation • Translated into community languages from 23 November 2023 • Gradually reduced to daily letters around 30 November 2023 • Gradually reduced to around ten letters per month in December 2023. Twice-daily letters covered a range of practical matters such as transport, quality of temporary accommodation and officer presence at Barton House and in hotels.
19 November 2023	Structural Assessment Brief finalised for Barton House.
November 2023	Waking watch increased in size following Arup peer review.
November 2023 –December 2023	Further detailed structural investigations carried out at Barton House by Ridge, with Arup conducting a peer review of structural findings.
8 December 2023	Interim update provided by Ridge regarding progress at Barton House in relation to the structural investigations.
11 December 2023	Interim update received from Arup with initial conclusions from the peer review of Ridge’s structural investigations.
18 December 2023	Residents meeting held at City Hall with leaders and officers from BCC. Residents were informed that they would not be able to return to their homes before Christmas. BCC provided a detailed update on the interim reports received from Ridge and Arup, discussing the possible issues in the building which were being investigated.
21 December 2023	BCC receives a high-level summary report from Ridge ¹³ on structural investigation findings to date, which stated that the “wall ties appear to be sufficient to satisfy current standards” and that the steel frame within the building would require fire protection to 90 minutes before residents can move back in.
3 January 2024	BCC receives a letter from Arup ¹⁴ as an update to the peer review stating that Arup generally agree with the Ridge technical letter. Arup outlines that “However, from Ridge’s conclusions set out in their letter.... it is our opinion

¹³ Ridge letter to Bristol City Council (2023) [Barton House, Brief, Background and Method](#)

¹⁴ Arup letter to Bristol City Council (2024) [file](#)

	that a single dwelling fire does not present a risk of disproportionate collapse due to the potential for load redistribution through structural robustness ties and/or the proposed fire protected steel goalposts”.
10 January 2024	Residents meeting held at City Hall with leaders and officers from BCC, structural engineers and Avon Fire and Rescue representatives. Attendees were updated on progress of surveys and the work required to the building before it could be reoccupied.
January 2024	New fire alarm installation starts at Barton House.
14 February 2024	Ridge Structural Robustness Assessment – Phase 2 report ¹⁵ received by BCC which concludes that, when the proposed works are complete, the building is at a relatively low risk of disproportionate collapse after meeting the relevant assessment criteria.
16 February 2024	New fire alarm completed at Barton House.
19 February 2024	Arup Barton House Structural and Structural Fire Review ¹⁶ received by BCC which agrees with Ridge’s conclusion.
20 February 2024	Phased return of residents.
23 February 2024	Strategic action log for major incident protocol finishes.
April – May 2024	Fire safety works undertaken at Barton House.
6 May 2024	The Committee system starts at BCC.
21 May 2024	Internal audit undertaken of Barton House decision-making.
26 February 2025	Medact release the “We do not feel safe here” ¹⁷ report which recommends rehousing for families who do not feel safe living in Barton House, a public apology, compensation to all residents, and an independent investigation into

¹⁵ Ridge (2024) Barton House Structural Robustness Assessment – Phase 2 [Barton House Robustness Assessment - Phase 2](#)

¹⁶ Arup (2024) Barton House Structural and Structural Fire Review [Barton House Structural and Structural Fire Review](#)

¹⁷ Medact (2025) We do not feel safe here [Barton House report: “We do not feel safe here” - Medact](#)

	how BCC handled the crisis, including the publication of any findings relevant to the safety of other similar council blocks in Bristol.
16 May 2025	Tender pack issued for the Barton House Lessons Learnt Review.
19 September 2025	BCC adjusts the allocations policy to include a band uplift for social housing tenants who have had to leave their home for a prolonged time (more than several weeks) due to a significant mass emergency event that is recognised by a relevant authority.

5. Decision-making and governance

5.1. Bristol City Council landlord services

5.1.1. BCC currently own and manage 26,808¹⁸ properties across the city, this includes 56 high rise blocks in scope for registration with the BSR. BCC directly manage their housing stock.

5.2. Governance at Bristol City Council

5.2.1. During the period of this review BCC transitioned from a mayoral system to a committee system following a public referendum in May 2022. The committee system started on 6 May 2024. The majority of the decision-making and governance in relation to Barton House was carried out under the former mayoral system.

5.3. An overview of the mayoral system

5.3.1. Under the Mayoral Scheme of Delegation, two Deputy Mayors and seven Councillors formed the Executive, known as the Cabinet. Each Cabinet Member had specific areas of responsibility (Portfolios). The Cabinet's role was to work with the Chief Executive and relevant Executive Directors to oversee operations within Portfolios and support delivery of the Corporate Plan.

5.3.2. Under the Mayoral Scheme of Delegation, Cabinet Members make decisions that fell within their Portfolio to the extent of delegations from the Mayor, and all decisions taken by the Mayor or Cabinet Members are taken in public Cabinet meetings.

5.3.3. Housing Delivery and Homelessness was a single Portfolio at the time of the mayoral system and included the following:

- Housing delivery and Innovation
- Major development schemes
- Modern methods of construction
- Homelessness (including temporary accommodation)
- University development and student accommodation
- Self-builds
- Housing Strategy and Project 1000
- Land and property allocated for housing development.

¹⁸ 2025/26 Local Authority Housing Statistics

5.3.4. The Mayor's Scheme of Delegation¹⁹ shows that Cabinet Members can work with the Chief Executive and relevant Executive Directors for involvement or decision at CMB. The Mayor's Scheme of Delegations set out that key decisions will be taken by Cabinet as follows:

“(a) to result in the council incurring expenditure which is, or the making of savings which are, significant having regard to the council's budget for the service or function to which the decision relates; or (b) to be significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in two or more wards in the city. Bristol City Council has determined that for the purposes of (a) above that “significant” expenditure or savings are expenditure or savings (including the receipt or loss of income or capital receipts) in excess of £500,000”

5.4. An overview of the committee system

5.4.1. The committee system is outlined in BCC's Constitution²⁰. BCC is led by 70 Councillors, one of whom is appointed by the Council as the Leader of the Council. Decisions are either taken by Full Council, Policy Committees, Regulatory Committees or officers, according to the rules in the constitution.

5.4.2. BCC has eight Policy Committees, with the landlord service sitting in the Homes and Housing Delivery Committee, which is responsible for the following functions:

- Housing delivery and Innovation
- Social housing and support services
- Landlord services
- Homelessness
- Home-choice
- Self-builds
- Estate renewal
- Private rented sector
- Living Rent City
- Housing Strategy and Project 1000
- Retrofit sustainability of homes – carbon and waste
- Modern methods of construction

¹⁹ Bristol City Council (2023) Mayor's Executive Scheme of Delegation

²⁰ Bristol City Council (2026) Constitution ([Public Pack](#))[Agenda Document for Constitution, 13/04/2026 00:00](#)

- Departmental performance, budget and risk.

5.4.3. The general principles applying to the exercise of delegated powers by officers are broader than those in the former mayoral system with officers engaging with committees for a broader range of factors including significant public interest, consideration of uncertain matters and the need for consistency in BCC's decision-making process.

5.4.4. In April 2025 BCC developed a standalone Housing Directorate. The delegation of powers from Full Council to Executive Directors is set out in the Directorate Scheme of Delegations: Housing Directorate²¹.

5.5. Capacity at a leadership level

5.5.1. We find that capacity at a leadership level was inconsistent and stretched. Those we spoke with as part of this review talked about roles being unmanageable. This affected the roles of Executive Director, Growth and Regeneration (responsible for the landlord service until April 2025) and the role of the Director: Homes and Landlord Services.

5.5.2. Until April 2025, BCC did not have an Executive Director of Housing at an Executive level and housing was led by the Executive Director, Growth and Regeneration who was responsible for a range of other functions as follows:

- Economy of Place
- Management of Place
- Housing and Landlord Services
- Property, Assets and Infrastructure.

5.5.3. The lack of a dedicated Executive Lead for Housing during the review period had substantial impact on BCC's focus on the landlord service. Without a dedicated Executive Lead for Housing focus on housing was limited at an Executive level.

5.5.4. In the dynamic and complex operating environment (as outlined in Chapter 3 of this report), the lack of a Housing Executive lead was a significant weakness in the oversight of key risks, complex statutory duties and in the exercise of delegated powers.

5.5.5. At Altair we have observed that there has been a change in approach to the leadership of landlord services, with many organisations now opting to ensure that there is stronger representation of the landlord service/housing at an executive level. The response from local authorities can be generally attributed to increased scrutiny and greater regulation by the RSH and BSR.

²¹ Bristol City Council (2025) Directorate Scheme of Delegations: Housing Directorate [BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL](#)

- 5.5.6. The limitations of the Executive Director role were acknowledged by BCC in 2024, and a review was commissioned to look at the leadership, management, structure and capacity of the landlord service at BCC. A decision was made to introduce an Executive Director, Housing role to the BCC structure. The role was covered on an interim basis from April 2025 – December 2025 and permanently from March 2026.
- 5.5.7. Until January 2025 one director was responsible for the landlord service and homelessness across the city. The role had a large remit and included line management of Heads of Service across major areas such as property and neighbourhood management.
- 5.5.8. In our interviews, many individuals spoke of the role being unmanageable. Considering the breadth of the remit of the Director, Homes and Landlord Services for key risk areas, in a strongly regulated environment serving over 26,800 properties, including 56 high rise blocks, the role was too broad to effectively prioritise and manage emerging significant risks. This weakness was compounded by the lack of an Executive Lead for Housing.
- 5.5.9. BCC acknowledged the breadth of the role of Director, Homes and Landlord Service and has since introduced an additional role, Director of Housing Property and are in the process of introducing a Director of Housing Strategy and Assurance, with all three roles sitting under the Executive Director, Housing.

We support the direction of travel by BCC in introducing additional leadership roles for the landlord service.

5.6. Legal and procedural oversight

- 5.6.1. We found, in the time up to the evacuation, that risks associated with high-rise blocks were generally managed operationally within the landlord service. This was delivered through two functions: the Housing Senior Leadership Team and the Building Safety Board.
- 5.6.2. At the time there were routes to raise matters of concern at the Executive Director Meeting which covered the entire Executive Directorate of Growth and Regeneration. Additionally, matters could be brought to the attention of the Executive Team, including the Chief Executive, at Corporate Leadership Board. As set out in the scheme of delegations at the time, matters requiring Cabinet Member involvement or decision could be presented at CMBs.
- 5.6.3. Note that from 2017, social landlords across the country commissioned a range of surveys and reports for high-rise blocks in response to changed regulatory and legislative requirements. The Easton Bevens survey, for example, was one of 26 surveys carried out across the city.
- 5.6.4. For the Easton Bevens and the subsequent Ridge (2022) reports there was no clear guidance to staff as to when or how to escalate risks identified from external surveys or reports. The lack of guidance also extended to how reports could be considered, escalated and recommendations delivered.
- 5.6.5. Based on the information we have reviewed, until 5 September 2023, neither the Ridge (2022) or Easton Bevens reports were circulated outside of the Homes and Landlord Service Directorate, and officers did not use the routes outlined in section 5.6.2 to escalate risks.

5.6.6. It could be thought that external surveys and reports should have gone to the BSB; however, our assessment of the BSB was that it was functioning as a stakeholder Board rather than fulfilling an assurance function. Anecdotally during interviews, some perceived that the BSB was providing assurance on the safety of homes, and others that it was not.

5.6.7. Our findings in relation to legal and procedural oversight also reflect on a broader range of factors for BCC, such as the current engagement with the RSH in relation to their C3 judgement²² and the volume of BCC high-rise blocks subject to the BSR.

5.6.8. It is our view that substantive gaps currently remain in the legal and procedural oversight of the landlord service at BCC. BCC has acknowledged this gap with the recruitment of the Director of Housing Property and the introduction of a Housing Strategy and Assurance Division to sit within the Executive Directorate, Housing.

5.6.9. The Housing Strategy and Assurance Division will draw together key functions as follows:

- Resident Engagement, Housing Policy and Governance
- Data, Performance and Assurance
- Landlord Compliance and Building Safety
- Service Improvement and Programme Management
- Strategic Asset Management

5.6.10. We consider that there are benefits in bringing landlord compliance and building safety out of line management that includes operational delivery of other property matters (such as investment and repairs). This will help address existing gaps in legal and procedural oversight. Staff in compliance teams will benefit from clearer leadership on risk escalation and there will be more robust mechanisms for monitoring regulatory compliance.

Recommendation 1: we recommend that BCC progresses the Housing Strategy and Assurance Division for the landlord service.

5.7. Decision to evacuate

5.7.1. Our review has considered the decision made to evacuate Barton House. As shown in our timeline, two key documents were central to the decisions made by BCC, the Ridge (2022) Report and the Arup letter, which were considered during meetings held on 14 November 2023 alongside guidance from the fire service. Our assessment of the governance of the decision made on the actual day of evacuation shows that all parties acted within the scheme of delegation at the time.

²² RSH (2024) Bristol City Council - Regulatory Judgement

- 5.7.2. In our interviews, individuals discussed a range of factors in the decision-making on 14 November 2023. These included the duty of care to residents of Barton House, that two serious fires had occurred in high-rise blocks across the city the year prior, and the material escalation of risk highlighted in the Arup letter. Our discussions showed that the decision to evacuate was considered carefully and undertaken with seriousness by those responsible for making decisions on the day.
- 5.7.3. In reaching the decision to evacuate, leaders needed to weigh not only the technical evidence of risks but the significant social, welfare and practical impacts on tenants. At the time of the decision to evacuate the extent of the social, welfare and practical impacts on tenants were not fully understood. However, BCC's statutory duty to prioritise life-safety above all other considerations was rightly prioritised.
- 5.7.4. Conclusions: decision-making and governance
- 5.7.5. This review concludes that the decision to evacuate Barton House on 14 November 2023 was made appropriately with careful consideration of both technical evidence and the welfare of tenants.
- 5.7.6. Capacity at a leadership level and, specifically, the lack of an executive lead for housing adversely influenced the prioritisation and focus on housing matters. BCC has now recruited a permanent Executive Director, Housing.
- 5.7.7. There were gaps in legal oversight, including unclear escalation routes for risks identified in external technical reports. We support BCC's direction of travel to strengthen assurance through the implementation of the Housing Strategy and Assurance Division and of the introduction of a Director of Housing Property.

6. Building safety and technical risk

6.1. Response to the Department for Communities and Local Government letter

6.1.1. The letter sent on 5 September 2017 to local authority CEOs highlights several concerns that are pertinent to Barton House. The letter identifies a wider pool of LPS type blocks that may have safety issues, specifically raises concerns about gas supply, suggests a desk-top exercise is undertaken to understand strengthening work and the original design of buildings and, depending on the records available, to commission further investigations (both non-intrusive and intrusive). The letter did not ask for a response from BCC which was uncommon for letters that were circulated by DCLG around that time.

6.1.2. We have established that the letter was circulated to officers in the housing service on 8 September 2017. However, we have not identified a direct operational response to the letter by BCC, and there is limited corporate memory of any response. However, the Ridge (2022) Report directly references the DCLG letter as a factor for their commission.

6.1.3. The absence of a direct operational response to the DCLG letter meant that potential safety concerns raised, such as issues with gas supply and the structural integrity of LPS-type blocks, were not immediately addressed. This lack of action could have delayed the identification and mitigation of risks within Barton House.

6.1.4. Furthermore, without a documented response or follow-up, organisational learning and memory concerning this issue were diminished, making it harder for future teams to trace decision-making or improvements. This may have contributed to missed opportunities for safety enhancements prior to the events of November 2023, as subsequent reviews had limited information on earlier interventions or considerations.

6.1.5. In our review, we identify that there continues to be a lack of process for the receipt and response to guidance and advice from government bodies, with dependency on the CEO's email account for delivery.

Recommendation 2: we recommend that BCC implement a formal and transparent process for receiving and responding to advice and guidance issued by government bodies. This process should ensure that all relevant communications are systematically tracked and documented with clear escalation routes and lines of accountability, thereby creating a clear audit trail of the actions taken in response to external advice.

6.2. Technical reports

6.2.1. Ahead of the decision to evacuate there were three reports provided to BCC:

- Easton Bevens Report (2019)
- Ridge Report (2022)
- Arup letter (2023).

6.2.2. In this section of our report, we consider each report individually.

6.3. Easton Bevins report (2019)

6.3.1. The Easton Bevins survey was commissioned in response to the Grenfell Fire tragedy. The report focussed on two key points, the external cladding and the internal fire separation in the block. Easton Bevins were commissioned to undertake 27 surveys across BCC stock. BCC officers suitably prioritised blocks for survey based on risk, age and complexity.

6.3.2. The Easton Bevins report makes a series of recommendations for further investigation as well as the introduction of a fire detection and alarm system or a sprinkler system. BCC opted for abseil surveys to better understand the fire barriers at Barton House.

6.3.3. However, response to the Easton Bevins report was affected by two key factors; emergency roof works at Barton House and Covid-19. This meant that, from a fire safety perspective, BCC was not fully aware of the safety risks within the block until 2019.

6.3.4. The abseil surveys were carried out on Barton House in June 2022. BCC introduced a waking watch to Barton House in May 2022, and it was in place until the installation of the fire detection and alarm system in February 2024.

6.4. Ridge (2022) Report

6.4.1. The Ridge (2022) Report references being commissioned in response to the DCLG letter sent to BCC on 5 September 2017. The methodology for the survey included visual inspection, concrete reinforcement scanning, concrete testing and intrusive opening up works.

6.4.2. The Ridge (2022) Report clearly set out limitations to the survey including that: only three flats were tested and none of them were at roof level; there was no investigation externally or for communal areas due to health and safety concerns for residents; and it was not possible to obtain core samples from floor slabs for compressive testing.

6.4.3. The report concludes that “the block in its current state is inadequate / to resist disproportionate collapse” and recommends strengthening works and several risk reduction measures.

6.4.4. We have concluded that the report was only shared within BCC's housing property division. Officers questioned the report's credibility, focusing on historical details about Barton House, and felt that the report did not consider strengthening works carried out around 1970. Officers also cited an error involving another local authority's name, undermining officers' confidence in the recommendations. Despite the errors in the report, we would have expected officers to have been more open to up-to-date current advice.

6.4.5. In questioning the credibility of the report, officers also referenced its limitations, specifically the small number of intrusive surveys carried out in the block. We saw no evidence of decant incentives to carry out more intrusive surveys, which would have resulted in more reliable findings. We also found there was a lack of cross-team working between the property and housing management divisions to enable more properties to become available for intrusive surveys at Barton House.

- 6.4.6. We found that engagement with Ridge by BCC was poor and was affected by a change of BCC lead during the project. The effect of this was that access to further properties in Barton House was limited and that the final version of the report included a simple error, which undermined the report's credibility. We have not seen any evidence of any further discussion with Ridge regarding their observations and no evidence to suggest BCC sought to clarify with Ridge the immediacy of any risk outlined within the report.
- 6.4.7. We have not found any evidence of a risk assessment carried out in response to the Ridge (2022) Report. In the absence of a structured risk assessment process, the conclusions of the report were not translated into clearly defined risk ratings, mitigations, ownership or timescales. This limited BCC's ability to make informed, transparent decisions about proportionate responses to the risks identified, including whether interim measures, additional surveys, enhanced resident engagement, or escalation through formal governance routes were required. The lack of a documented risk assessment also reduced organisational learning and weakened the audit trail, making it more difficult to evidence how professional judgement was exercised and how competing risks were weighed in advance of the decision to evacuate on 14 November 2023.
- 6.4.8. Following receipt of the Ridge (2022) Report, officers developed an options appraisal for the future of Barton House with a view to redevelopment. The Options Appraisal Report, with the Ridge (2022) Report appended was provided to the Executive Director Meeting then to CMB in September 2023. Prioritising option appraisal over risk management conflicted with sector norms and showed a lack of risk focus and competence from the housing property division.
- 6.4.9. The delay in highlighting the risks to leadership had a significant impact; upon receipt of the Ridge (2022) Report leaders were informed of a risk that BCC operational staff had been aware of for over 12 months. Similarly, the way the risk had been highlighted to leadership, via the supporting information for an options appraisal, had a significant negative effect on the trust leadership had in officers.
- 6.5. Arup letter (2023)
- 6.5.1. Following concerns raised by leadership, BCC sought support from Arup to peer review the Ridge (2022) Report. The Arup (2023) letter focusses on structural fire safety which aligns with some of the risks raised in the Ridge (2022) Report. The Arup letter (2023) acknowledges the limitations of the Ridge (2022) Report and references a workshop held with BCC officers on 8 November 2023 where a discussion was held in relation to the mitigations in place for Barton House.
- 6.5.2. The Arup letter (2023) explains that the information on which Arup has based its opinion is 'limited in nature' and concludes that further survey work should be carried out immediately, focussing on the robustness of ties in the building. It also recommends removal of the EPS render system in place. The Arup letter does not give a view on whether the building should be evacuated or not but does use language to suggest there was a risk to life-safety.
- 6.5.3. After its receipt, the Arup letter was reported to leadership. We give our view on the governance and decision-making in chapter 5 of this report.

6.6. Culture

- 6.6.1. We have identified that a lack of cross-team working between the property and housing management divisions significantly influenced BCC's ability to obtain a full survey by Ridge which may have provided more clarity on the safety of the building.
- 6.6.2. Individuals discussed potential and perceived issues with the culture of the housing property division at the time, which they attributed to not acting on legal and regulatory concerns.
- 6.6.3. The lack of risk focus, understanding of governance and insular behaviour within parts of the BCC property division at the time is significantly out of step with sector norms, where we usually observe a strong connection between risk management, governance and building safety.
- 6.6.4. The team's emphasis on the options appraisal potentially showed their prioritisation of new home development during that period, our observation is that for some, interest often piqued at the potential tangible outcomes of redevelopment.
- 6.6.5. We note that a significant number of individuals from the housing property division have since left BCC.
- 6.6.6. During discussion sessions, officers spoke of their reflections on the handling of technical reports and showed a strong awareness of the impact of poor risk management on residents. They also spoke about changes that have since occurred, including better use of the Building Safety Board as a forum for technical reports.
- 6.6.7. The proposals for a Housing Strategy and Assurance Division provide a stronger and more risk-focussed approach supported by clearer governance pathways, to be supported by the role of the Director of Housing Property.

Recommendation 3: we recommend that BCC provide adequate building safety, risk and governance training to all responsible for the commissioning of and response to technical reports.

Recommendation 4: we recommend that BCC put in a plan to overcome silo working between the housing property division and the housing management division.

Recommendation 5: we recommend that BCC conduct a review of the suitability of the Building Safety Board to oversee outcomes from technical reports to inform the planned approach for a Housing Strategy and Assurance Division.

6.7. Conclusions: Building safety and technical risk

- 6.7.1. BCC did not respond in a clear traceable way to external government safety advice and there remains a weakness in how such guidance is acted upon.
- 6.7.2. Technical reports were commissioned, but BCC lacked a system to turn technical evidence into risk management or to highlight concerns about technical reports into the governance of the organisation. BCC did not engage appropriately with the appointed specialist consultants to discuss and understand the immediacy of identified risks.

- 6.7.3. The housing property division's approach was culturally and operationally out of step with sector norms, showing insular working, weak governance understanding and a lack of risk focus.
- 6.7.4. Since the decision to evacuate, a number of the housing property division have left BCC and BCC has started to introduce a Housing Strategy and Assurance Division, which will move building safety matters into a dedicated directorate focussed on governance and assurance.

7. Resident experience and impact

7.1. Introduction – resident experience and impact

7.1.1. This review has been created with a specific resident engagement strategy with the following principles:

- **Trust-building:** Foster transparency, honesty, and two-way communication.
- **Resident-focussed:** Prioritise the voices of those most affected by the evacuation.
- **Inclusivity:** Ensure all groups, including ‘silent voices’, are heard through a range of diverse methods.
- **Balance:** No single voice dominates; all perspectives are valued.
- **Empowerment:** Residents see evidence that their input shapes the review.
- **Flexibility:** Adapt methods to meet participant needs and preferences.
- **Supportive:** Engagement is trauma-informed and sensitive to participant wellbeing.
- **Outcome-centric:** Ensuring that residents see evidence that their input shapes the review and lessons learned.

7.1.2. The engagement strategy was delivered through several direct methods, shown in the table 4 below, alongside the number of residents engaged. An interpreter was used, as needed, during the focus group and interview sessions.

Table 4: engagement methods used for this review

Engagement method	Number of attendees/responses
Focus group sessions (including those attending the scoping group session who shared their views and experiences)	16
Interviews (including those who attended the scoping interviews who shared their views and experiences)	30
Surveys	2

7.1.3. We also considered the views of residents of Barton House through indirect methods which included a review of all complaints from residents logged by BCC between September 2017 and May 2025, a review of 61 surveys of residents in relation to building safety carried out by BCC through door knocking between August and October 2024, and a review of the Medact

“We do not feel safe here”²³ report.

7.2. Health

- 7.2.1. Residents consistently described the evacuation as sudden and distressing. Each resident we spoke with could recall in detail their experience, and that of their family, on being told that they needed to leave the building, with many finding out about the evacuation through social media, media reports or other residents.
- 7.2.2. In discussing the evening of evacuation, parents spoke to us about a period of chaos for children; some parents chose to stay in the building to avoid upset for their children, particularly for those children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Other parents spoke about leaving immediately out of fear of imminent building collapse, and that children left the building without coats in November.
- 7.2.3. As residents were staying at the hotel during winter months, there was a heightened risk of infectious disease. Residents who stayed at the hotel reported outbreaks of illness including diarrhoea, vomiting and chickenpox. Several residents spoke about taking their children to hospital because of dehydration. At the time BCC advised individuals who were unwell to isolate and for hotel staff to deliver food to their rooms.
- 7.2.4. A significant number of residents spoke about the impact of the evacuation on sleep. One resident who stayed in Barton House told of staying awake due to fear of the building collapsing in the night, harming her and her children. Parents spoke about months of unsettled sleep in the hotel which they attributed to disruption of routine and less space. Some talked about an inability to sleep upon returning to Barton House because of concern about the building’s safety.
- 7.2.5. Post-natal and pregnant women spoke to us about the impact of the evacuation on their experience. One post-natal mother, evacuated shortly after having a baby explained that she evacuated the building without support and later suffered from an infection which she attributed to the trauma associated with the evacuation. Pregnant mothers spoke of anxiety that they may give birth before they could return home. Some were placed into serviced accommodation with their families. Those with babies who stayed at the hotel referenced developmental delay which they attributed to a lack of space in hotel rooms for babies to roll, crawl and sit up. One mother explained that the hotel initially refused to warm her baby’s milk and she had to contact her midwife to arrange for the hotel to provide suitable facilities.
- 7.2.6. Some parents of secondary-school aged children discussed how they had observed a significant impact on their children’s mental health. One parent explained that their daughter had been experiencing suicidal thoughts since the evacuation and was working closely with

²³ Medact (2025) We do not feel safe here [Barton House report: “We do not feel safe here” - Medact](#)

BCC to obtain rehousing. Schools reported that young people living in the wider Barton Hill area had concerns that their building could be suddenly evacuated, as with Barton House.

- 7.2.7. Residents consistently spoke of severe mental health problems since the evacuation, with many talking about experiencing poor mental health for the first time. Many residents attributed this to a feeling of uncertainty about their safety and the future of the building.
- 7.2.8. Additionally, residents we spoke with talked of consequential ill health which they attributed to the evacuation of Barton House. The ill health reported to us included heart conditions and worsening of existing physical conditions.
- 7.2.9. Our review has identified that BCC adopted a responsive approach to health matters. As we describe in section 8.4, a range of mental health support was offered to residents which was gradually enhanced as time progressed. For future major incidents BCC should consider health impacts at an earlier stage and put in place proactive measures. This is one of our recommendations made in section 8.4.

7.3. Transparency and trust, and advocacy and voice

- 7.3.1. In section 8.5, we give our view that residents were not fully informed of the reasons for the evacuation until the City Hall meeting on 18 December 2023. This had a significant impact on the relationship between residents and BCC.
- 7.3.2. Many residents described a lack of clear, consistent and reliable information at the time of evacuation. Some residents observed that officers were 'clearly tired', and residents felt that they were 'talked to' by officers and unable to ask questions about the reason for the evacuation.
- 7.3.3. Messaging from BCC occasionally sought to address misinformation, however some residents chose to rely on word of mouth rather than the regular letters.
- 7.3.4. Residents who attended the City Hall meetings described the meetings as being 'scripted' and felt as though they were stage-managed. They talked about not being able to raise questions. We have learned that the leaders at City Hall meetings were provided with a script, but there was opportunity for questions.
- 7.3.5. While residents were out of the building, BCC attempted to develop a formal tenant group, however this failed. Officers attributed this to struggling to find a chair and reflected that BCC was attempting to overly-formalise the group. There have been no attempts at setting up a formal engagement group since.
- 7.3.6. Several residents of Barton House were members of Acorn²⁴, Meetings were held with Acorn members local to the hotel. Acorn actively engaged their members to express their views on

²⁴ Acorn [ACORN – union for the community](#)

the handling of the evacuation and to formulate appropriate demands on BCC. It is our understanding that staff representation from Acorn was not permitted at the City Hall meetings. BCC struggled to navigate resulting complexities and at times sought to avoid the inclusion of Acorn.

- 7.3.7. The impact of the evacuation on trust has been severe with many residents still not confident that the building is safe and that an evacuation would not happen again. Many residents remain extremely uncertain about the future of the building. Several residents discussed seeking rehousing following the evacuation.
- 7.3.8. We have established that there are no current plans for the future of Barton House (such as demolition, refurbishment etc.). BCC is currently in the process of drafting a new Asset Management Strategy and this includes consideration of asset performance.
- 7.3.9. BCC currently publishes all the technical reports in relation to Barton House on their website, which we have referenced throughout this report.
- 7.3.10. In September 2025, BCC approved a change to the allocations policy for social housing tenants who have had to leave their home for a prolonged period (more than several weeks) due to a significant mass emergency event that is recognised by a relevant authority. This enabled a number of Barton House residents to have their priority increased by one band on the housing register.

Recommendation 6: we recommend that additional opportunities are provided for residents to be briefed on the most recent technical assessments of Barton House.

Recommendation 7: we recommend that BCC work in partnership with residents of Barton House in relation to the future of the building.

7.4. Discrimination and fairness

- 7.4.1. In undertaking the review of decisions made about the evacuation we have seen no evidence of direct discrimination or unfairness. However, we find that certain groups were more negatively affected by the evacuation than others.
- 7.4.2. The experience of residents who lived with friends and family was broadly better than the experience of those who stayed at the hotel. Those in hotel accommodation often had more limited local support networks or faced constraints that made alternative arrangements less accessible. These factors may reflect wider inequalities.
- 7.4.3. Residents with limited English described a greater sense of panic during the evacuation. One resident talked about being shouted at and being told that the building was “falling down”. We found that residents with limited English often had less trust in, and knowledge of, the safety of the building. This is supported by the 2024 BCC survey of 61 residents which found that those requesting communications in another language felt less informed on safety, averaging 4.5 out of 10, compared to 5.3 for others.
- 7.4.4. Women who were pregnant or post-natal at the time experienced higher levels of stress and concern than others who were evacuated. We describe the specific impact in 7.2.5.

7.4.5. Families with children with special education needs and disabilities spoke of a tumultuous experience, especially those who stayed in the hotel. Parents discussed significant challenges in re-establishing routines during hotel moves and in returning to Barton House, and that their children could not eat the food at the hotel.

7.4.6. Those with large families had a more difficult experience, specifically living in multiple hotel rooms and with more complex family arrangements, such as children attending different schools.

7.5. Conclusions: Resident experience and impact

7.5.1. Trust in BCC was significantly damaged by the evacuation and the prolonged period before most residents felt fully informed about the technical reasons for the evacuation. Residents' confidence in the safety of Barton House remains fragile.

7.5.2. The evacuation caused severe and wide-ranging harm to residents, particularly to mental health. The experience of evacuation was not equal, and we have identified some disproportionate negative impacts on particular groups.

7.5.3. BCC has made reasonable adjustments to the allocations policy which acknowledge the specific concerns of residents of Barton House.

7.5.4. BCC has taken steps to develop an Asset Management Strategy for all council housing which provides an opportunity to work in partnership with residents of Barton House about the future of the building.

8. Operational response and resident support

8.1. Carrying out the evacuation

- 8.1.1. On the day of evacuation BCC declared a major incident and stood up major incident protocol which includes clear governance of decision-making. Daily operational and strategic stand-ups were carried out and emerging issues were discussed. The decisions made during the entire period while residents were out of Barton House were clearly logged in a strategic action log.
- 8.1.2. A core team (a “hub”) was put together of three individuals from the housing management team, one head of service, one lead from income collection and one lead from lettings. On the night of the evacuation the hub was responsible for collecting resident information, allocating hotel spaces and speaking to residents as needed. Officers who were involved in the hub described an intense pressured working environment where best efforts were being made to support residents. Locations were made available near to Barton Hill, however, some stakeholder groups described little or no notice of the use of their location as a rest centre.
- 8.1.3. On the day of evacuation, a freephone helpline number and dedicated email address was set up. Residents could also register for text message updates.
- 8.1.4. Officers reflected on some key decisions made on the day of evacuation and particularly regretted that single males were not prioritised for hotel accommodation. Officers reported that the evacuation brought an awareness that BCC does not have strong resident data and that basic information about residents of Barton House was not available (e.g., number of occupants in a property, telephone numbers and email addresses). Officers also spoke about losing some key pieces of information (resident contact details) which they attributed to the ‘chaotic’ environment at the time. Some officers spoke about working into the early hours of the next morning.
- 8.1.5. Several members of the housing management team were only informed of the issues with Barton House on the day of evacuation, with some others only finding out when the evacuation was already underway. The lack of involvement of the housing management team meant that their role was responsive rather than proactive.
- 8.1.6. One key opportunity that was missed was obtaining information about who was living in Barton House at the time. This could have been sought around the time that Arup was commissioned to conduct the peer review of the Ridge (2022) Report, September 2023. Further, BCC should have stronger data at a baseline level for all residents as required under RSH consumer standards.
- 8.1.7. Initially residents were housed in three hotels across the city and some stayed with family and friends. We were informed that after the initial placement, vulnerable residents such as families with SEND children and pregnant women were prioritised for serviced accommodation. After the initial placement to three hotels, all residents were placed into one hotel.

8.1.8. At an early stage. BCC did not fully estimate the multiple complexities of the evacuation of many households. This resulted in a responsive approach that required residents to voice their needs rather than a proactive approach where needs were fully considered initially. As a result, negative outcomes were particularly felt across some tenant groups, such as families, families with children with special educational needs, pregnant and post-natal woman and single males. We provide a recommendation on this point in section 8.4.

8.1.9. BCC is currently working to comply with the RSH consumer standards, in response to a May 2024 review carried out by Savills. Our review of Savills' programme shows that there is no specific workstream for resident data.

Recommendation 8: we recommend that BCC starts a process of reviewing the current resident data held for all council tenancies across the city with a view to closing key data gaps, specifically in relation to tenant contact details, household makeup and diverse needs. BCC should consider whether this should be a specific activity that can be monitored through the Housing Data Governance Board.

8.2. The impact of the media to the operational response

8.2.1. Following the decision to evacuate and before BCC had opportunity to speak to all residents about the evacuation, a number of media outlets released stories about the evacuation of Barton House. This included live BBC coverage from 17.46 on the day of evacuation.

8.2.2. Media involvement had a significant operational impact on the ability to carry out a calm and structured evacuation, with residents hearing of the evacuation via media notifications, friends and family, schools and workplaces rather than directly from the operational team who could help with next steps. This resulted in significant distress for residents and placed additional pressure on the operational team to manage press presence at the time of the evacuation.

8.2.3. Officers present at Barton House on the day of the evacuation talked of the need to liaise with the media to ensure that there was space for residents to be able to leave the building. Some told us that journalists attempted to access the building while it was being evacuated. BCC initially provided one communications lead to Barton House on the day of evacuation, further officers were sent when it was identified that the media was present.

8.2.4. Residents said they found the media presence to be stigmatising. Parents in particular expressed distress that images of their children were released by the press.

8.2.5. In response to the learnings from Barton House, the communications team at BCC has since arranged for two communications officers to be present whenever there is a media presence for all BCC activity.

We agree with the renewed approach to send two communications officers whenever there is a media presence.

8.3. Temporary accommodation

- 8.3.1. Initially residents were housed in three hotels across the city. Eventually all residents living in hotel accommodation were housed in one hotel. During the period residents were living in the hotel, BCC held daily calls with the hotel to deal with issues as they arose.
- 8.3.2. From our review of the strategic action log, concerns about the hotel were raised through daily strategic meetings and addressed within around 1-2 working days. BCC introduced a Housing Officer checklist which was used to ensure that the hotel was meeting BCC's expectations.
- 8.3.3. As time progressed and residents raised concerns with BCC, BCC provided additional facilities at the hotel, which included a playroom for children, a prayer room and a study space. Residents raised concerns about the cleanliness of the hotel and BCC arranged for rooms to be cleaned more regularly and for access to cleaning facilities for residents.
- 8.3.4. We have received reports that, during the period when residents were accommodated at the hotel, several people, including children, experienced a vomiting illness. In letters sent to residents in the hotel, guidance was given about accessing health support, including asking residents who were feeling unwell not to mix with other people at the hotel. The hotel provided food to rooms, when needed.
- 8.3.5. As part of hotel accommodation, food was provided. However, residents expressed significant dissatisfaction with the quality of the meals. BCC told us they arranged for a specialist chef in response.
- 8.3.6. To support residents, a taxi service was made available in the first few days after evacuation for essential travel. Eventually residents were issued with bus passes so they could travel from the hotel to schools, work, and to visit friends.
- 8.3.7. Residents were offered suitable rehoming for pets during the period of evacuation. Most residents with pets opted to stay with family and friends.
- 8.3.8. Officers responsible for temporary accommodation reported learnings, including the early introduction of essential facilities such as bottle warmers and study space. Important practical learnings from the evacuation should be recorded so they can be used, if required, in the future.

We provide a recommendation in section 8.4.

8.4. Support services

- 8.4.1. BCC ensured that there was Housing Officer presence at the hotel. Initially this included weekends. Officers spoke about the role of the Housing Officer as a link between support services and residents, and signposting residents to help, as needed. This included access to financial support.
- 8.4.2. Our review of the mental health support offered was that, initially, residents were referred to partners and agencies. BCC improved this in time, and in January and February offered direct support sessions for adults at the hotel. BCC worked with schools to deliver school-led

sessions for children. Offers of direct support and counselling continued after residents returned to the building.

- 8.4.3. A variety of activities was made available to residents of Barton House. Residents were informed of free activities being carried out across the city which were available to them (e.g., sports tickets, cinema and local groups/clubs). These were communicated to residents through the regular letters and on a dedicated Barton House webpage.
- 8.4.4. Local schools provided practical support to children by offering uniform washing services and free school dinners. They also provided wider mental health support through the provision of stronger pastoral care targeted at children from Barton House.
- 8.4.5. As with the learnings about the approach to temporary accommodation, officers reflected on implementing support at an earlier stage and offering more structure to support, if required, in the future.

Recommendation 9: we recommend that BCC work in partnership with residents to further develop scenario-planning to better support the major incident protocol. Scenario-planning should fundamentally ensure that human need is met, reflect cultural considerations and consider the full range of potential health consequences in response to a major incident.

8.5. Communication with residents

- 8.5.1. Drawing on our findings within section 8.2, communications on the night of evacuation could be described as chaotic. Initial communication plans quickly changed as a result of media attention. BCC lost the ability to control communications in a structured and calm manner. All parties involved have described a highly frustrating environment.
- 8.5.2. On the day of evacuation residents were provided with a letter that told them that BCC was evacuating the building immediately in response to a “recent building survey at Barton House [which] has shown us there is a risk of building collapse if there was, for example, a fire, explosion or large impact”. The letter asked for residents to stay with friends and family and advised those who cannot stay with friends and family to go to a local rest centre.
- 8.5.3. Leadership committed to providing twice-daily letters, which was honoured in the first few weeks that residents were out of the building. Eventually letters reduced to once daily and then to around ten letters per month in December – February. Regular twice-daily letters were not initially translated; translations into main community languages started on 23 November 2023. Letters were emailed to residents and hand-delivered to rooms in the hotel.
- 8.5.4. Officers said that twice-daily letters were often challenging to put together due to lengthy sign off processes, trying to obtain new or updated information for letters, and factoring time for language translation. Our review of the letters disclosed that messaging was often repetitive, which could have increased the likelihood of residents’ disengagement.
- 8.5.5. The letters from BCC to residents mainly contained information for those who were living at the hotel. BCC may have improved communications by considering the other resident cohorts: those with family and friends, those in serviced accommodation and those who remained at Barton House.

- 8.5.6. A number of ways to contact BCC was provided to residents including a dedicated email address, freephone number, and in person to Housing Officers at the hotel. Housing Officers were placed in a liaison role, however we have found that the Housing Team was not equipped with information about the technical assessments to the building, therefore messaging about the reason for evacuation was limited adding to the uncertainty for residents.
- 8.5.7. In our review of communications with Barton House residents, we find that it was some time before residents were fully told of the technical problems with the building. That detailed technical information was provided at the first City Hall meeting on 18 December 2023, after the interim updates from Ridge and Arup. The time it took for BCC to fully inform residents of technical assessments has badly affected the relationship between BCC and the residents of Barton House.
- 8.5.8. Following the City Hall meeting on 18 December 2023, residents were provided with more detailed updates about the investigations and works being carried out at Barton House. At the following City Hall meeting structural surveyors and the fire service were also present.
- 8.5.9. Our review of communications shows that during the period of evacuation; communications were mainly housing-management focussed and lacked the volume of technical information about the building we would expect. In discussion some talked of a lack of communication from the housing property division, and we note the lack of a representative of the housing property division within the hub. We also reference our findings in chapter 6 of this report, where we make a recommendation to overcome silo working.
- 8.5.10. Our review has considered the accessibility of communications. For language requirements, as outlined at 8.5.3, written correspondence was translated at a relatively early stage and, on the day of evacuation, community translators were used. Translators attended both City Hall meetings. The approach was proportionate. We find, however, that communications were not adjusted for adults with communication difficulties or for young people.
- 8.5.11. In speaking with BCC officers, most have said that the initial offering of twice-daily letters was onerous and challenging; they recognised that the messaging was often repetitive. Officers also acknowledged that consideration should have been given to how to communicate with adults with communication difficulties and young people during that time.

Recommendation 10: we recommend that BCC review their major incident protocol and associated communication frameworks to ensure that communications and messaging reach all groups, including adults with communication difficulties and young people, for major incidents.

8.6. Conclusions: Operational response and resident support

- 8.6.1. BCC successfully mobilised a formal major-incident response and maintained a clear decision log. This supported the coordination of support and accountability for the period residents were out of Barton House. Media presence took away the ability of BCC to carry out a calm and structured evacuation and led to resident upset.

- 8.6.2. A lack of resident information hindered BCC's ability to offer a proactive response, and the opportunity was missed to gather information about residents at the time of the commission of the Arup report.
- 8.6.3. Resident support improved over time, yet the early provision of support did not fully anticipate the scale and complexity of their needs.
- 8.6.4. It is clear that officers have learned from the evacuation of Barton House on a personal level, however learnings should be recorded to be applied, if required, during future major incidents.

9. Learning and future preparedness

9.1. Bristol City Council

9.1.1. Throughout our review we observed a reflective organisation which has taken steps to improve the approach to landlord services in response to two events: the Barton House evacuation and BCC's engagement with the RSH. Both have resulted in changes to the oversight and governance of the landlord service, including additional senior leadership capacity, and there are plans to further strengthen governance and controls.

9.1.2. The strongest area of learning was from the experiences of residents during the evacuation; the organisation has reflected on these. These learnings are among the most important lessons for BCC, and it is vital they are captured for future incidents.

9.1.3. The relationship between residents of Barton House and BCC is complex and, for some, significantly damaged. BCC should work to recover this relationship with enhanced engagement. We identify two main areas to start rebuilding relationships - the future of the building and developing scenario plans for future incidents.

9.1.4. BCC has clearly reflected on the operating environment at the time. It has considered the problem of silo working and cultural issues which undermined building safety management. Some of these matters have been addressed through staffing changes, yet it is recognised that culture and silo working require continual effort.

9.1.5. The evacuation could have been handled better if BCC had had a better understanding of the residents of Barton House. The importance of this has been recognised. BCC could monitor this at scale through the Housing Consumer Standards Programme.

9.2. Sector-wide implications

9.2.1. This review, sadly, brings out points often referenced in RSH guidance - knowledge of tenants, knowledge of properties, and the management of risk.

9.2.2. Knowledge of tenants is essential for making informed decisions and for understanding the impact of decision-making. In practical and emergency situations, knowing who lives in properties, what their needs are and, at a simple level, their contact details become vitally important. Having this data available to officers as they need it, is a key part of operational delivery. It requires continual effort to update and maintain this information.

9.2.3. For social landlords of over 1,000 units, the RSH currently assesses compliance against the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard, which includes requirements to understand the needs of tenants and for clear, accessible communication.

9.2.4. As knowledge of complex properties has deepened, sector learning has matured. Technical information should be consistently translated into risk management and considered at a building and individual property level. Documenting professional judgement is vital to better understand organisations' interpretation of risks. This also includes risks highlighted by government safety advice and guidance.

- 9.2.5. The BSR has a proactive role in reviewing safety cases at a building level for all high-rise blocks nationally. To support this, the RSH assesses compliance against the Safety and Quality Standard for all social landlords with over 1,000 properties, which includes specific requirements for health and safety.
- 9.2.6. Governance, oversight and risk management of the landlord service is necessary to ensure there is sufficient capacity and challenge so that statutory requirements are met and that, ultimately, tenants are safe. This review brings out what was a lack of capacity at leadership level of the landlord service, and a lack of a clear governance framework for risk management.
- 9.2.7. Governance, oversight and risk management are not assessed at a local authority, landlord-level by statutory bodies (whereas private registered providers are measured against the Governance and Financial Viability Standard). Therefore, this learning is of utmost importance to local authority registered providers. With flexibility in delivery options, local authority registered providers should regularly reflect on their governance, oversight and risk management arrangements to assess whether these are sufficient to meet legal and regulatory standards.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

10.1. Conclusions

- 10.1.1. The decision to evacuate Barton House on 14 November 2023 was made appropriately within the governance arrangements in place at the time, and with the right emphasis on life-safety, even though the full welfare impact on residents was not known at the time.
- 10.1.2. Leadership capacity and assurance arrangements for landlord services were stretched in key parts of our review period. In particular, the absence of a single executive lead for housing contributed to a lack of prioritisation and oversight of emerging landlord-service risks. We strongly support the introduction of the Executive Director, Housing role to BCC's structure.
- 10.1.3. Ways of working within parts of the housing property division were out of step with sector norms, with evidence of silo working, limited governance understanding and insufficiently risk-led practice. The result of this was that the risks identified in the Ridge (2022) Report were not acted upon fully and promptly.
- 10.1.4. For residents, the evacuation had a severe and, for some groups, disproportionate impact on wellbeing, and it caused sustained damage to trust and confidence. This was exacerbated by the time taken to fully communicate technical information.
- 10.1.5. BCC mobilised a major incident response at pace and improved resident support over time. However, preparedness was compromised by gaps in resident data and by communications arrangements that were not fully resilient to the pressures of a high-profile incident.

10.2. Recommendations

We set out our recommendations to BCC in table 5 below:

Table 5: Our recommendations

Recommendation	Our recommended timespan for delivery	Currently in progress y/n
Recommendation 1: we recommend that BCC progresses the Housing Strategy and Assurance Division for the landlord service.	6 months	Y
Recommendation 2: we recommend that BCC implement a formal and transparent process for receiving and responding to advice and guidance issued by government bodies. This process should ensure that all relevant communications are systematically tracked and documented with clear escalation routes and lines of accountability, thereby creating a clear audit trail of the actions taken in response to external advice.	3 months	N

Recommendation 3: we recommend that BCC provide adequate building safety, risk and governance training to all responsible for the commissioning of and response to technical reports.	4 months	N
Recommendation 4: we recommend that BCC put in a plan to overcome silo working between the housing property division and the housing management division.	3 months	N
Recommendation 5: we recommend that BCC conduct a review of the suitability of the Building Safety Board to oversee outcomes from technical reports to inform the planned approach for a Housing Strategy and Assurance Division.	6 months	N
Recommendation 6: we recommend that additional opportunities are provided for residents to be briefed on the most recent technical assessments of Barton House.	3 months	N
Recommendation 7: we recommend that BCC work in partnership with residents of Barton House in relation to the future of the building.	12 months	N
Recommendation 8: we recommend that BCC starts a process of reviewing the current resident data held for all council tenancies across the city with a view to closing key data gaps, specifically in relation to tenant contact details, household makeup and diverse needs. BCC should consider whether this should be a specific activity that can be monitored through the Housing Data Governance Board.	3 months	N
Recommendation 9: we recommend that BCC work in partnership with residents to further develop scenario-planning to better support the major incident protocol. Scenario-planning should fundamentally ensure that human need is met, reflect cultural considerations and consider the full range of potential health consequences in response to a major incident.	5 months	N
Recommendation 10: we recommend that BCC review their major incident protocol and associated communication frameworks to ensure that communications and messaging reach all groups, including adults with communication difficulties and young people, for major incidents.	5 months	N

Appendix 1 Scope and methods

Scope and Methods –Independent Review and Lessons Learned – Barton House Evacuation

Thematic Scope

This review will focus on the following themes:

Scope Theme	Focus Areas
Decision Making and Governance	Timeline of Events: Assess key decision points from September 2017 to July 2025, identifying who knew what and when, how decisions were framed and how complex factors were prioritised. Leadership and Accountability: Review the roles of senior officers, elected members and external consultants in commissioning surveys, interpreting risk and the decisions to evacuate. Consider how decisions were taken, the level of debate and challenge and the use of independent advice. Legal and Procedural Oversight: Consider whether statutory duties were met and whether governance structures were fit for purpose.
Building Safety and Technical Risk	Technical Reports: How were technical reports scoped and then reviewed by the Council and whether recommendations taken on board and implemented. Placement of Technical Advice: Exploring whether the safety team had the capacity, mandate, and clarity to act on the recommendations. Safety and Evacuation Strategy: Evaluate what contingency plans had been made for the eventuality of an evacuation.
Operational Response and Resident Support	Evacuation Execution: Review how the evacuation was planned and implemented. Temporary Accommodation: Investigate the quality, suitability, and management of hotels and other placements.

	Support Services: Assess the availability and effectiveness of psychological, financial, and practical support, including the role of support stakeholders. Communication with Residents: Assess how the Council communicated with residents during the process and whether communication was effective, accessible and transparent.
Resident Experience and Impact	Health: Assess the overall health impact of the evacuation, especially on children. Transparency and Trust: Examine how information was shared with residents before, during, and after the evacuation, including the role of media leaks and Council communications. Discrimination and Fairness: Identify whether there is any evidence of discrimination or unfairness in relation to decisions made around the evacuation and since. Advocacy and Voice: Evaluate the role of resident-led groups in shaping the response and review, and whether their input was respected and acted upon.
Role of Stakeholders	Involvement: consider the involvement of stakeholders since the evacuation Communication: consider the communication between the Council and stakeholder groups
Learning and Future Preparedness	Organisational Learning: Identify what the Council has learned – or failed to learn – from Barton House. Policy and Practice Reform: Consider changes made in response to learnings from the evacuation Sector-wide Implications: Consider whether the findings inform sector-wide recommendations Future Plans: Assess what steps the Council has made – or needs to make - to make future plans for the building.

Out of Scope

This review will not:

Out of scope area	Rationale
Make detailed recommendations in relation to the future of the building.	This would require a different type of review, considering other factors.
Independently assess structural integrity or fire safety.	This would require a specific technical review, of which is published by the Council on their website
Make judgments on the current safety of Barton House.	This would require a specific technical review, of which is published by the Council on their website
Replace or duplicate the role of statutory regulators.	Our role is not to 'act' as statutory regulators.

Methodology

We have identified the following methods to deliver this review:

Method	Purpose	Sources
Data and Document Review	Establish a factual timeline, identify decision-making processes, and assess compliance with statutory duties. Understand resident experience through communications and complaints.	Council reports, emails, and committee minutes. Structural and fire safety assessments. Policies and procedures. Resident communications and complaints. Media coverage and press releases.

Resident Engagement	To understand the experience of residents (including children) and validate findings from the document review	Resident questionnaire Individual interviews (online and in person) Telephone interviews Focus groups (online and in person) Parents' focus group Representatives (stakeholder) focus group
Experts' Roundtable	To agree a consensus on the response to technical information provided.	Consultation with independent experts Identify good practice examples for similar cases
Stakeholder Interviews	To understand the relationship between the Council and stakeholders, gain professional insights and organisational perspectives	One-to-one interviews for sensitive topics Group sessions for shared experiences Review of documentation provided by stakeholders
Thematic Analysis	To identify patterns across stakeholder groups and evidence sources	Analysis will be as per the six areas of scope.
Reporting	To communicate the findings of the review to a range of audiences including: Current and past residents of Barton House (where possible to do so) Political Leadership Bristol City Council Officers Stakeholder Groups	n/a

	Other audiences to the report may include the wider social housing sector and tall building owners, the Regulator of Social Housing and the Building Safety Regulator.	
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Resident Engagement

We have developed an engagement strategy for this review which you can request if you'd like to see it. Note: the engagement strategy has been provided as a paper copy to recent and current residents of Barton House.

Safeguarding and Ethics

We will follow our research ethics policy, which you can request if you'd like to see it. This policy is based on best practice from the Government Social Research team and the Social Research Association.

The key principles are:

- Data collected for review purposes will only be used for this review.
- Participation will be ethical and voluntary
- We protect confidentiality and anonymity
- We aim to avoid harm
- We use inclusive practices

Ethical participation means people give informed consent, can withdraw at any time, and we take steps to reduce risks such as power imbalances or harm. Data collected will only be used for this review and kept for a limited time. Before agreeing to take part, participants will be told about confidentiality, anonymity, and any possible impacts.

We will follow our safeguarding policy, which you can request if you'd like to see it.

Appendix 2 Resident engagement strategy

Independent Review and Lessons Learned – Barton House Evacuation: Draft Resident Engagement Strategy

Purpose

This Strategy outlines the approach that Altair will have to delivering the independent review and lessons learned in respect of Barton House. This is to ensure that the review is informed by the voices of those most affected, and that engagement is inclusive, transparent, and meaningful.

Our Engagement Principles

- **Trust-building:** Foster transparency, honesty, and two-way communication.
- **Resident-focussed:** Prioritise the voices of those most impacted by the evacuation.
- **Inclusivity:** Ensure all groups, including ‘silent voices’, are heard through a range of diverse methods.
- **Balance:** No single voice dominates; all perspectives are valued.
- **Empowerment:** Residents see evidence that their input shapes the review.
- **Flexibility:** Adapt methods to meet participant needs and preferences.
- **Supportive:** Engagement is trauma-informed and sensitive to participant wellbeing.
- **Outcome centric:** Ensuring that residents see evidence that their input shapes the review and lessons learned.

Who We Will Engage

- Current residents of Barton House (and those who were resident at the time of evacuation)
- Elected members (and former elected members)
- Bristol City Council staff (including former staff)
- Community stakeholders and advocacy groups

How We Will Engage

- Focus group sessions (online and in person)
- Interviews (online, by telephone and in person)
- Questionnaire (digital and paper-base)

- Stakeholder focus group sessions
- Through regular updates to those most impacted

Appendix 3 Graphical timeline



