

Barton House Evacuation: Independent Review and Lessons Learned

The purpose and scope of the review

Bristol City Council (the Council) commissioned Altair Consultancy and Advisory Services Ltd to independently review the Barton House evacuation. The full review can be read here: www.bristol.gov.uk/barton-house. This is a summary of the findings.

The review examined the evacuation of Barton House on 14 November 2023, and lessons learned for governance, building safety, resident impact, operational response, and future preparedness.

Findings

Theme	Our findings
Decision to evacuate	- The evacuation decision was appropriate and justified. The Council put the safety of residents first in response to escalating risk, identified by independent advisors. - However, the social and welfare impacts on residents were not fully understood at the time.
Governance and leadership	- Leadership capacity was stretched and inconsistent. There was not a specific executive leader for housing during key periods. - Weak processes meant essential technical reports (2019-2022) were not shared widely or acted upon. - The role of the Building Safety Board within the Council was unclear. There were differing views on what the role of the Board was in relation to providing assurance about the safety of homes.
Building safety and technical risk	- The Council had identified technical risks to the building during 2019-2022. The risks included potential structural and fire safety concerns. - The Council failed to turn technical findings into risk management actions. - There was no documented risk assessment or mitigation plan. - The focus shifted prematurely to redevelopment options, rather than the immediate safety risk.
Resident experience and impact	- The evacuation caused severe disruption and long-lasting harm, especially to the mental health of residents. - Many residents heard about the need to evacuate from the media or by word of mouth, not directly from the Council. - Residents experienced: - Confusion and distress - Health problems and disrupted family life, particularly for vulnerable groups - Trust in the Council remains significantly damaged, partly due to delayed and unclear communication about the decision to evacuate.
Operational response and resident support	- The Council mobilised a major incident response quickly, with coordination structures and support in place. - However: - Information about residents was poor, limiting support - The initial response was reactive rather than planned - Media leaks undermined the ability to make a controlled evacuation - Support improved, but the Council did not initially realise the scale and complexity of need.

How Bristol City Council has responded since	• The Council has since made improvements, including: ◦ Increased leadership capacity ◦ Plans for a Housing Strategy & Assurance Division • However: ◦ Lessons from resident experience are not yet fully embedded ◦ Governance, risk management, and data quality still require improvement.
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Conclusions

Key conclusions	• The evacuation was right on safety grounds, but weaknesses in how it was carried out led to avoidable harm. • There was: ◦ Insufficient leadership oversight ◦ Poor understanding of risk from technical evidence ◦ Lack of co-ordinated working and weak governance ◦ Inadequate preparedness for the effect on residents.
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Summary of recommendations

Theme	Summary of recommendations made
Decision-making and governance	• As planned, establish the Housing Strategy & Assurance Division • Improve processes for acting on government advice
Building safety and technical risk	• Train staff in risk, safety and governance • Improve how property and housing teams work together • Review the Building Safety Board
Resident experience and impact	• Work with residents on the future of the building • Provide residents with more opportunities to be briefed on the most recent technical assessments of the building
Operational response and resident support	• Strengthen resident data • Strengthen major incident planning and scenario-testing with residents • Improve communication frameworks for major incidents