



Date March 2025

Dear resident,

Response to the report produced by ACORN, Medact and residents of Barton House

Firstly, I would like to thank Medact Bristol for the work they have undertaken with Barton House residents and ACORN to produce this report and take a deeper look at the issues raised.

The council takes its duty of care to residents very seriously, and we endeavour to continue to support the residents of Barton House. Our priority remains to ensure that the health and wellbeing of all residents living in council housing is supported and that their homes are safe and well maintained.

It is important to state that the council would not have moved residents back into Barton House if the flats were unsafe. Several safety measures - including a centralised fire alarm system and fireproofing of the building's steel frame - were put in place before residents were allowed to return. The recommendations made in the survey reports were followed, completed, and approved, by Avon Fire and Rescue Service prior to residents moving back into Barton House.

I have taken time to consider and reflect on the conclusions and recommendations of the report and would like to outline our responses and the actions we are planning to take moving forward.

1. Rehousing for those families who do not feel safe living in Barton House

I have advocated for the residents' campaign for re-housing, and I understand the frustrations from residents waiting to be re-housed, but Bristol remains in the grip of a housing crisis, and we currently have over 22,000 households on the housing waiting list. I want Barton House residents' experiences to inform their housing priority, but we need to make sure the system is fair to everyone in the city who is in housing need. That is why we have committed to reviewing the current Home Choice system.

We will look at how we prioritise households who need to move due to the impact of unforeseen circumstances, and how we consider the additional needs of residents who have had to leave their home for a period of time because of an emergency. Any proposed changes will be subject to consultation, which we aim to launch at the end of May, so we can ensure that people who will be affected by the changes have an opportunity to input. This will be a citywide consultation as these circumstances may also apply elsewhere in the city, so we need to make sure all residents are being treated equally and fairly, and we will be inviting all council housing tenants to have their say.

We are offering in-person meetings with Barton House residents who are currently on the housing register to discuss their application. We have also contacted residents to offer personal fire risk assessments to those who are eligible. This includes people who live in

high rise blocks and may be at greater risk due to one of a number of vulnerabilities including age, disability and health conditions. The risk assessment will consider any factors that might lead to an increased risk, in the event of a fire, the ability of the resident to respond to a fire alarm or signs of fire, or to escape in the event of fire. We previously carried out some assessments in October last year, but we want to make sure that everyone who needs some additional support, has a customised safety plan in place.

2. A public apology to residents of Barton House.

I would like to say sorry to everyone for the impact of the evacuation and the following months spent in hotels and temporary accommodation while the council worked to fix problems at Barton House. I issued a public apology at the recent meeting with Barton House residents when we were presented with this report, and our housing leaders have previously issued other public apologies to residents, including when residents were staying in hotels and other temporary accommodation. We understand that a good home is fundamental to living a happy, healthy and prosperous life and everyone should feel safe and secure under their own roof. We are sorry that some people living in Barton House do not currently feel this is the case. I am sorry that the evacuation and the impact of this situation that followed has been traumatic for many residents. Throughout this whole process the council has done its best to support the residents of Barton House, and it is certainly the case that we have learnt valuable lessons on how to handle similar challenging situations in the future.

3. Compensation to all residents

This was a unique situation, and while we accept that some things could have gone better, the council put the safety of residents first at all times and continue to do so. We will not be offering a blanket compensation payment because all associated evacuation costs were covered at the time, to ensure that no resident suffered financially as a result of having to leave their home. This included accommodation, food, transport to and from Barton House, bus passes to help children get to school and a laundry service for those staying in a hotel. Housing officers were on hand to answer questions and help people access further support. People who chose to stay with family and friends also received a support payment. However, if people are able to provide evidence of additional costs incurred as a direct result of the evacuation and temporary relocation, we will consider each case on an individual basis.

Whilst we acknowledge the unintended impact the evacuation may well have had on some residents and their health – the actions taken at the time were deemed necessary for residents' safety. Every effort was taken at the time to provide support to residents, including culturally intelligent advice along with guidance from local organisations including Nilaari, The Barton Hill Settlement, and Somali Resource Centre.

4. An independent investigation

It's clear that we need to look at the circumstances that led to the evacuation of Barton House, as well as the actions and experiences of that day and the subsequent weeks. We will employ an independent organisation to undertake a review into what led to the evacuation and to add to what we've already learned from this difficult period. The organisation chosen to carry out the review will work with the council, impacted residents and other stakeholders to design how the review should look. Following these discussions, we want the review to get underway towards the end of the summer, and once the report is complete, we will share the results with residents. We have already learnt lessons from the evacuation process and are continuing to improve our housing services and how we communicate with residents.

Last April the council self-referred to the Regulator of Social Housing and was told that significant improvements needed to be made to our social housing.

We have developed a dedicated improvement plan to address these issues and over the

past 12 months, a significant amount of effort has been put into responding to areas of concern across our current council homes.

Fire and building safety works have required immediate and continued multi-year investment to provide waking watches, install alarms and sprinklers, and accelerate the removal of expanded polystyrene cladding from dozens of our high-rise blocks. We are committed to prioritising building safety works across our entire housing estate where actions are identified.

More recently, a huge effort has been made to get to grips with areas of maintenance across the estate that we have fallen behind on.

We are also continuing to work closely with partners across the city to improve standards of housing.

Across the city, working with health partners, we have made tackling damp and mould a priority. In Barton House we have contacted all residents who have reported issues with damp and mould, and we are working to inspect and treat the issues. We have asked all residents at Barton House to contact us if they have any problems with damp and mould and have issued advice leaflets to all homes. We are also looking at the possibility of a programme to improve ventilation in the block.

We are aware that there was an increase in lift breakdowns in Barton House and this is partly because of the presence of workers on site leaving dirt in the tracks, but also due to heavy use during the evacuation works. Back in December the housing team asked a lift engineer from Stannah to spend two days onsite inspecting the lifts, looking at the reasons for the increase in these issues, and since then reliability has improved and we have had no repair calls.

The safety and wellbeing of residents is our number one priority, and we are committed to improving standards in all our homes across the city. Again, I would like to take this opportunity to apologise to the residents of Barton House for the distress caused by having to leave their homes and the doubt and uncertainty they faced in the following weeks. Our door remains open to continue this conversation, and we will be looking to further involve residents in our re-housing consultations.

If you wish to receive this letter in another language, please email estates@bristol.gov.uk or bartonhouse@bristol.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Barry Parsons

Chair of Homes & Housing Delivery Policy Committee