

ARK Consultancy Investigation Immediate Actions

Progress as of January 2022

After the conditions at Regina Road came to light, the Council commissioned an independent investigation by ARK Consultancy. This review made a number of far reaching recommendations which form the basis of the Council's Housing Improvement Plan. However, their report also contained a number of actions to be addressed "immediately".

The Board has asked for some information on the Council's work to date to address these immediate actions.

Recommendations

1. *Resourcing of the Council's Compliance function which oversees the delivery of the Council's health and safety activities within the housing service, including fire safety and gas servicing, is inadequate. Currently only one of three posts is filled. This issue requires an immediate response.*

- A Compliance Manager was recruited in August 2021, and interim arrangements are in place until the recruitment to the Senior Fire Safety Compliance Surveyor post.
- The Council aims to recruit permanently to this post before March 2021. Additional growth of £0.5m to increase the capacity of the Compliance team and address the additional responsibilities of the Council following the introduction of the Fire Safety Act and Building Safety Bill has been built into the draft HRA budget for 2022/2023.

2. *ARK identified other problems in the block, such as a leaking roof, which is causing damp and mould problems to flats in the upper storeys. Once again these appear to be treated as 'one-off' repairs. ARK understand some of these are now being progressed as disrepair claims against the Council. The growing number of disrepair cases represents a significant further risk to the Council. This issue requires an immediate response.*

This is closely related to a Recommendation 10:

10. *Over half of the homes in Regina Road have been surveyed to varying degrees. These surveys identified issues relating to damp, mould and condensation. Indeed, the Council planned to investigate the installation of a mechanical ventilation system into flats before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. ARK understands that the Regina Road roof was programmed to be replaced some time ago. However, in 2018/19 as part of the Council's installation of a sprinkler system the roof was considered 'fit for purpose'. Leaks into flats on the upper floors of 1-87 are now common, with patch repairs having limited effect. This issue requires an immediate response.*

- The worst affected flats at Regina Road have now been decanted and a number of other flats have decants in progress.

JANUARY LBC HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD MEETING 2022

- Since November 2021, a dedicated Council repairs inspector has knocked on every door across the three blocks to gain access, and identify if there are any outstanding repairs.
 - Through these inspections, the Council has raised jobs for immediate responsive remedial work, including mould treatment to prevent reoccurrence.
 - Mould sampling has begun this year to clearly identify which proportion of properties have mould issues, and later this month, water-sampling will be carried out to assess the drinking and bathing water supplies, as requested by residents.
 - Between July and December 2021, the Council commissioned Ridge & Partners to conduct detailed surveys across the three blocks to inform future investment priorities in those homes, including the Council's investment plans regarding the roof of 1-87 Regina Road.
3. *ARK identified an outmoded culture and attitude among a number of Council staff towards tenants. Tenants were often seen as demanding, difficult to deal with and less worthy of respect. Some Council staff lack empathy with tenants, failing to put themselves 'in their shoes' when dealing with problems. These attitudes appear to be going unchallenged. This issue requires an immediate response.*

This is closely related to a Recommendation 5:

5. *ARK did not find clear evidence of discrimination on race grounds as part of this investigation. Instead, there appears to be a wider issue, with all tenants being stigmatised and seen as less worthy of respect. However, ARK has some concerns about allocations, tenants understanding of their tenancy status and overcrowding within the block that should be explored further. This issue requires an immediate response.*
- Following the publication of the ARK Consultancy Independent Investigation in May 2021, both the chief executive and the Leader reminded all staff of the need to treat tenants with respect and empathy, as a precursor to the broader culture change programme.
 - Both the previous and current corporate directors have reinforced these messages through communications with housing staff.
 - The Resident Involvement team held 27 engagement events between July and October 2021 for residents in estates across the borough which captured satisfaction levels by protected characteristic.
 - In September 2021, a Tenant & Leaseholder workshop was held to better understand the changes our residents wish to see in staff attitudes.
 - Work has begun to carry out a forward-looking skills gap analysis to identify any skills gaps in the Council's housing workforce, and rollout a learning and development programme offer.

JANUARY LBC HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD MEETING 2022

- The Council is establishing specific Learning & Development Interventions to strengthen the capacity and competence of staff to ensure meaningful and resident involvement.
- From January 2022, staff will be supported to better understand the Staff Code of Conduct, and Equality in Employment Policy.
- Work will begin from January 2022 with the Council's contractors to ensure that contractor operatives consistently deliver a tenant-focused service.

4. *ARK is also concerned that at some points disruptive work may have compromised fire safety measures in the block. ARK is concerned that the door to Flat B does not meet the required safety standard. Importantly, ARK has also asked for confirmation that works identified in a Fire Risk Assessment undertaken in October 2020 have been completed in line with recommended timescales.*

- Interim arrangements are in place until the recruitment to the Senior Fire Safety Compliance Surveyor post. The Council aims to recruit to this post before March 2021.
- The detailed surveys conducted by Ridge & Partners of the three Regina Road blocks included an investigation into fire safety requirements. Ridge & Partners found that across the three blocks the risk of uncontrolled fire requires investigation, but not immediate action nor an improvement programme.
- Subsequently, a programme of capital works has commenced on site, including fire safety.
- Axis, the Council's contractor, has been instructed to replace any doors that were identified in the latest Fire Risk Assessment.
- In November 2021, survey work commenced to begin the installation of smoke and heat detectors to accompany the existing sprinkler system.
- Beginning in January 2022, Axis Fire is conducting the fire safety checks recommended, including checks of electrical cupboards and communal stairwells.
- The Council are commissioning an independent consultant to assist in the development of a compliance roadmap. The Council will then commission independent auditors to provide verification and assurance of performance data, the results of which will be available in April 2023.

6. *Tenants' experience shows that the Council lacks a simple, effective, clear and accessible route for getting concerns and complaints resolved. This issue requires an immediate response.*

- In September 2021, the Council began to review the existing complaints process to map all complaints routes for stage one complaints, and MP/councillor enquiries.

JANUARY LBC HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD MEETING 2022

- Streamlining of the complaints process will take place before April 2022.
- Work has also been undertaken to review the tenant and leaseholder webpage for ease of access and clarity.
- Alongside the review of the complaints process, the Council has begun an analysis of complaints, and will use the insight gained to drive service improvement.

7. *The Council is not visible or seen as open and accessible to tenants. Tenants lack awareness of who they should report failures in the day-to-day service or non-repair issues to. They are often unaware of who their tenancy officer is. This issue requires an immediate response.*

- The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Homes and the Executive Director of Place held online meetings with tenants and leaseholders from Regina Road on May 4th and 20th 2021 to address the ITV news coverage and reassure residents.
- The Resident Involvement team held 27 engagement events between July and October 2021 for residents in estates across the borough, particularly those with high-rise blocks.
- Council officers from the Resident Involvement and Tenancy teams are at the Regina Road site Monday to Friday to allow residents to drop into the office and ask questions regarding ongoing repairs works, and tenancy issues.
- The Council has set up a Regina Road Residents Group to listen to the concerns of tenants, identify their priorities, and to ensure their input into forthcoming work.
- The Council is in the process of developing a Communication and Engagement Plan to ensure that all stakeholders are updated on the progress of the Housing Improvement Plan.
- The Council has also begun the process of ensuring we meet all future legislative and regulative requirements in relation to resident engagement (The Charter for Social Housing Residents: social housing white paper).

8. *The Council does not appear to have a 'mature' partnership relationship with its main contractor. Relationships appear to operate on a client/contractor basis with a focus on monitoring performance indicators rather than actively managing performance. ARK would expect discussions to be forward-looking, seeking to identify trends and working together to resolve operational problems and drive continuous improvement. This issue requires an immediate response.*

- Our main contractor, Axis, is available on-site on Wednesdays 17:00-19:00 to answer questions from residents regarding ongoing repair works.
- The Council has begun to re-establish core and contract management meetings with Axis, and is establishing a Contracts Hub to oversee the management of all main contracts.

JANUARY LBC HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD MEETING 2022

- In September 2021, the Council began to develop a responsive repairs improvement plan to address Axis' performance and the specific issues raised in the ARK Consultancy Independent Investigation report.
9. *The Council is not using its data and intelligence to identify and learn from problems or to underpin its decision-making. Intelligence and data exists in 'silos' and does not appear to be drawn together to provide a holistic view of asset performance. ARK is unclear to what extent the Council uses its intelligence to inform strategic decision making or budget-setting. This issue requires an immediate response.*
- In May 2021, the Housing directorate established a suite of key performance indicators for reporting internally to the Corporate Management Team and to Cabinet.
 - By January 2022, the Council had proactively surveyed all 26 council-owned tower blocks to develop clear investment plans for the future.
 - The Council is in the process of auditing the accuracy of all key data on stock condition, and developing 'business intelligence' systems to collect and share real-time information on asset condition and performance.
11. *ARK repeatedly heard concerns that the Council is not investing sufficiently in planned improvement to ensure its homes are sustainable over the longer-term- in demand, reflecting tenants' needs and providing good value for money. The high level of responsive repairs suggests the need to proactively invest in homes. Also based on what Council staff have said ARK recommended the Council assure themselves that all key data covering stock condition (Decent Homes Standard) and landlord health and safety responsibilities is accurate. This issue requires an immediate response.*
- Between July and December 2021, the Council commissioned Ridge & Partners to conduct detailed surveys across an initial five blocks, including the Regina Road blocks, in line with the Decent Homes Standard.
 - The findings from the surveys will inform future investment priorities in those homes. To address the lack of stock condition data, the Council will be conducting a stock condition survey of 20% of all Council stock each year.
 - A refreshed 30-year HRA Business Plan will be submitted to Cabinet in March 2022. By May 2022, the Council will have established a team focused on improving investment planning for council housing stock.
 - Additional growth of £0.5m to increase the capacity of the Compliance team and address the additional responsibilities of the Council following the introduction of the Fire Safety Act and Building Safety Bill has been built into the draft HRA budget for 2022/2023.

JANUARY LBC HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD MEETING 2022