

Ten Tower Blocks Consultation

Supporting Information for Tenants and Leaseholders

Introduction

Stoke-on-Trent City Council's recently updated "HRA Asset Management Strategy 2022-2027" identified ten tower blocks for which it has carried out an option appraisal and is now considering and preparing how best to respond to the issues identified in order to address the quality and sustainability of the blocks.

These blocks are: Arthur Cotton Court and Port Vale Court in Burslem; Boundary Court, Brookfield Court and Forest Court in Hanley; Dibden Court, Penkhull Court and Southern Court in Stoke; and Pedley Court and Robinson Court in Blurton.

The blocks were built in 1972 and are all similar in design and layout. Over the past 50 years, the blocks have aged and deteriorated despite the council delivering investment to meet the decent homes standard and carrying out various lifecycle replacements, such as those relating to fire safety standards and passenger lift replacement. Despite this, the condition of the blocks is getting worse, due mainly to water getting into the building around the roof area and upper floors.

In response, an external, specialist technical report was commissioned by the council in 2020. This considered an earlier stock condition report, other technical information and cost data, to inform suggestions for works that would improve the sustainability and condition of the ten blocks for current and future residents. The council's proposals are based on the findings from that report.

Assessment findings - Condition of the Tower Blocks

The technical surveys carried out as part of the options appraisal, found a number of problems affecting the tower blocks.

One of the main problems is rainwater that is now getting into the buildings, through the cavity wall, into the flats and in some cases the lift shafts. As a result, the cavity wall insulation is becoming wet, which means it will no longer insulate the flats from heat and cold and will increasingly lead to issues of damp and mould in people's homes.

There are additional common problems for all blocks in the areas of stairwells, basements, lift shafts and masonry. Plus, each tower block also has its own unique issues due to its location and design, added to which the energy performance in the blocks is less than the average for all our social housing, with heating mainly provided through electric storage heaters.

The council is considering what can be done about the poor condition of these tower blocks over the longer term, as simply making ongoing repairs will not solve the problems identified. The council must make sure that all properties meet new standards in the future. The ten blocks will become more challenging and uneconomical to repair in the future and so it is important that a long-term solution is found as soon as possible.

Options for the Tower Blocks

By assessing the technical information, stock condition reports and cost data, ten possible options were identified. These options ranged from “do nothing”, to complete “redevelopment” which requires demolition and building the same number new homes as replacement for all those that would be lost through demolition.

Seven of the ten options range from do nothing to repair and refurbishment options which include:

1. Do nothing – carry out no repair works to the blocks.
2. Minimal repairs - carry out repairs considered to be necessary.
3. A basic living standard - carry out the works in the minimum standard, plus the communal areas and entrances requirements.
4. An improved standard – involves works listed in 1 and 2 plus new windows and an internal makeover to all rented flats (improving the layout of kitchens, bathrooms and electrics).
5. An energy standard – includes all works identified at point 4 and also external wall insulation. This may create its own condensation and damp/mould growth within the flats.
6. Alternative energy standard – the works would be similar to point 5 but drop the internal works introduced at point 4 and replace with ongoing Decent Home upgrades.
7. Fit for the future – all the works included at point 5 and additional measures to reduce the carbon footprint e.g. enhanced insulation, triple glazing etc.

However, none of the above options address all of the issues with the blocks, all are expensive and disruptive to residents and none of them provide a long-term resolution. Even if the council does these works to the highest standard there is no guarantee that it will solve all the problems.

The remaining three options (set out below), involve a mixture of refurbishment and redevelopment, each of these would solve the problems with the tower blocks, provide high quality homes that support local residents in housing need. The estimated costs for these three options range from £41m to £78m. Each of these options would require existing residents to move out to alternative suitable accommodation to enable the required works to be undertaken. The council is at an early stage in considering its options. The design of the replacement provision would be part of the next stage of this programme, if it moves forward following consultation. The attached questionnaire is seeking residents’ views on three possible options:

- Option A – This redevelopment option would mean the tower blocks on each site, in turn, being progressively emptied and demolished and then the building of new homes on each of the four sites. This option would potentially not replace the exact number of properties lost through demolition (to be determined through detailed design works), but it is considered best value,

with the cost being met by the Housing Revenue Account, estimated to be £54m, together with the opportunity to apply for any additional external funding. This is currently the preferred option.

- Option B – The same as option A, but includes an additional site to replace the total number of homes that would be lost by demolishing all ten blocks. This is the most expensive option, as it would require extra land to build more homes. The cost of this would be met by the Housing Revenue Account, estimated to be £78m, together with the opportunity to apply for any additional external funding.
- Option C – Full refurbishment of six blocks at Hanley and Stoke and demolition and rebuild at the Burslem and Blurton sites. This option is an expensive option with a large amount of funds allocated to refurbishing six blocks that may not resolve all the issues or provide a long-term resolution, and would potentially require these blocks to be redeveloped over time. The cost of this would be met by the Housing Revenue Account, estimated to be £41m to £44.5m, together with the opportunity to apply for any additional external funding.

The main benefits from these options, include:

- Improve the living conditions for residents – Options A, B and C.
- The new build design would meet the current and future needs of residents – Options A and B.
- New homes are more energy efficient so residents would benefit from reduced energy bills – Options A and B.
- Improved the quality of homes and the residential environment across the city – Options A and B.

Any option that includes new builds will be in line with planning policy and residents will be consulted in developing detailed plans.

No decision on the future of the tower blocks has yet been made.

Considering the order of the sites

If any of the options are approved, the delivery will be a large-scale project that might take approximately 15-20 years to complete and is likely to be carried out one site at a time. It is not known yet which site would be redeveloped or refurbished first.

In order to understand which site the council may start with, we have identified what factors we think should be considered in establishing a priority order. These seven factors and a brief explanation are listed below:

1. Condition of the blocks – the condition and likely cost of future repairs.
2. Void issues – how many empty flats are in the blocks and how long do they take to be let to new tenants.

3. Adjacent redevelopment sites – the availability of land in the local area that could be used to provide new homes for residents.
4. Problematic site conditions – any issues with the tower block sites that might delay new, replacement homes being built on them.
5. Suitable stock for decant – availability of existing council homes in the local area that tenants could move into.
6. Project affordability – making sure the project can be funded (e.g. through the HRA or other external funding bids).
7. Risk of additional costs or delays in delivering the project – the overall size of the project on each site.

These factors will be scored using a technical assessment to produce an order in which the sites will be delivered.

The attached questionnaire also seeks residents' views on the seven factors set out above and in particular whether residents think these are the right factors to consider, whether they are fully inclusive of all the likely impacts, or if there are more to be considered.

What we need to do

Before the council makes any decisions, it wants to hear your views on what it has already done and what is proposed, through an 8-week consultation. As part of this consultation you are invited to a drop-in event on Wednesday 7th September between 4pm and 7pm at the Kings Hall. The drop-in event will be an opportunity to hear more about the tower block project, have your questions answered and to make your views heard through completing the questionnaire.

The council is interested in hearing your views on:

- Have you understood all of the information that we have provided to you to explain the tower block project.
- The approach the council is taking, in using the tower block survey reports to consider its options.
- The preferred option to demolish the tower blocks and build new homes on the sites (Option A).
- The information the council proposes to use to determine the order of sites if the project does go ahead.
- The council's suggestion that, if we do proceed, we redevelop each site in turn over the next 15-20 years.
- Your experience of living in tower block accommodation or any other comments that you might have.

Have your say

Along with the information contained here, we are also providing answers to frequently asked questions, which provides more information and may answer some questions you have.

You can also get more information:

- Via our website: www.stoke.gov.uk/towerblocksconsultation
- By email if there is anything else you would like to know and we will get back to you as soon as possible: towerblocks@stoke.gov.uk
- At our open drop-in event between 4pm and 7pm on Wednesday 7 September 2022 at Kings Hall, where you can speak to council staff in person – we would love you to attend.

Please give us your views about this consultation via our online questionnaire using the QR code below or by visiting the above webpage.

Please use your smart phone to scan the QR Code to complete the Tower Block Consultation Questionnaire:

