

## TEN TOWER BLOCKS CONSULTATION – DROP-IN EVENT 7<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2022

### **DRAFT STATEMENT FOR COUNCILLOR EDWARDS**

Thank you to all residents who attended the consultation event, and to those who have already given feedback, for the consideration of the future of ten tower blocks across the city. The blocks were built around 50-years ago and unfortunately, they are now presenting some significant challenges mainly related to their age and the design of the building.

It is very important to the council that we consult on things that impact on our residents so we can make the right decisions for you. You may recall that the council consulted with residents and communities on the draft Housing Revenue Account HRA Asset Management Strategy last November, and that consultation mentioned these ten tower blocks: Arthur Cotton and Port Vale Courts in Burslem; Boundary, Brookfield and Forest Courts in Hanley; Dibden, Penkhull and Southern Courts in Stoke and Pedley and Robinson Courts in Blurton.

Some of you may have been involved and responded to that HRA Asset Management Strategy consultation or be aware of it from an article published in the Sentinel last November that mentioned these ten tower blocks. They were identified as a priority for the council to consider in more detail.

The reason that these ten blocks were identified, and not any other blocks across the city, is that they are amongst the council's worst performing properties in terms of being high cost. Now that the HRA Asset Management Strategy is in place – it was agreed by Cabinet in January, this year – the council has been able to fully consider all of the technical information on the tower blocks, and identify possible options for them, which we have summarised in the information we have sent to all residents of the ten tower blocks on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2022.

As this part of the consultation, I would like to explain:

1. Why the council is talking to you about the future of these ten blocks and the importance of this project.
2. What the next steps are, and
3. The potential this project has for all of you and the City

Before I cover those points, however, I need to say that I understand that this consultation may be unsettling for residents, including both tenants and leaseholders, of the ten blocks. We've already heard from some of you through submitting your online questionnaires, and are getting a sense of the different opinions and views you are expressing around the options the council has suggested. That is why this consultation is so important, because not only will your views form part of the outcome, but also because we want to hear about any concerns you have, anything you are anxious about, so that the council can do everything it can to help.

Let me explain what the council has been working on leading up to this consultation. As part of our approach to managing and maintaining the council's housing stock, working alongside our repairs and maintenance company, Unitas, we carry out an assessment to measure how well each of our council homes are performing. This assessment found that the ten tower blocks we are talking about today were some of the worst performing properties in terms of being expensive and challenging to maintain. For this reason, the council commissioned specialist surveys in order to investigate. These surveys found lots of issues with the blocks – as outlined in the information that has been sent to you. Most important amongst the problems is the fact that water is getting into the blocks and causing damage – this is penetrating through the roofs and through the cavity walls and it's getting worse, as some of you have commented on the feedback we've received so far.

Unfortunately, simply repairing, or even replacing, the roofs is not straightforward. The council/Unitas has repaired the roofs before and those repairs did not work – water continued to get into the buildings, and this is partly due to the complex design of the roof and its surround. The council has also considered completely replacing the roofs but this would be very disruptive for residents, it would also be very expensive and - importantly – unfortunately, it cannot be guaranteed to solve the problem.

The water getting into the buildings is also having an effect on the insulation in the walls and preventing it from doing its job properly – so it's no longer insulating as it should and this situation is getting worse. You may have noticed your home being very hot on those hot summer days, and it will certainly be very cold in the winter, and this is something else we really need to sort out – particularly since energy bills are getting more expensive. A solution for this could be that we put cladding around the outside of the building, however, the council has been told by our experts that this may cause other problems, such as condensation in the flats.

It really is a very difficult and complicated situation that the council is facing with the condition of the tower blocks. That is why we instructed specialist technical advice to come up with ideas on what we could do to fix the identified problems. The consultant's report forms the basis of this consultation from the ten possible options they suggested. The first seven of these options are to repair the blocks, however, for the reasons I've mentioned, these only offer short-term fixes and do not address the big problems in the long-term. The other three options, as you will have seen in the information, are to demolish the blocks and build new homes in their place, although one option includes the refurbishment of blocks on two sites. It is these options that the council want to hear your views on, and how you would like to see them taken forward.

Right now, we are just over five-weeks into this eight-week consultation period and so you have just under three-weeks remaining to complete your questionnaire if you have not already done so.

Part of the reason for holding the consultation event is so those council officers present can assist you in completing your questionnaires if that would be helpful for you. Also, they can answer any queries you have, in as much as we have answers yet in view of this project being at such an early stage.

On that point – the council has had a few questionnaires back already asking what might be built on the sites if the tower blocks are demolished. We cannot answer that question yet because we simply don't know. The council needs to get your views first, from this consultation, before we can get to that stage. And if the project does go ahead then, at the next stage and on the first proposed site, the council will consult with the residents who live in the blocks on that first site so that those residents can help inform any re-provision of homes.

The council has also had a few leaseholders asking if the council is interested in purchasing their properties now. First of all, can I say that, yes, the council is of course listening to what leaseholders are saying too. However, until the council has evaluated what comes out of this consultation and knows what the future direction is for the blocks, it cannot commit quite yet to buying back properties in the blocks.

The consultation the council is undertaking ends at midnight on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> September. Please make sure you complete a questionnaire and get it back to us before then. Once this consultation has closed the council will:

- Collect all of your feedback and analyse your views and produce a 'Consultation Report' of the findings.
- Consider everything that residents have told us to influence the council's approach.
- Carry out a technical assessment using the seven factors, plus anything else that comes up from the consultation to be considered.
- Produce a proposed order for the four sites to be considered
- Present the consultation findings over the winter, with a detailed plan proposal on how to proceed, to Cabinet in early 2023.

So, following this consultation closing, it may be the end of the year, or even early 2023, before the council will be in a position to update you on what is happening next. The council is sorry that there will, necessarily, be this period of uncertainty for everyone during this time. The important thing is though, that when we've reviewed the feedback from this consultation in the autumn, the council will be in a much clearer position. We will then tell everyone what will be happening and, just as importantly, when it is planned to happen and how residents can be involved. In the meantime, there is an absolute commitment that the blocks will continue to be maintained in the usual way.

In the information that the council has given you we let you know that the project may take 15 to 20 years to complete across all four sites, if it does go ahead. This is a realistic timescale and we don't want to make people anxious unnecessarily by over promising and then not delivering. We've had lots of early comments back from questionnaires that are in favour of redeveloping new homes on the sites, but saying that the council need to get on with it and do things quicker. If this comes out of the

consultation as a strong message then, like with all of your comments, the council will certainly look into it and see what can be done.

Finally, I want all residents to know that I really empathise with everyone who is living in, and who has bought, the flats in these ten tower blocks because I understand that what is happening may cause uncertainty and anxiety for many of you. But we really do need to do something, to find a solution, and I think this is an opportunity for us to actually make things better for existing and new residents. On several projects, we've been fortunate enough to receive 'levelling up' funding from the central government, and that is enabling some great projects to go ahead, such as the Goods Yard. All of these are going to improve our great city. I'm keen that we look at this tower block project in the same way – as an opportunity to provide better quality homes for our residents – newer, more modern, and better insulated to save tenants money on heating, and better suited to residents' needs in terms of the size of homes and their layout – at this stage we have an 'open mind' on what types of accommodation might be re-provided if the project does go ahead. Finally, this is also an opportunity to make those homes, and the wider area, really attractive and that, along with the jobs this project will create, can boost our economy in the city too.

I do hope that this information gives you a wider view of why this project is necessary and so important to us at Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Please take the opportunity to ask me and my council colleagues any questions you may have. If you have already completed and returned your questionnaire, thank you very much, if you are yet to complete it, please do so before the closing of the consultation, midnight on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

We all look forward to reading your views on this consultation.

Thank you.