

Statement from RBH on College Bank for update to Rochdale Council Communities, Regeneration and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Background

College Bank comprises seven high-rise blocks at a single site adjacent to Rochdale Town Centre. Four of these blocks are 20 storeys and three blocks are 16 storeys. The homes in the 20 storey blocks comprise a mix of bedsits (two on each floor) and two bedroom flats (four on each floor). The homes in the 16 storey blocks comprise a mix of bedsits (two on each floor) and one bedroom flats (four on each floor).

These blocks were built in the 1960s and have extensive investment needs. These needs have been highlighted by both technical surveys and extensive consultation with the community beginning in 2016. They form part of our masterplan for College Bank and Lower Falinge which, based on community feedback, recognises the need for investment to enhance and sustain these neighbourhoods for current and future generations. During the consultation on the options with the community the Grenfell Tower tragedy took place. This prompted an immediate review of the options at that time in light of the early indications of the implications for high-rise homes and their residents. This was discussed with the community as part of our engagement event to set out the high-level masterplan options in June 2017.

Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we confirmed that each block had a recent fire risk assessment in place. We updated our 'stay safe' fire advice to residents and confirmed that the blocks were specifically designed to support the approach that it would usually be safest to stay in their flat in event of a fire elsewhere in the building. Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service confirmed at the time that these procedures were appropriate. We also confirmed that as further details emerged about the nature and cause of the fire at Grenfell Tower, we would make sure that we fully considered any lessons for the future of College Bank and the options or investment in the blocks, and that we would continue to work in partnership with the Council to do this.

The Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety was announced by Government in July 2017 following the Grenfell Tower tragedy and was led by Dame Judith Hackitt. Its purpose was to make recommendations that will ensure a sufficiently robust regulatory system for the future. These proposals are now being taken forward by Government, incorporated in a Building Safety Bill published in July 2020. The Bill has been described by Government as "*the biggest change in building safety for a generation*". The bill overhauls the building control regime for residential buildings of a prescribed height, which is likely to be 18 metres or six storeys.

College Bank blocks are the only buildings we own which meet this likely definition of high-rise high risk residential buildings. The measures contained in the Building Safety

Bill are unlikely to come into force until 2021. A lot of the detail in the Bill, which aims to improve building and fire safety in higher-risk buildings, has been left to the regulations that will follow once Parliament has passed the Bill and it becomes law. However, we are proactively considering what measures it needs to put in place in preparation for this in the spirit of the Hackitt recommendations. We have adopted an approach which has a focus on resident safety in addition to regulatory compliance and we are carrying out further investigations before it becomes a legal requirement to do so.

Current position

RBH currently carries out 434 fire risk assessments across our buildings. We review the seven fire risk assessments for the blocks at College Bank on a minimum of an annual basis and carry out any required actions. As part of our review in March 2020, we decided to carry out proactive intrusive investigations of the internal and external compartmentation within individual flats. By doing this, we acted in the spirit of the independent Hackitt report, rather than waiting for legal requirements likely to be in place from 2021.

Unfortunately, these assessments showed areas where a fire could spread between flats in certain circumstances. These were linked to inadequate work carried out in 1998 prior to the existence of RBH. As a result, we have now employed a temporary waking watch as a safeguarding measure, until a longer-term solution to remedy these issues is in place.

We have informed all residents of these new measures and have asked those that may have difficulty leaving the building down the stairs in an emergency to contact us so that we can work together on a personal emergency evacuation plan.

We have worked closely with the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service and in particular their High Rise Task Force to share our findings and our changed approach to evacuation. This has included a number of joint site visits.

We shared information on the current situation with Councillors as soon as we had informed local residents. We took decisive action as soon as we became aware of this issue, and we are awaiting advice on next steps from our independent, accredited advisors.

In addition, we are also taking legal advice relating to the warranties provided by the Council at the time these blocks were transferred to RBH.

Next steps

Our focus at RBH is on the safety of residents. The current measures are in place to reassure residents and support them in raising an alarm and helping to evacuate if needed in the event of a fire. We have asked residents to help us and to feedback on any issues with the communications on this and we have had helpful feedback from some of our most engaged tenants. We are organising an online event for residents to get in touch with questions and have set up a dedicated email address as well as contact by our Freephone number and web portal.

We have commissioned new fire risk assessments for each block based on the latest information now available from the intrusive surveys. We are working through the detail of options in terms of longer-term measures to ensure both the safety of residents and the quality of homes. In line with the fire risk assessments, these will be planned to take into account the fire safety considerations and investment needs across the whole of the blocks. As the proposals for these are developed, in line with our approach across the whole of College Bank, we will ensure that residents hear directly from RBH first about any proposals and changes that affect their home.