

Gerri Scott  
Strategic Director of Housing and Modernisation

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## RESIDENTS OF LEDBURY TOWER BLOCKS

Dear residents,

Firstly I would like to thank those of you who attended Tuesday night's meeting at Camelot School where we had an update from Structural Engineers Arup about their investigations into the structural implications of the cracks in your blocks. This was followed by a question and answer session with our Fire Safety Manager who updated everyone on the impact that these cracks have on fire compartmentation and what is being done to address this.

It was really helpful for officers and councillors to hear directly from residents about your concerns, the questions you want answers to, and the things the council needs to do better. I have said all along that I want to be completely honest and transparent with you about the issues we have identified, and the ways we are going to fix them, and I hope the meeting went some way to reassuring you about the action we are taking.

At the meeting Arup confirmed that they have not found anything in their investigations that gives concern about the structural stability of the building but are continuing their assessment. Once their work has finished we will share all their findings with you.

Our Fire Safety Manager explained that the gaps impact on compartmentation and so we then talked about the work that the council needs to do to fill the gaps, to make sure that should a fire break out in one of the flats, the fire and smoke won't spread to neighbouring flats or shared areas. We have already started our level 4 fire risk assessments, which are the most detailed assessments we can carry out, and will be continuing this work in the empty flat on the 6th floor of Skenfrith House block before sharing a detailed plan of work with you. Please see the Questions & Answers below for what will be involved.

At this stage we don't know exactly what we will need to ask you to do, but we hope that we will be able to carry out this work while you remain in the towers. We are aware that some residents invited an independent Building Surveyor, Arnold Tarling, to carry out his own

investigation of fire safety in the blocks. We requested his report, which we have now received, and we will be addressing his concerns as part of our own review.

There were a lot of questions at the meeting about specific issues you wanted us to respond to which I have answered as best I can. I hope this update is helpful. We have also produced a fire safety special edition of Southwark Life which will be delivered to every home in the borough. Please be aware that any general advice about what to do if a fire breaks out does not apply at Ledbury Towers while we carry out our work. Please see below for more information.

Yours sincerely



Gerri Scott  
**Strategic Director of Housing & Modernisation**

## Questions and answers

Here are the main concerns/issues we heard:

### What to do in the event of a fire

If a fire breaks out in your tower block at the moment, you must **leave immediately** and make your way outside. Wardens will assist anyone who needs help, particularly those with mobility issues. The evacuation point is the Ledbury Tenants Hall where toilet facilities and drinks will be available in the event of a fire.

We are checking all notices in the blocks to make sure they offer this advice consistently.

### Contractors entering flats

I was very concerned to hear from some residents about bad behaviour by some contractors. I have written to all the companies carrying out work on the estate to remind them of the council's value to treat all residents as they would treat members of their own family. If any contractor has caused damage to a resident's possessions, we will expect them to reimburse those affected.

### Fire wardens

There were concerns about fire wardens leaving their post, not being clear on what they were meant to be doing, and one who had fallen asleep. We will be reminding all wardens on the rota of what we expect from them and they will be told that they must remain identifiable at all times and under no circumstances are they to remove their yellow jackets or identity badges.

In the longer term, we will be installing comprehensive fire alarms in the shared areas, so that we don't need to keep the wardens on, apart from those who are there to support vulnerable residents.

### What does a Level 4 Fire Risk Assessment involve?

Current guidance only requires the Responsible Person (Southwark Council) to undertake a type 1 fire risk assessment which is a non destructive survey of the common areas of the building. Southwark Council goes beyond those requirements and generally undertakes type 3 assessments, which means we sample a few flats and inspect areas to take into account the internal configuration, the domestic fire alarm system and the provision of internal fire doors.

A Type 4 fire risk assessment has the same scope of work as a Type 3 fire risk assessment, except that there is a degree of destructive inspection, in both the common areas and the flats, carried out on a sampling basis. This will usually involve a contractor opening up construction and putting things back together after the inspection.

This is the most comprehensive fire risk assessment, but will only be appropriate in limited circumstances – such as when a new landlord takes over a block of flats in which the history of works carried out is unknown and or there is reason to suspect any risk to their residents. Level 4 fire risk assessments are the type that we are carrying out at the Ledbury Towers.

### **Where would we move people to if we needed to?**

We are confident that we can keep residents living in the blocks, and will not need to carry out a mass evacuation. However, I have asked our housing solutions team to look at how many properties we have available should we need them. As everyone knows, there are huge pressures on housing in Southwark and we don't have lots of homes sitting empty, but please be assured that should we discover anything during our investigations that means you aren't safe, we will move you out immediately.

### **Why has the empty property with scaffolding on floor 6 of Skenfrith House been left empty? Is it because you think it is unsafe?**

No. The previous tenant left the flat in early May and we were in the process of getting it ready for the next tenants, when this issue arose. We have therefore kept it empty on purpose, as a useful 'test flat' for us to carry out initial works and understand more about the blocks, limiting disturbance to other residents.

### **What happened after earlier reports of cracking?**

We filled the cracks in as they were reported to us. However, the tragedy at Grenfell has made all councils look again at their buildings, and after the gaps were reported to us as a potential fire safety issue, we took immediate action.

### **It has been claimed that gas pipes in the building should not be there. Are they safe?**

The claims seem to be based on the pipes being fitted in the 1980s, but our records show, and some residents have confirmed, that the pipes have been in place since the towers were built in the 1960s. Following the partial collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in 1968 the Government required all building owners to assess their high rise buildings for robustness against gas explosion and required that they be strengthened where necessary. A Government report dated 1985 specifically references the blocks at Ledbury as being of a construction form that did not require strengthening.

However, as a concern has been raised we will investigate fully, and have asked Structural Engineers Arup to include this matter in their work.

### **Why do we have to pay rent/ will we get compensation?**

All rent paid to the council goes into the Housing Revenue Account which funds all improvements to council homes, including fire safety improvements and new kitchens and bathrooms. However we understand that people are living in difficult conditions, and we want to compensate you for that. We are now working up details of a compensation package which we will share with you as soon as possible.

### **Will any damage to decoration be paid for?**

Yes, once we know the extent of the work that is required, we will develop a plan to either carry out full refurbishment and redecoration, or to compensate residents as part of the compensation package.

### **The door entry system is disabled - is this a security issue?**

It should not be an issue with the wardens present, but we have taken your concerns on board and will be reinstating the door entry system.

**How will vulnerable people or those with mobility issues be supported in the event of an evacuation?**

The wardens are there to do exactly that. However, we will be visiting vulnerable residents to ensure they understand what we are doing and what would happen in the event of a fire so that they feel safe in their homes. If people are really concerned about their ability to evacuate, we will offer them the opportunity to go into Band 1 and bid for an alternative council home.

**We want to know what you are going to do and when – a clear timeline?**

Arup will report to us very soon about the structure and we will share that with residents. We have started the detailed fire risk assessments and will keep you updated. We don't know how long they will take but we hope that within the next two weeks we will have worked out a plan to fill the gaps long-term and deal with any compartmentation issues.

