

<b>Briefing Note for Scrutiny Board 6 November 2023</b>	
<b>To:</b>	Members of Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities)
<b>From:</b>	Director of Communities Housing and Environment
<b>Date:</b>	6th November 2023

### **Introduction and Purpose**

The paper responds to the Call-In received on 27 October 2023 in relation to the Executive Board decision taken on 18 October 2023. The decision relates to the “Future of six high rise and resident rehousing - Bailey and Brooklands Towers, Ramshead Heights, Leaffield Towers, Raynville Court and Grange”. The paper addresses each point raised in the Call-In request.

### **Main Issues**

- 1. Whilst the report notes consultation and engagement with residents, it does not include a full breakdown of the views of residents about the proposals. We think this should be presented more clearly, along with greater detail on the numbers consulted and number of responses, in order to gauge whether the current proposals have the wide support of existing residents.***

#### **Resident/Leaseholder Engagement:**

As at the beginning of September, across the 6 blocks, we have spoken with just under 80% of households. The below is a further breakdown of what is included in para 41 of the Exec Board Report.

It may not be possible to achieve 100% confirmation of engagement with all residents prior to rehousing. However, we will continue working to make sure that all residents have been engaged with and are aware of the support available.

Block	Households engaged with	Total households (Excl voids)	Percentage	Outstanding
Brookland Towers	51	54	94%	3
Bailey Towers	52	58	90%	6
Ramshead Heights	28	60	47%	32
Raynville Court	51	59	86%	8
Raynville Grange	41	56	73%	15
Leaffield Towers	45	58	78%	13
	268	345		77

22%

Total percentage engaged	78%
--------------------------	-----

#### **How we tried to maximise engagement:**

It should be noted that we raised awareness of opportunities to engage with us via letters, posters, e-mails and texts. We offered drop-in sessions held on site at the residents' blocks (3

per block, evenings, day times and weekends), bookable appointments in their own homes, telephone appointments along with large print, braille and translations services as required.

Following the advertised engagement sessions, we continue to review those who we have yet to speak to, about the future of the blocks and sought individual contact based on any known information - such as via an interpreter, or through an advocate.

#### **How we try and ensure engagement is meaningful:**

Data collected from the consultation and engagement outreach sessions has been analysed and thematised, points arising in relation to equality characteristics requirements have been fully considered (*for example engaging with residents from 210 properties resulted in data being collected on declarations of 13 caring responsibilities, 26 physical disabilities and 13 mental health impairments*).

All identified needs are recorded on the project tracker to ensure that individual needs are taken into account and continually met throughout the rehousing project.

#### **Support or opposition for the current proposals from existing residents:**

It should be noted that the engagement sessions mainly focussed on sharing the facts about what was being proposed with our residents and answering any specific questions, with a strong emphasis on our residents' well-being, identifying any support requirements that people may want, any preferences for areas and or bedroom numbers / property type etc.

The overall resident response to engagement was positive in that some residents did express a sadness of having to move, but most residents understand the requirement to invest in the blocks to provide better quality homes. Some residents did, however offer particularly strong views about the proposals, and as at the end of September, the information shows that 29 residents (8%) were anxious or unhappy with having to move.

One in five residents are currently actively seeking rehousing with a housing application already in place. The engagement has also helped identify those who may need additional help and support with registering their housing applications and move support.

- 2. The proposals will result in the loss of 360 units of housing, which will clearly have an impact on the housing register in the context of an already large waiting list of people needing social housing. We do not believe this factor has been sufficiently addressed in the report in terms of the explanation of options considered.***

The service has a requirement to ensure all its tenants live in good quality decent homes, the repairs required to these blocks are extensive and for this reason, whichever decision was taken at executive board, the tenants would have been asked to leave their homes, either to allow refurbishment or demolition. The loss of 360 units is unfortunate at a time when demand is high for housing and this will have a minor delay on applicants bidding for alternative homes across Leeds, however this will be done in a managed way over a 2 to 3 year period.

Tenants will of course receive 'choice' in terms of where they are re-housed within reason and based on a similar situation (the Highways blocks) no one had a possession order made and all where successfully re housed, the vast majority into council properties in an area of their choice.

All tenants will receive Band A on the housing register and also Direct Let. Officers will then work with tenants to provide support and assistance whilst alternative housing is provided

- 3. *The future of these sites is an important aspect, and whilst the report says this will be considered in detail at a later stage we believe this should have happened before beginning the process of clearing the sites. It is vital that the project does not become stalled and that desired outcomes for the sites are properly understood.***

The desired outcome is that these sites are developed to build as many replacement one and two bedroom homes as we can – but of course we need to also take into account planning policy which does significantly limit what is possible at these sites. Considering the scale of these developments, and the need to progress this work in a managed way, it is considered a sensible approach to first take a decision on the future of the existing blocks, and then consider in detail the options available to develop the sites.

To do all of that work before a decision on the future of the blocks is made would provide us with less time to progress the relocation of tenants in a managed way and would also potentially involve abortive costs.

Given the challenging financial environment we are currently working in, we do not feel it is morally or financially right to promise more than we are confident can be delivered at this point in time, until all of the future options have been fully considered.

- 4. *In terms of what happens to existing residents in the short to medium term, has sufficient consideration been given to options that would allow existing communities to be kept together during the decant process? We also think in general there has been insufficient consideration of alternative options.***

Our proposals are not to move people on a short-term basis, but to try and work with our residents to help them find a home that is suitable for them in the long term. Two thirds of residents that stated an area of choice preference across the engagement sessions, wished to remain in the local area. One in five residents are currently actively seeking rehousing with a housing application already in place.

Also, the Executive Board Paper at para 44 a) notes that the rehousing preferences in terms of preferred locations from those that expressed an opinion are that 20% of households raised that they would want to stay in the same area, whilst 9% said that they wanted to move to a different part of the city. We will know more about residents' preferences as rehousing support progresses.

Our residents will be supported to find a suitable home that suits them longer-term. They will be able to bid on other RSL properties, and Leeds City Council properties. They are also able to move into any private property or with others (i.e. family) and still receive a Homeloss payment if eligible.

Unfortunately, doing nothing is not an option considering the nature of the blocks and their projected lifespan. Whether refurbishment or demolition was considered, residents would need to be moved out. All options for the future of the sites will be and are being considered. These options are being explored in parallel with this project (i.e. the project to empty and demolish) and we are not waiting for residents to be moved out to commence this.

5. ***We also have concerns about the potential negative impact on the Housing Revenue Account. This decision may place unsustainable strain on the HRA as funds will need to be borrowed for capital purposes, while at the same time inward revenue flows will be squeezed, while dwelling numbers are reduced throughout the construction cycles of whatever types of property are subsequently built, for however long that takes, the effects possibly lasting years. We would ask that the decision is reconsidered in light of the above concerns.***

As per the Executive Board Report (paragraph 54), an approximate net loss of income per year of approximately £80,000 per block has been estimated for every year that sites are not developed from when buildings are empty (for example accounting for rent loss but also for savings from maintenance including repairs) – for six blocks this would be £480,000 per year.

As stated in the Executive Board Report, these blocks do currently meet all required safety standards, however these will change over time, and this is important to plan for. We will be required to submit a safety case for each of our high rise blocks by March 2024, and without a clear robust plan for future investment (which we have appraised and is not financially or technically viable) we are at risk of an occupancy certificate not being granted. Not being granted a certificate would result in immediate decant of all occupants. For clarity, we need to submit a safety case either way, but if the plan is to demolish, then the requirements is to ensure that we will maintain safety throughout the managed decline until the buildings are emptied and demolished (i.e. maintained, but not improved). If we have no decision in place to demolish, then we need to be able to evidence and demonstrate the investment that will be taking place in these blocks.

If we did not put plans in place to help support people into new homes, the immediate investment needs, just to meet minimum safety standards, excluding structural upgrades, that would have to be carried out are estimated to be circa £4.2m across the 6 blocks. This would then be abortive spend as any longer-term decision to invest (via full structural refurbishment or demolition and exploration of future use of site) would then ultimately need to be progressed.

PRN	Block	Est Cost
22340	Bailey Towers	£ 880,800.00
9976	Leafield Towers	£ 856,075.00
22354	Brooklands Towers	£ 857,050.00
22409	Ramshead Heights	£ 525,800.00
46456	Raynville Court	£ 521,525.00
46469	Raynville Grange	£ 512,400.00
	TOTAL	4,153,650.00

So while the proposal does put a strain on the HRA, trying to keep people living in these properties given the known issues with the blocks (including water ingress for example) would also put significant pressure on HRA budgets. This could be through incurring costs on the immediate investment needs, including things such as potential for disrepair claims, high void costs or lengthy works times. Also, any back-and-forth negotiation on the building safety case would incur a fee for each letter/correspondence with the RSH.

The number of residents eligible for home loss payments is likely to increase over time, and the amount each eligible person would be entitled to will also increase over time (it is currently approx. £8,100 each, was circa £7,800 last year as an example).