

Residents Question Time

Items from East Resident Only Minutes 19/09/19

1. Decent Homes Standard

The Residents' Meeting on 20th June raised concerns that several properties have fallen below the Decent Homes Standard, particularly in relation to their kitchens and bathrooms. It was felt that the response provided to Area Panel was inadequate and that further information is required from Housing Services on how they will ensure that all of their properties are of a decent standard.

Action: 3 stars (III)

It was agreed to raise this at the Agenda Setting meeting requesting that Housing Services explain the response in more detail and state what action will be taken, detailing timescales, plans and priorities after the end of the current contract. Provide information on whether the Brighton and Hove Decent Homes Standard is being reviewed with a view to ensuring it provides a guarantee that tenants' homes are of an acceptable standard, particularly those who have already had either kitchen or bathroom works done as part of the project. Further detail has to be provided on the percentage of homes which met the standard during the original assessment, compared with how many do so now.

Response from Marcus Richardson, Interim General Building Manager

T: 01273 293070

The current Mears contract ends on 31st March 2020, but we will be looking to finish planned programmes in February/March, to allow for snagging and invoicing of these works before the contract ceases.

We have stock condition surveys happening now which we expect to finish early in the new year, these surveys only cover 20% of the housing stock, but we also gather information on stock condition from empty properties. We will continue to build detailed information around our stock by carrying out further surveys each year. These combined with some of the existing information held in the councils asset management database will provide details which will influence planned programmes of work post April 2020. In addition to these programmes, the repairs service when responding to jobs also refer properties which they feel require whole replacement of housing attributes like kitchens, windows, doors etc., if they are beyond economical repair.

Once the stock condition surveys are complete, we use the information to generate draft planned programmes and we will engage with residents as required ahead of works.

Going forward the new planned programmes will continue as they have been throughout the duration of the current Mears contract, but using new contractors once we have completed procurement of these contracts. Once the procurement has been completed and contractors have been appointed, this will be communicated with residents.

We will continue to review the standards that we work to alongside any review of the decent homes standard undertaken by government.

If residents are concerned about the condition of any specific properties please contact us through the repairs helpdesk and we will arrange for a surveyor to come and visit.

Mears can be contacted on 0800 052 6140 or 01273 294409

Or by Email: bhcc.repairs@mearsgroup.co.uk

2. Anti-Social Behaviour at Robert Lodge

There are increasing problems of anti-social behavior at Robert Lodge.

There are now two flats currently being used by drug dealers. One of them has an elderly tenant whose flat has effectively been taken over by 'cuckoos' who are using the tenant to do deliveries, constantly have people coming to the flat and having regular all-night parties that are disturbing other residents in the block. The other flat is being used by drug dealers, but there isn't the same problem of parties. The garden area in the middle of the blocks and grass area at the bottom of Manor Way are used by dealers at night, and it isn't unusual to find several people queuing up to buy from them.

Cars and taxis are constantly coming and going during the night causing further disturbance.

Residents' lives are being made a misery but they are also very scared by this.

Numerous reports have been made to Housing and the Police and one of the flats has been raided on several occasions, but there doesn't seem to have been any action by Housing against the tenants of the flats.

Action: 2 stars (II)

It was agreed to raise this at the Agenda Setting meeting requesting that Housing outline what action is being taken to enforce the tenancy conditions of the tenants in the two flats being used by drug dealers

Response from Rachelle Metcalfe, Housing Manager East Housing Team

T: 01273 293196

The East Housing Team, based at Whitehawk Community Hub, deal with the management of council tenancies in the East of the city, which includes Robert Lodge. The East Housing Team deals with a wide range of tenancy management issues, including anti-social behaviour, cuckooing and drug-related nuisance. The East Housing Team has not received any reports of cuckooing, drug-dealing, parties or associated drug-related anti-social behaviour at Robert Lodge from any residents or from the police. We cannot take action unless we receive reports from witnesses with the details of the nuisance.

The process for reporting anti-social behaviour is outlined on the Brighton & Hove City Council website and in the tenant handbook, it is also often publicised in the Homing In

Area Panel items from East Residents Meeting 19 September 2019

magazine and is often discussed at residents meetings and in contact with Housing staff. There is one telephone number for residents wanting to contact Housing to report anti-social behaviour, or any other issue, it is the Housing Customer Services Team on 01273 293030 or residents can email them on housing.customerservices@brighton-hove.gov.uk. Alternatively, residents can make an online report via the Brighton & Hove City Council website www.brighton-hove.gov.uk. Noise nuisance issues should also be reported to the Environmental Protection Team on 01273 294266 or online via the Brighton & Hove City Council website.

Any criminal activity should be reported to Sussex Police on 101 for non-emergencies and 999 in an emergency. Reports can also be made online via the Sussex Police website www.sussex.police.uk or by emailing them on 101@sussex.pnn.police.uk. In addition, reports can be made anonymously by telephoning Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

In order to take action against someone's tenancy we need written evidence from witnesses with details of times, dates and details of the incidents they have witnessed. We will then work with witnesses and other agencies to tackle the problem. This will include making appropriate referrals to address support needs. If we have sufficient evidence, we have a range of options for taking tenancy enforcement action, including serving a Notice of Seeking Possession, which is the first step in eviction proceedings; making an application to the County Court for an injunction or making an application to the Magistrates Court for a Closure Order. The council can only evict a tenant after obtaining a court order and a court order will only be granted if the court has been presented with strong, corroborated evidence and it must be satisfied that the action is reasonable and proportionate.

Cuckooing is a high-priority for both the police and Housing and we work together to tackle the perpetrators and support the victims. Sussex Police and the Housing Teams across the city have worked together to obtain Closure Orders which close down properties for 3 months where serious drug-related anti-social behaviour is occurring. However, we rely on residents to report details of incidents that they have witnessed so that we have the evidence in order to take the appropriate action.

3. Journalists at Area Panel Meetings

Area Panel meetings are for tenants, leaseholders, council officers and Councillors, but are not open to the general public. The minutes name all those present, but do not specify the names of individual residents in the reporting of what is said at the meeting.

However, recently the attendance of journalists has become a regular occurrence, with reports then appearing in the local media and on Facebook - there was recently a Facebook post that named a tenant and what they said at the Area Panel meeting.

This has raised concerns that resident's reps could be vulnerable to repercussions if their comments at the meetings are published alongside their names.

The meeting felt that there need to be some guidelines on the expected conduct of those invited to meetings, particularly in relation to what information can then be reported to the wider public.

Action: 3 stars (III)

It was agreed to raise this at the Agenda Setting meeting requesting that clear guidelines be given on reporting of discussions at Area Panel meetings

Response from Clare Saul, Head of Communications

As the meeting are specifically for tenants and leaseholders how are representing the wider community the Chair of the meeting is able to state this and ensure that information that is personal or sensitive is not copied or published.

What might be difficult is if some people do want media to attend to hear discussion on an issue or if they then talk to the media outside of the meeting and tell a reporter who said what, although the reporter would have to verify comments that they didn't directly hear.

What's also difficult is if people at the Area Panels take to social media following a meeting and publish details of discussions. We know that local reporters follow the Hanover Facebook page and others across the city, looking for stories to use from these groups.

I would be very happy to come and talk with Chairs and Vice Chairs and indeed panels about how to maintain good relationships with media whilst protecting people's privacy during the meetings.

4. Poor Construction of new Robert Lodge blocks

The new Robert Lodge South and Robert Lodge North blocks were built in 2015/16. Several problems are now arising due to the poor quality of work and cost-cutting in the latter part of the build when the North block was being built. The Residents Association is concerned about the following problems:

Ground sinking

The pavements and grass areas are sinking around the south block. The pathways are now so uneven that it is not safe for residents on mobility scooters to use them and there is concern that somebody could trip and injure themselves.

It is thought this may have been caused by a landfill system used after the old Housing Office was demolished. Excavated land was filled with plastic 'crates' laid over with plastic membrane. The area over this was filled with soil, which may now be filtering down into the cavities in the plastic 'crates', causing the ground to sink.

Lack of insulation in North block

The sound and thermal insulation in the North block is of poorer quality than that in the South block, so residents are disturbed by noise from neighbouring flats and have higher heating bills.

Poor staking and maintenance of trees

The stakes used to secure the trees have rotted at the base, leading to the trees getting damaged. One tree has completely fallen down. Another has snapped in high winds, and another is becoming very high and spindly, so is vulnerable to wind damage.

The Residents Association have contacted the arboriculturalists and the Parks Department on several occasions since June to ask them to carry out essential tree works, but nothing has been done.

Action: 3 stars (III)

It was agreed to raise this at the Agenda Setting meeting to request that:

- A representative from the Property & Investment Team and Community Engagement Team to arrange a site visit with Chair and Vice Chair of the Robert Lodge Residents Association, Gerry Lewis and Chris El-Shabba, to discuss the issues.
- Remedial work be done to the trees and stakes urgently, as well as information on original plans for tree planting and a commitment to replace those which are unable to recover from damage.
- The Council should re-visit the recent works at Robert Lodge and determine whether or not the contractors should be instructed to put right the serious flaws, particularly in regards to land movement, that have appeared since the completion of the works.

Response from Sam Smith, Lead City Regeneration Programme Manager

T: 01273 291383

On Monday 7 October, I visited Robert Lodge along with Ian Bingham (Westridge Construction), Catharine Whitby (Project Architect – Brighton and Hove City Council - BHCC), Marcus Richardson (Property & Investment Team - BHCC) and Keely McDonald (Community Engagement Team - BHCC) where we met Chris El-Shabba (Robert Lodge Resident Association Representative)

Footpaths

With regards to the footpaths, we took photographs of the areas around the tree pits to the south of the south block, where the ground appears to have sunk. We discussed various ways in which to rectify the issue, and will now contact our civil and structural engineers, HOP, to request they visit site and advise us on the feasibility of remedial options.

Trees

With regards to the trees, some appear to have outgrown the straps which help support them, and the timber support structures are failing in places. There is also some growth at the base of several trees which requires removal. We will contact a landscape / tree specialist asap in order to arrange a visit, and any subsequent remedial works necessary, to ensure the continued and healthy growth of the trees.

North Block Thermal Performance

With regards to the thermal and acoustic performance of the north block, it is correct that the construction of the north block was different to that of the south block. This decision was not made on the basis of cost, but was made on the basis of location, logistics and time of year at which the block was built.

The south block was constructed with a concrete frame, and a lightweight metal framing system behind the brickwork forming the 'inner leaf' of the building. This was not an appropriate method of construction for the north block due to its position close to Manor Way, a two way bus route, since concrete deliveries would have impacted the bus service. The size and location of the north block, coupled with the fact that it was constructed from Spring onwards, leant itself to a traditional 'brick and block' masonry construction methodology. Brick and block is durable, and has a higher thermal mass than lighter methods of construction.

U-values are used to measure how effective elements of a building's fabric are as insulators. The lower the U-value of a building's fabric, the more slowly heat is able to transmit through it, and so the better it performs as an insulator.

The construction summary from our sustainability consultant confirms U-values as follows for each building element as constructed at Robert Lodge North; (NB: numbers in brackets are current building regulations Part L minimum standards)

Roof AS BUILT: 0.11W/m²K (0.20W/m²K minimum standard)

Floor AS BUILT: 0.11W/m²K (0.25W/m²K minimum standard)

External Walls AS BUILT: 0.20W/m²K (0.30W/m²K minimum standard)

Windows AS BUILT: 1.4W/m²K (2.0W/m²K minimum standard)

We would note that the north building flats have their own individual gas boiler, (located in the flat store) whereas the south building flats are heated from a large communal boiler, located in a separate plant room. This is likely to explain the disparity between heating bills, since it is our understanding that the buildings are billed differently as a result.

North Block Acoustic Performance

With regards to acoustic performance, the building was constructed to 'Robust Details' which isolate parts of the building fabric to minimise sound transmission through the structure of the building. The building was subject to sound testing on completion and was found to meet all the requirements of Part E of the building regulations, and in fact achieved a good improvement on the minimum standards.

We received a complaint related to sound transmission from a tenant once the building was occupied, and subsequently engaged an acoustician to carry out further independent tests. Although the tests demonstrated that the building was fully compliant with current building regulations, Part E, we went on to carry out substantial remedial works, to improve the situation for an individual tenant who was disturbed by noise from elsewhere in the building.

Again, the mass of the masonry construction should in fact be beneficial to the acoustic performance of the building, when compared to lighter methods of construction.

We will feedback to the next Resident Association meeting once H.O.P. Consulting Engineers have visited, and we have a quote for the tree inspection.