

Residents Meeting - 17th March 2024

Approximately 130x people in attendance.

Chairs: Ali, Becky & Caro

Special mentions: Labour candidate for MP David Pinto-Duschinsky & Marcos (Lawyer)

Introduction – Caro

- We are not professionally qualified or trying to tell people what actions to take.
- Purpose of this meeting was to continue to create a forum to share information with each other. The people involved in getting the meeting together are also just everyday residents as well and are here to support with you, not for you.
- Everyone has to inevitably make their own decisions that they feel comfortable with.

Summary of actions that have currently been done:

- A whatsapp group has been created.
- 480x houses were letterboxed to bring awareness of the group and the residents meeting.
- A website has been created to help share information www.residentsresponse.com and also contains links / copies of documents.
- 18th March 2024, first residents meeting held.
- Petition to government has been submitted (pending check, then link will be shared).

Upcoming Meetings:

- **6th of April 2024**, council held drop in session for residents is being held at the Watling Community Centre from 10:30am to 12:45pm. To register to go email the council at timberframehomes@barnet.gov.uk (also request to be added to their mailing list for updates).
- **13th of April 2024**, next residents meeting planned, final details TBC.

Lobbying:

- The council has no money. The best chance at funding is central government. The government has previously already set the standard by issuing grants for remedial cladding repairs due to fire safety for high-rise buildings (18m and higher), and then a 2nd grant was introduced for mid-rise buildings (11m to 18m). We should just be the next “natural” extension to these grants being under 11m.

Current lobbying actions:

- Labour candidate for MP David Pinto-Duschinsky has written to the Secretary of State (a copy of this letter can be found on the website).
- Conservative candidate for MP Ameet Jogia has written to the Secretary for State (a copy of this letter can be found on the website).
- The council has requested a meeting with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
- The council has contacted the Greater London Authority (GLA).
- Email sent to Anne Clarke (our London Assembly member for Barnet) to put forward a question to the Mayor for support.

We have to allow time now for responses, but we do need to know “what happens next”. Everyone will be kept informed on when we need to show support in numbers (whether that be by emailing or turning up in person).

Comments from Everyone:

- The internal walls of some of the houses were “fireproofed” in the 80s by the council. This was both tenants and freeholders (freeholders received a grant for the works). We don’t know if every house was done.
- In 50 years it is estimated from those who can remember there has only been 2 fires in Burnt Oak cladded houses. One of these was a fire in a car parked close to a cladded house but this fire did not spread to other homes via the outside. The wood charred but did not burn. We have photos of these fires.

- What will happen to privately owned properties that are attached to council tenants houses when the council carry out the work for their tenants?
- Burnt Oak is a conservation area, this means that previous homeowners were told they could not change the look of, or materials used on their home, why have the council now had a change of direction?
- In other industries such as cars if there is a “fault” in the product it is recalled. If these houses were built faulty then the council should have to pay.
The council argue at the time they were built they were according to the standards of the time. Even until recently building materials were looked at individually, the cladding was ok, but now they look at the cladding, along with the cavities, the fixtures etc everything as a whole.
- Ahlam: has already reached out to special housing solicitor but they’re at capacity with other cladding cases but as soon as she has a response will let the group know. Also has asked for freedom of information for the survey.
- Further discussion on solicitor help: Has any legal action been taken to prove negligence? We should try to resolve the issues ourselves before taking legal action? The group could jointly cover the cost of a solicitor. Our proposal should be a united front, made legally on behalf of 460 people – 120 have not yet been identified. How will this be funded? How would we raise money?
- The fire report from the Finchley fire has not been shared with us.
- Has any money been set aside from the council for us? Why can’t the fund come from the council taxes? The only money the council has set aside is from the Housing Revenue Account (from tenants rent). We are not entitled to those funds. Details of council accounts can be found online. Can funds come from council tax?
- Can we find out how many houses are privately owned and how many have Council tenants? 150 of the 580 notified are council tenants.
- The person who is in-charge at the council is quite unclear. The letter is signed by Cath Shaw, but Gavin Bass is the “project sponsor” (whatever that means).
- The reason there is a range of cost on the letter is because higher costs would be charged to end of terrace houses (3 external walls to fix) as opposed to mid terrace which is just front / back.
- Government doesn’t have cladding on their website? Wooding cladding doesn’t spread fire. Could the survey dis-prove this? We have examples from the residents of real fires that did not spread to the neighbouring houses.
- The council are paying for the surveys. Until they are done everything is just “hypothetical”. There’s no reason not to allow the survey, even if you want to do your own after to compare any differences between the reports. Surveys are anticipated to start in May. Perhaps we could get a group price on a private surveyor.
Note: Since the residents meeting on Sunday a private surveyor has questioned whether a Cat 1 Hazard can be issued without a survey. Need clarity on if you accept the survey if you are disadvantaging yourself on them being able to act.
- Council told a lady that it’s a ticked box exercise and it probably won’t be as bad as it says it’s going to be.
Note: if you talk to anyone it is really important to make note of their name and the date / time you spoke to them.
- There is a lot of conflicting information coming from Barnet Council so the way forward would be to get as much in writing/by email as possible as opposed to speaking to them on the phone as they can retract.
- Council have said there is no imminent danger.

- How do we find out which contractors were used to carry out works in the past on our homes?
- Should we notify the fire services for advice?
- Barnet is the first council to go to houses for cladding works, this could turn into a country-wide issue.
- Have people or should people respond to the letter?
The council have suggested emailing in to be added to their mailing list for updates.
No one is replying to the council on your behalf, this is your responsibility / choice. The group may choose to send certain suggestions or points to the council for the purpose that there is strength in a collective response, to show we are united but every person can decide if they want to be involved or not.
- Becky: We had extension 2020/2021 part of planning permission same materials had to be used as existing building. When she spoke to council the woman on end of phone said they would have a good case against council for forcing them to use that. Houses in Finchley didn't seem to have the brick wall whilst some of the wooden cladding do have brick fire breaks.
- Treated cladding is listed as category B whereas untreated is classed as category D? The proposed "new" cladding from the council is A2 rated.
- Another possible "financial" arrangement could be a charge against the house. Not sure if this would be with interest.
- Check your current home insurance if you are covered for "legal costs", check what this mean (do they need to be involved from the beginning). Everyone's policy could be different.
- Check your current insurance in-case these works can be covered by it.
- One resident is an architect, before doing anything legal we need to know if the homes are safe or not, we need a health and safety consultant on board who can tell us.
- Fire breakers and lack of insulation could be raised as additional issues. Council will check cavities, brickwork, diving walls.
- Not sure if the Finchley houses have a dividing brick wall.
- We all need to "make" noise. It can't just be a few people asking questions.
- One resident contacted 'End our cladding scandal' group, she is a leaseholder and that she has to pay this. Guy who writes with the guardian who has a lot of information.
- Everyone should advise their skill set.
- Concerns about chimney breast or the other things they have done. This could open up other cans of worms.
- Concerns about when extensions were done perhaps the cladding wasn't removed, and is in the wall still.
- Concerns about elderly residents or those where English isn't the 1st language. What care is being given to make sure they are informed and updated.
- A leaseholder received 2 different letters. One for the same bill of up to £23k another for £250. We need to preserve the wrong information and contradicting information that the council is providing people.
- One Housing Association are refusing to pay saying this is purely the tenants responsibility. Endar Cladding was mentioned as a Company to work alongside.

- Concerns if survey is carried out that it might invalidate the insurers. You need to check if your insurance is valid regardless of the survey outcome. Not all insurers will have the same stance. If your insurance does become void, it's another point to go back to the council on the position they've put us in – it's possible they could be held responsible for this. Perhaps people can get an extra indemnity policy.
- We have a duty to disclose information to insurance companies so you could still be at risk of invalidating your policy whether you do this now or at a later stage when we have more information. It is each individual's decision to notify their insurance company.
- What kind of survey is it from the council? At the time of the meeting no one knew any details about the survey, only that they are starting from May.
- Should we respond to Barnet Council's letter acknowledging receipt? The Council have said they will be appointing a Liaison Officer.
- "Enforcement" could mean the council are enforced to do the work. Not sure what action then the council can take to make residents pay.

Comments from Marcos (Solicitor).

- Been in law for 43 years specialising in divorce and property. He has worked with cladding before but only in a planning capacity.
- Works on an agreed monthly figure. Would need to have a look in more detail, once he knows what needs to be done he will lay out the costs.
- We have a big advantage being a united team. Don't let them separate us, councils may try to do side deals with different people.
- Keep a dossier to refer to.
- We need to know our issues before engaging his services.
- Suggests sending collective emails.
- Involve press at later stage.
- Don't fall into the trap of phoning and getting an answer from someone who "didn't have authority to tell you". The person who speaks on phone needs to be authorised to tell you the answers, so should be put in writing from who is authorised.
- We're going to need lawyers, surveyors, builders. Need both legal and surveyor expertise. We need a good barrister who will tell us the law about what our situation is. Between our different properties there may be different laws and regulations. They will also let us know what is urgent.
- Organisation is key, it will be quite a detailed case.
- Sounds like the council are playing a two-way game, their not being direct or precise in what their saying.
- People's knowledge of their own properties is helpful.
- Suggest if the council contact us to go through a "particular person" so all the information is collected and fed through the same person.
- Get everything ready, the first step would be the ombudsman, court can come later.
- We can take their surveys but also get our own for our own evidence. Don't just rely on the councils information. Your own survey will either be able to agree or counter act what the councils survey says.
- We need to attack them in a challenging way, not in an aggressive way. But the council does need to justify what they are doing.
- Council doesn't have money, but would have insurance that will enable them to pay for a court case.
- Everyone's got to be really committed with it. Split it down so the work becomes effortless.
- We need to agree the letter, and all of us should then write and say this is the letter we have sent and we all agree with the letter (as different times) don't make any assumptions in the letter make it factual from the H&S point of view. Marcos happy to read through the letter before we send it.
- Don't use the words "acting on behalf of" as everyone should be acting.
- Suggest to make a committee and everything we send to council goes through that committee.

Action points since the meeting:

- Google form has been created to register for email updates.
- Sub categories of topics have been identified, **we need volunteers** to take ownership of a point and also helpers.

Sub categories include:

- 1) Fire safety regulations / health & safety regulations
 - 2) Media (TV, Newspapers)
 - 3) Social Media
 - 4) Admin (whatsapp group, emails, minute taking)
 - 5) Lobbying government
 - 6) Solicitor advice
 - 7) Elderly support
 - 8) Outreach (letter boxing, identifying missing community members and letting them know about the group.
- Trello / Slack has been set up for sub teams to communicate and keep track of tasks.

Updates of each categories can be shared during our next residents meeting. If no volunteer comes forward that topic is parked for the time being.

Regarding the suggestion of a “committee”, it need to be clear what their role would be. Suggestions cannot be made and soley put on the “committee” to handle alone, remember the main purpose of this group is to share information and to have impact with a community standing together.

We are all homeowners and volunteers, no one is formally qualified and so the information shared should not soley be relied on for your decisions or in lieu of your own research or legal advice as it is always changing as we find out more.