

Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce

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Rt. Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
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Dear Secretary of State

ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA (RBKC): CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY TO DELIVER A RECOVERY FOLLOWING THE GRENFELL TOWER TRAGEDY.

INTRODUCTION

We write with our latest views on the capacity and capability RBKC to deliver an effective recovery for those affected by the Grenfell Tower tragedy of 2017 and to re-establish community confidence in local governance.

At this two-year point since the tragedy, we acknowledge the significant change we have seen in the council since our work commenced. In some ways it is a different organisation, nevertheless we observe strategic weaknesses that concern us which we consider in further detail below.

The final section sets out what we would like to see from the council over the next period, in the hope that we can report later this year that the organisation has the capability to drive both delivery on the ground as well as sustainable change across the council.

Whilst progress has undoubtedly been made we remain concerned that RBKC is not yet achieving the level of performance in its recovery effort that we have consistently suggested they aim for. We have set the bar high, but our judgement on the organisational strengths and weaknesses has been reached taking into consideration everything we have seen after almost two years of work.

In many ways RBKC was a broken organisation in the autumn of 2017. It has repaired itself, and in some areas, it functions well. However, it is still some distance from being a high performing organisation that has the confidence of many of its residents in the north of the borough most affected by the tragedy. We hope to be proved wrong, but we are unconvinced that the current pace of change will achieve this in the foreseeable future.

CHANGES SINCE WE ARRIVED

There is no doubt that we have seen changes across the council. In many ways it is not the same organisation we first encountered in August 2017. At that time both the Leader and the Chief Executive had been in post a matter of weeks and were still coming to grips with the enormity of the situation. The scale of this emergency was such that any council would have struggled without help.

We found a council that clearly felt under siege and was itself struggling to come to terms with the terrible nature of the tragedy. In these circumstances they were attempting to make plans to pick up those services that had been taken over by London Gold¹, working out ways to start re-housing all those who had been made homeless by the fire and trying to formulate suitable support for those who needed it. We have not underestimated the challenges that these circumstances posed for the council faced in terms of delivering services to those most immediately affected by the fire.

After nine weeks, we noted in our first report that this council needed to work at **greater pace**, be **more empathic** in its service delivery and design, make sure that staff had **the right skills** and be **more innovative** in finding solutions for the challenges it faced. We had also observed that it was seen as distant, traditional, limited in understanding of collaborative working, with a lack of understanding of delivery of modern public services.

For clarity, our reference to working at ‘pace’, relates solely to how quickly the council manages and delivers its own work. How quickly it can develop, communicate and implement a plan for example, or make a change in policy. It should not be interpreted as suggesting that the council are being asked to put pressure on survivors and bereaved to make decisions they are not yet ready to make.

Since our first report the council has worked to change itself, including being more open and responsive to people’s needs. It has undertaken a number of consultations on a wide range of subjects from housing to governance issues. Indeed the “Creating Stronger Communities” consultation of Summer 2018 was described by one resident as “the best consultation this council has ever done”. Similarly, the consultation that led to the Council Plan which incorporated the Creating Stronger Communities findings along with conversations about priorities from the rest of the borough was the largest the council has undertaken.

The council asked the Centre for Public Scrutiny to undertake a review of governance to make it more open and transparent, and put in place measures to meet their recommendations.

In housing it has invested a considerable amount of money in securing over 300 properties in order to have a stock of housing to offer those made homeless by the fire. It has also personalised many of these homes to fit the individual requirements of the tenants regardless of whether they are homeowners or social tenants. Progress in rehousing was slower than we believed necessary. Beyond that it has begun a significant change programme:

¹ London Gold was made up Chief Executives and senior officers from other London Boroughs. It was the emergency command that took over the response from the council in the months immediately following the fire

- It brought the management and repair of its housing stock back in-house, implementing feedback received from consultation on this issue, and has focussed on reducing the backlog of repairs;
- It undertook a large consultation exercise with its residents on the future management of the council stock. At the outset of the consultation it had been intended that residents would be formally presented with different options for management and/or ownership of the stock. The exercise did not progress to the extent that residents were offered detailed and informed choices. This caused disappointment amongst some of its resident representatives. The council may need to return to this exercise in more detail in the future;
- At the behest of the MHCLG, the Council undertook an interactive consultation exercise with local residents to explore. This was initially well received and raised expectations. Continued uncertainty about appropriate levels of funding to follow through with these improvements has led to continued frustration for local residents. It is developing a wider housing strategy including how it can increase its social housing stock across the borough. This will inevitably require a high degree of innovation as delivering affordable housing in one of the most-high value housing areas in the world, with little available land and where two thirds of the residential stock is in Conservation areas, will be enormously challenging.

The council has also begun a programme of cultural change, devising new values for itself and beginning to make these a part of the day to day behaviour of Councillors and officers, undertaking a programme of training on a range of issues as well as undertaking a structural review. It may be too early to judge definitively but we are unconvinced that the cultural change programme is having penetration at all levels and areas of the organisation.

The election in May 2018 brought in 25 new Councillors, increasing the diversity from what had been a very homogenous council.

PROGRESS OVER THE PAST PERIOD

In the months since our last report the council has pushed forward on several workstreams. They have done a lot and we highlight some of the main areas here.

Recovery Strategy

Our last report looked forward to the council's Grenfell Recovery Strategy. This has been published and the council has committed £50m of revenue funding over the next five years toward services that support recovery. However, a lot of the programme is still to be developed in detail with key performance indicators and tangible outcomes yet to be defined. Nevertheless, this is a key milestone in the recovery process and perhaps the most tangible evidence that the council is moving from an emergency response to a planned recovery mode. Furthermore, they have made Grenfell Recovery the number one priority in the new Council Plan.

Within the Recovery Strategy, it is clear that the greatest focus has been on developing the dedicated service with bereaved and survivors in a way and at a pace that suits them. A strong foundation has been laid and while the service won't be fully operational until July 2019, this has been a genuine piece of co-design between service users and the council. Officers involved in developing this approach have done a good job in challenging circumstances.

We note however that several of the timescales have already slipped: the dedicated service was planned to be fully operational in April 2019 and will not be fully staffed until July and several of the elements of the community programme are already behind schedule.

The Recovery Strategy also sets out borough wide initiatives that will contribute to recovery. This is part of the commitment to develop the priorities that emerged from the Stronger Communities consultation with plans for an Economy Strategy; a new Youth offer; and a People Strategy. We understand that this is part of the emphasis that this is a “whole council” responsibility, and that the intention is that council wide activity that supports recovery is to be considered under the auspices of the Council Plan. However, in practice this means that delivery is dispersed across several plans. The council need to make sure that the governance of recovery pulls all the different strands together and explain how it will govern the programme and drive the delivery. Key performance indicators and tangible outcomes need to be defined. There is little in the strategy itself that explains how the council will govern the programme and drive delivery. We understand the council is working on this now and giving consideration to how it will manage the recovery process, both strategically with external partners and internally. Effective management of the entirety of the recovery programme will help contribute to developing a coherent and comprehensive recovery narrative.

Housing

Rehousing the number of displaced households in an area with a relatively small social housing stock was always going to be difficult. Prioritising resources to fund a large purchase programme was a powerful statement of commitment. It would now seem the end is in sight for the rehousing programme although the council has a small number of households many of whom have very complex care and support needs.

As of 6 June 2019, 1 household remains in hotel accommodation, from the 201 households made homeless by the tragedy. From the Tower and walkways 184 have moved in to permanent homes. Of the 17 remaining, 14 households are in temporary accommodation, 2 in serviced apartments and 1 in a hotel. Additionally, all but 7 of those households have accepted permanent homes, although they have not yet moved. Adaptations to permanent homes including necessary accessibility changes and personalisation at the request of the household are underway or have been completed.

The council is encountering difficulties and delays in resolving these final few rehousing cases and agrees with the Taskforce that having any households living in emergency accommodation after this length of time is unacceptable. That said the impediments to rehousing for these final households has little to do with the availability of suitable housing and much more to do with very complex care and support needs for households who have been severely traumatised.

The Recovery Strategy includes commitments to refurbish the Lancaster West Estate and effectively catch up investment on the rest of the housing stock. Determining priorities for investment and securing sufficient funds to support the required investment will be very challenging.

The council is now turning its mind to the longer-term challenge of increasing the proportion of affordable housing in the borough. Success in this endeavour will rely on a high degree of innovation. Whilst the immediate task of rehousing residents made homeless by the tragedy

is within reach of completion, the wider housing challenges for the council going forward are substantial.

Governance

The council have been implementing a series of changes about how their governance works. We welcome their appetite to modernise their governance procedures. Recommendations of the Centre for Public Scrutiny are being implemented. A programme of Listening Forums has been set up. These are meetings in different locations and times where people can speak about their local issue directly to RBKC leadership. At the time of writing 6 Listening Forums have been held across the borough.

The council has undertaken a Borough Area Governance Review to look at “how decisions are made for the whole of the borough and at how local people and organisations can become more involved”². The panel overseeing this has taken evidence from external sources including other councils. This work includes a review of how Overview and Scrutiny works in RBKC. This is clearly a work in progress: the council agreed in May to the proposal for an over-arching Overview and Scrutiny Committee which will “prioritise the Council’s scrutiny work”³ and to identify themes for four Scrutiny Committees following consultation with Councillors and a resident’s conference. We have noticed that the recent Grenfell Scrutiny Committees have run better, but this was from an exceptionally low base. In addition, the council is currently working on a new set of governance and monitoring arrangements for delivery of the Grenfell Recovery Strategy. We would suggest that the council needs to ensure that it is open and transparent – and most important proactive - in reporting publicly about delivery of the Grenfell Strategy.

The political leadership are actively developing less experienced Councillors by giving them distinct responsibilities. A programme to support and develop all Councillors, especially those newly elected, is in place. Nevertheless, we have seen in public meetings unedifying behaviour from Councillors from all sides: this gives cause for concern.

Community Relationship and Communications

As noted earlier the Stronger Communities Consultation held over the summer and autumn of 2018 has been praised by some in the local community. The council has clearly increased the number and means by which it engages with its residents. We have heard several times that there are now too many consultations and the council needs to streamline them. It has also bolstered the Community Engagement Team putting in a temporary post focussing on the wider community programme element outlined in the Recovery Strategy.

More recently there have been meetings between the political leadership and some of those most directly affected by the Grenfell tragedy. Meetings between representative groups and the political leadership are relatively new. However, we do not see the same level or consistency of engagement either at Member or senior officer level with the wider community.

² See RBKC Website: <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/council-councillors-and-democracy/how-council-works/governance-review>

³ See RBKC Website, paper 10 Appx A, paragraphs 3.5 – 3.10: <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/committees/Meetings/tabid/73/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/669/Meeting/7750/Committee/1535/SelectedTab/Documents/Default.aspx>

We have seen pockets of good practice in terms of fostering a good relationship with service users and the community. One of the best examples has been the Local Account Group, made up of residents, service users and people representing service users. Set up by Adult Social Care services to help them design service, specify new systems, review day-to-day work and hold them to account. We observed the group in action and were impressed by the excellent joint working, the positivity, and drive and ambition to make things better.

The communications review begun in October 2018 was only completed in March 2019. There is now a settled communications team with new leadership. We hope that this will help the development of a culture of greater openness and transparency within the council. To date we feel that communication has not been effective.

The Council is still struggling to convert the high degree of social capital that is clearly apparent into a positive force. There are many groups and individuals in the north of the borough who are keen to help shape and be part of the solution. The council have an opportunity to be innovative in how they harness that enthusiasm. We note they are soon to provide support to build capacity within Resident Associations in the borough.

ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTIONS

Set out below is our assessment of the key areas that need further work.

Culture

The drive for a new 'culture' across the council has not yet had the consistent impact that is required. While the Leader and Chief Executive have initiated a culture change, we are not convinced that it is being driven across all functions with the vigour that is needed. We have seen little evidence to convince us, for example that the culture of silo working is really being tackled. We would like to see more evidence that senior officers are working together strategically to ensure that culture change, and recovery, is woven through everything they do.

Recovery Strategy

The recovery picture remains opaque. There is a strategic failure to present a coherent narrative on recovery and the progress and outcomes that have or will be delivered. This means that it is difficult for us, never mind the bereaved, survivors and wider community to see whether the council is really delivering or not. It also means that the council is missing an opportunity to rebuild their relationship with the bereaved, survivors and wider community by being genuinely open and transparent.

In December 2018 we raised questions about how the Recovery Strategy's delivery would be driven, how risks would be identified and managed and what the success measures would be, particularly as services transitioned from the Grenfell Directorate across the whole council. We still do not have confidence that this has been thought through well enough.

We explained earlier what we mean by saying the council needs to inject more pace to their work. The issue of pace still needs to be addressed. Too often particular workstreams are delayed or take a long time to reach fruition – the review of the communications team being a case in point. Many elements of the Recovery Strategy are still in development and will not be finalised until the summer. Similarly, the wider community programme is still in development: we are assured that the churn in the community engagement team will not

affect their timetable. We hope that is correct, but our experience of the council suggests that timetables and deadlines can easily slip. Supporting plans like the Economy Strategy are still in development. We have very recently seen the draft People Strategy which sets out, at a high level, how the council will make sure that all staff have the training, tools and resources to do their jobs well.

All this means the capacity and corporate capability to drive sustainable change is of concern to us.

Community Relationship and Communications

The quality of the council's relationship with the local community in the north of the borough is inconsistent and too frequently weak. The council have rightly focussed their efforts on bereaved and survivors. However, the relationship with the wider community in North Kensington has not made sufficient progress. In some respects, it is going backwards: while a fluctuating relationship is to be expected, in the circumstances we would like to see the council be clear about its aspirations for a better relationship and to make sure the capacity is there in the long-term to achieve it. We still see inconsistent engagement. We have heard multiple examples of senior people attending an initial meeting, making promises to engage and then they are never seen by the community again. We are pleased that a new head of the Community Engagement Team has been appointed and its capacity boosted. We hope that it can begin to repair the damage that inconsistency has produced.

The importance of the Community Engagement Team to the council's efforts to repair its relationship with the community in the north of the borough cannot be over-stated. They have done some positive work. There has been a long period of uncertainty over the future management of the team with consequences on staff empowerment and commitment to a future within RBKC. This has been resolved very recently with the recruitment of a new head of team, a strengthening in capacity to work with the community in the north of the borough and confirmation that for the immediate future the Chief Executive will be overseeing their work himself. It will be important that the team works to overcome the lengthy uncertainty and is empowered to embed longer term plans.

We want to see regular messages about what the council is doing put out via a wide range of different channels. In one instance we were disappointed that we were pointed to council committee papers published on their website, as evidence of communication with the community.

Governance

Elected members from all sides are not consistently demonstrating the community leadership skills and capabilities to match the challenges they face. Often the atmosphere at public meetings is hostile: responding appropriately can be challenging. We have witnessed behaviours in public meetings that have been unedifying. We understand the pressures on members who experience every day the frustrations from the local community and recognise the challenges they face. This makes it more imperative that each councillor steps up and demonstrates self-awareness and integrity in their role.

Conclusion

In preparing this report we again asked ourselves the question whether we can give you the assurance that this council has the capacity and capability to drive forward delivery of a recovery.

Whilst some of the right steps are being taken, there remain too many gaps in what we would expect from an effective and capable high performing organisation. In our reflections, we were aware that all too often we were identifying the same problems we have raised in earlier reports. During our consideration of different workstreams we found ourselves still concerned about the overall pace of change and/or delivery, looking for effectiveness at both strategic and operational levels, and seeing the ongoing problems the council have in communicating what they are doing. These echoes of our first observations in 2017 has led us to conclude that there remain underlying problems within the council's approach that still need to be addressed.

Overall, we had hoped that the council would be further forward in their plans and delivery than they are. Many of their plans are not finalised, and we have not seen **clear written operational plans**. Positive outcomes are delayed or unapparent.

Therefore, we cannot yet give you the full assurance that we had hoped to do at this stage.

WHAT WE WANT TO SEE OVER THE NEXT PERIOD

Overall, we need to see a stronger more strategic and dynamic organisation, consistently focussed on change for the better. We would like to:

- See clear **written operational plans for all workstreams** that contribute to recovery. Plans should have clearly defined outcomes as well as outputs, timescales, responsible Councillors and Officers, measures of success, risk registers and mitigation plans.
- Receive stronger assurance and demonstration that the leadership can drive recovery at pace. Robust and agile governance plans to drive this would help.
- See that the Leadership is bringing the whole council together behind their recovery vision to actively address silo working and engender council-wide culture change.
- See that it is clearly communicating the recovery narrative including the risks to it, and mitigation plans via a range of channels demonstrating their commitment to the spirit of the Hillsborough Charter.
- Better programme management of the recovery programme. For example, we would like to see it demonstrating a clear understanding and reporting of success measures.
- See a convincing long-term housing strategy to address the investment challenges the Council faces.
- See honest analysis and consideration of the capacity and skills in the council to face on-going and future challenges. This should include both internal challenges around delivering culture change as well as external challenges like the impact of the Public Inquiry.
- Give community engagement the strategic prominence required to begin to address the hostility and mistrust expressed, particularly in from some communities in North Kensington. The council needs to do more to build on the social capital that has been evident in the past two years.

We would like the council to address all this as soon as possible in the hopes that this will inject further pace into the recovery efforts.

NEXT STEPS

We have in this report set some challenges to the council that we know will take them some time to deliver. We have never underestimated the enormity of the task. Nevertheless, we

suggest that three to four months is sufficient time for the council to provide us with better evidence that consistent delivery is in train. We propose therefore that we begin to consider our next report in late August with a view to providing you with our views in October.

We would be happy to discuss any aspects of this report with you further should you wish.

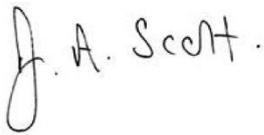
Yours sincerely



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