

Eastfields Estate, Merton: Lessons Learned and Next Steps



CLARION
HOUSING GROUP

September 2021

Foreword

Clarion Housing Group is committed to being open and transparent in all that we do. That is why, when the unacceptable housing conditions experienced by some residents on our Eastfields Estate came to light, we resolved to carry out an urgent investigation into what had gone wrong and report its findings.

This report is prompted by the experiences of some of our residents - to whom we owe an unreserved apology. We have already taken action to carry out repairs and ensure our homes are up to standard.

We were determined to understand why conditions in some of our homes had deteriorated and why we had not engaged with our residents as frequently as we should have. We are now in contact directly with residents following a door knocking exercise of every home on the estate and we are taking appropriate steps to remind residents of how to raise their concerns with us.

We are confident that Clarion understands what went wrong and why it happened, is taking all the appropriate action and has the right processes in place going forward. A major £1.3bn regeneration programme is underway and is set to transform the estate into the high quality and sustainable housing that our residents need and deserve. We are fully committed to working with our partners and stakeholders in turning these ambitious plans into a reality and changing the lives of residents for the better.



David Avery

Chair, Clarion Housing Group



David Orr

Chair, Clarion Housing Association

Executive Summary

The approach we had taken in managing homes nearing the end of their life was not robust enough. As a consequence we had some residents living in homes which were in a poor condition. We were too reliant on residents reporting issues and chasing us to ensure the work was done. We did not have a wider plan of investment for the estate other than the regeneration programme, nor did we proactively check the conditions inside residents' homes. We have apologised unreservedly to those residents we failed.

As an organisation, we will learn the lessons from Eastfields and have set out our plan to begin changing how we work.

Our investigation has highlighted the following issues

- The buildings on the Eastfields estate were poorly designed and near the end of their life which is why we have a regeneration plan in place.
- The cost of maintaining these homes has rapidly increased and their deterioration has accelerated.
- Our focus on the regeneration programme meant that we got the balance wrong in terms of investing in existing properties.
- We have not engaged with residents enough. If we had, we may have identified problems and been in a position to address them sooner.
- The regeneration has taken significantly longer than expected and in recent years we have taken a responsive, rather than proactive, approach. In hindsight, a planned maintenance programme may have highlighted many of these issues at an earlier stage.

Our actions to improve, manage and resolve issues over the last 12 weeks have been swift and effective - including knocking on the door of every resident and undertaking thorough inspections and surveys. We are working closely with residents, both on an individual basis and through the Resident Association, as well as the local authority to improve conditions on the estate. We are operating in a challenging environment of skills shortages, which is affecting the whole of the UK, but are continuing to work closely with our contractors to deal with problems as quickly as possible.

1. Background

The Eastfields Estate was built in the 1970s. It is comprised of 466 homes with a mix of 1, 2 and 3 bedroom flats and 3 bedroom houses. Almost half of the homes on the estate are privately owned. The homes on the estate are coming towards the end of their life, which is why the entire estate is to be demolished and rebuilt as part of Clarion's £1.3 billion regeneration programme in Merton. Subject to planning approval, there will be 800 new homes created in Eastfields, along with new shops, leisure facilities, and green spaces.

Between May and June 2021, the substandard conditions of some of Clarion's properties on the estate were brought to light in a number of media reports. The immediate priority was to rectify the issues raised but we also wanted to understand how the situation had arisen in the first place. This prompted Clare Miller, Chief Executive Officer of Clarion Housing Group, to task a senior member of the management team with conducting an investigation.

The investigation was to determine why conditions in some properties had deteriorated to such an extent, whether teams were clear on their roles and had the tools and resources they needed to do their jobs, and the nature of communication with and from residents.

Clarion's investigation examined the individual cases highlighted in the media, as well as the wider situation on the estate. This included speaking to hundreds of residents during visits to their homes. Some 50 members of staff across a number of departments were interviewed or took part in group discussions and documentation from project, team and board meetings was also examined.

2. Housing conditions

Regeneration

It is widely accepted that the only sustainable solution to the condition of homes at Eastfields is to regenerate the estate. This is the strategy we have been following in partnership with the London Borough of Merton.

The plan to regenerate the estate resulted in an approach of completing structural and external works that were deemed essential, and responding to requests from residents rather than automatically replacing things such as kitchens and bathrooms. We have already replaced 86 boilers, 11 kitchens and 7 bathrooms over the past five years. However, our approach meant that some homes were not in an acceptable condition and our discussions with residents in recent months have identified 15 kitchens, 14 bathrooms, 1 toilet and 1 boiler as needing replacement. These improvements are currently in progress.

The process of regeneration is complex and expensive, and would not be expected to happen quickly. Nonetheless the programme has taken significantly longer than expected to progress. There were several opportunities to consider what additional steps may have been needed to maintain our homes. However, these opportunities were missed, which left some homes to fall below the standard we expect.

Repairs

Our investigation found that the fact that the estate was designated for regeneration did not affect the repairs service we provide to residents. However, it is evident from our recent discussions with residents that some residents had not reported repairs because they did not think the problem would be resolved. We acknowledge that some residents may not know how to report problems, along with a lack of regular home inspections, has resulted in a partial picture of the repairs needed.

We also looked at repairs which had been reported. Sometimes repairs are not straightforward, particularly when they are related to leaks in deteriorating properties. It is clear that some residents were not kept sufficiently updated and that some repairs, particularly those involving complex issues which cannot be completed in one visit, could have been handled better.

The performance figures across the Responsive Repairs contract in Merton were reviewed for specific periods during the last two years¹. Key points to note from the data include:

1. A lower number of repairs were completed in March to May 2021, as a result of pandemic-related resourcing issues.
2. Eastfields properties represent 6% of the total repairs completed by Clarion in Merton, which has ranged between 4% and 12% over the last two years.

The challenges posed by the ageing and poorly designed homes on the Eastfields Estate make delivering a repairs service more complex than would otherwise be the case.

In response to the feedback from residents and Clarion staff about the issues around repairs, we will look at how we measure our performance and use data to understand recurring issues that can be proactively addressed.

Damp and mould issues, exacerbated by leaks, were identified in a number of households during our visits to residents earlier this summer. As a result we are reviewing our approach to managing these cases. A key part of this will be using data to identify issues and deploying a range of techniques, working in partnership with residents, to resolve the issue.

Pest Control

At Eastfields, the pest issue had extended beyond being one which could be tackled on an individual level. During the door knocking sessions we held in June, 40% of households said they'd experienced issues with pests or vermin, which highlighted the extent of the issue. We have now carried out a full pest control programme across those homes on the estate which have been affected.

3. Relationships with residents

Regeneration

There was frequent engagement with residents regarding the regeneration plans up to September 2019. However, after starting a full review of the regeneration scheme in October 2019, the level of engagement dropped significantly. This caused uncertainty among some residents as to whether the estate regeneration would happen. We are clear that we should have kept residents updated and done more to set out the reasons for the delay.

Queries and complaints

There is evidence from resident feedback, supported by face to face discussions with residents, that some find it difficult to contact us. This is particularly the case when the issue is complex or there are multiple repairs and problems cannot be resolved in one visit. Some residents have found it difficult to find out what is happening, who is responsible, and the timescale for issues to be managed and resolved.

¹ We looked at data between October and December 2019, October and December 2020, and March and May 2021. These periods provide a good overview of performance pre-pandemic, during the recovery from the first lockdown, and the current service.

In a recent survey we have found an increase in residents saying they find it difficult to access Clarion services increasing from 16% to 25%. We are in the process of understanding the reasons for this so we can act accordingly. There is no difference reported in the ease or difficulty of accessing Clarion's services between residents living in areas earmarked for regeneration and those elsewhere.

Complaints from residents living in the London Borough of Merton take slightly longer to resolve in comparison to complaints elsewhere, at 22 days compared to a 19 day average. This difference is driven mainly by the nature of complex repairs which take longer to diagnose and resolve than simple routine repairs.

Resident Involvement

Special working groups looking at the Eastfields and High Path regeneration projects met several times in the latter part of 2020 (July, August, and November). The groups were made up of residents, councillors and Clarion staff. Their purpose was to review existing stock and communal areas, look at areas that might need planned works, and inspect communal areas to ensure standards were being maintained. These meetings resulted in a programme of painting and decorating, as well as repairs and pest control in communal areas.

There is an active Residents' Association on the Eastfields Estate, which is given updates by key operational teams working on the estate.

In June 2021 we opened an estate office to provide direct contact with those residents on the estate who need it as we progress our regeneration project.

4. Immediate actions taken

At Eastfields

Clarion has taken swift action to put things right with those residents who have been living in substandard housing and is working with them to improve the conditions of their homes.

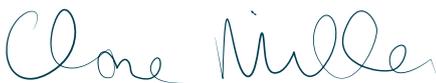
Here are specific steps we have taken to improve things on the Eastfields Estate:

1. We tried to speak to every household on the estate. This resulted in 72% of households being spoken to in June 2021 and asked for details of any outstanding or unreported repairs. In the weeks since, more than 400 repairs have been completed – including 145 raised by residents during the door knocking exercise.
2. We now have full time staff and a dedicated office on the estate, so that residents can report any repairs or problems in person.
3. Our contractor Equans, has appointed a supervisor to work exclusively at Eastfields, to help specify and oversee the completion of works. We are reviewing the contract we have with Equans to see where further improvements can be made.
4. Clarion is preparing to submit a planning application for the first phase of the regeneration of the estate – which will enable the first 198 new homes to be built if approved.
5. Clarion has committed to making sufficient investment in the estate while the regeneration progresses. We are assessing the need through a programme of stock condition surveys and will develop a medium-term investment plan from the findings. We will keep residents informed of all developments that affect them.
6. A programme of regular checks will be made on homes on the estate to pick up on any problems at an earlier stage.
7. A pest control company has been brought in to deal with problems across the estate.

5. Wider learning for Clarion

We are determined to ensure that the situation as Eastfields does not occur elsewhere. Here are a number of actions we will be taking across the Group to ensure we learn and improve:

1. As part of the approach to developing regeneration proposals, we will ensure that a medium-term asset management plan is presented at the point of approval for the project. This plan will then be reviewed twice a year to ensure it remains fit for purpose and homes remain in an acceptable condition. Residents' experiences and views are considered as part of this check.
2. We will build more opportunities for residents to share their views before we take decisions and we will hold conversations across the country to understand their views and incorporate this into our service design and future engagement mechanisms.
3. We will complete the ongoing programme of Housing Association service reviews to ensure Clarion is sufficiently customer focused, effective and efficient with clear roles and responsibilities. Residents will be involved in this process.
4. We will review the scope and presentation of reporting and management information to ensure this is fit for purpose and drives improvement and success.
5. We will communicate with our customers to ensure that they understand how to report issues to Clarion and understand the repairs, complaints process to ensure we have full visibility of issues. As part of this, we will seek to understand the reasons for historical under reporting.
6. We will complete a review of the repairs customer journey, encompassing learnings from the exercise with a particular focus on complex case management and resolution.
7. We will review our approach to damp and mould problems.
8. We will review leadership responsibilities ensuring there are separate executive leads for delivering our customer and asset strategies to ensure we can drive swift progress.
9. We are reviewing the wider investment requirements and will revise our budgets accordingly.
10. We will strengthen the coordination of pest control where there are multiple outbreaks within a block or estate area to prevent the problem from escalating.



Clare Miller
Chief Executive
Clarion Housing Group

Clarion Housing Group  clarionhg.com
Level 6  [@clarion_group](https://twitter.com/clarion_group)
6 More London Place  [/clarion-housing-group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/clarion-housing-group)
Tooley Street  [@clarionhousing](https://www.facebook.com/clarionhousing)
London  [@clarion.housing](https://www.instagram.com/clarion.housing)
SE1 2DA

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