

# Minutes and record of site inspection meeting between RBG and Residents of the Vanbrugh Park Estate 1/06/23.

## Context:

This site inspection was called as a result of a request by residents at the AGM of the Vanbrugh Park Estate Residents' Association 16/05/23. Residents were concerned about long outstanding maintenance and repair issues across the estate which are severely impacting residents' health, safety and wellbeing. A dispute between residents of the mews flats and RBG regarding the placement of pot plants in their blocks' outdoor areas has been heavily publicised and a petition on Change.org currently has attracted 30,766 signatures. Residents have sought advice from fire engineers, two of whom are Grenfell Tower Fire Inquiry expert witnesses, (Edwin Galea, Jamie Clark and José Torero), and the London Fire Brigade who all agree the pots and benches do not pose a fire risk. In addition, the destructive management of the community planting and lawns of the estate has caused great distress.

In view of the large number of issues on VPE it was agreed with the council that a guided site visit was the best way to communicate and demonstrate the impact of the lack of maintenance and care on residents and identify a positive compromise for managing the future of the mews flats front gardens. [A risk register produced by Nina Lundvall](#) formed the basis for the walk round.

## Attendees

### Royal Borough of Greenwich:

Richard Parkin: Senior Assistant Director of Repairs and Investment.

Tony Gleeson: Fire Safety

Carey Gay: Caretaking Manager.

Christine St Matthew Daniel: Councillor Blackheath Westcombe Ward

Leo Fletcher: Councillor Blackheath Westcombe Ward

### Residents:

Laura Cade

Duncan Brown

Beth Higham-Edwards

Alberte Lauridsen

Mick Cooke

Ray Cooke

Clare Barry

Michael Gallagher

Siobhan Graham

Virginia Clements

Nina Lundvall

### Apologies:

Pat Slattery: Councillor Greenwich Park Ward, Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Homelessness

Douglas Harrison (resident)

Alex Wheeler (resident and chair of VPERA)

Billy Taggart (resident)  
William Egan (resident)

## Minutes:

### The Undercroft:



*Above: the Undercroft beneath Combe Mews. Multiple health hazards from vermin, leaks, structural and electrical issues. Pigeon nesting in an open coaxial cable box. Leak below flat 3.*

The tour started in the undercroft, a huge gated unused area containing empty garages and sheds, which was identified as having significant health and safety issues that impact residents in the Combe Mews flats above. The undercroft has been closed for many years and shows many signs of neglect. Photos attached to this document illustrate the scale of both the space and its problems. There are mounds of pigeon droppings (see attached document about the diseases spread by pigeon droppings), pigeons are able to easily access the undercroft and nest there. There are also rats and mice living in the space and the mesh gates do not stop dried droppings blowing around the wider area.

A waste pipe from flat 3 has been overflowing onto the floor since at least 1997, this has been reported innumerable times to no effect and the smell pervades the flats above and the roadway outside causing distress to residents. Pipes running along the ceiling are rotten, covered in pigeon droppings and with lagging hanging down.

Exposed electricity, phone and internet cables run outside and inside the undercroft in an ad-hoc manner, often exposed to vermin and the elements, the main electricity fuse box and associated cabling were behind an open door. The soffit of the entire space is scorched and filthy – evidence of a fire from many years ago on the east side of the space, is still evident – and often damp. The disused garages have wooden doors which would be readily available fuel in the event of fire.

This lack of maintenance and care obviously presents fire and health risks to residents – please see all attached photographs. Residents questioned whether the historic lack of maintenance provided

to the mews flats and the undercroft was due to undisclosed RBG plans to demolish low rise residents in favour of building higher density buildings. Parkin and Fletcher categorically denied that there were any plans to demolish any of the Vanbrugh Park Estate.

**Exterior:** as a result of persistent damp and unresolved subsidence issues the entire block is at risk of becoming structurally unsound. Block work is eroding in many places. Subsidence is affecting the staircase adjacent to Vanbrugh Park Road and in consequence the whole of 1-19 Combe Mews.

**Action:** - the whole of the undercroft should be cleaned, the vermin eradicated, all cabling checked and made safe, pipes and lagging replaced and the leak from flat 3 finally fixed at the first possible opportunity and further investigations as to the damage caused. The exterior issues must be made good. Environmental health professionals and structural engineers should be asked to inspect the space urgently to highlight risks we, as lay people, may have missed. This level of disrepair and neglect would not be tolerated in any workplace and is wholly unacceptable where people live. Once all this remedial work is completed the future use of the space for the benefit of VPE residents should be addressed.

#### 1-19 Combe Mews:



*Above: Combe Mews showing deterioration of walls, subsidence effect on stairs, and overflowing sink due to blocked plumbing.*

The mews flats above the undercroft have many issues with damp including mould and mushrooms growing on walls. One resident has been unable to claim for repairs from their insurer because the insurers were able to demonstrate the damage was caused by lack of maintenance by RBG. Residents live with the constant insecurity of living above the undercroft with its hygiene, vermin, damp and structural issues and suffer both physically and mentally as a result. Drains routinely backup filling sinks etc. in the flats, one resident this week has been unable to get anyone from maintenance to



come out to their full kitchen sink. The system for logging maintenance jobs seems to be dysfunctional and where repairs are undertaken they are often done as 'patch up' jobs, masking rather than tackling the underlying problem. There are also leaks from the roof so residents have damp on both their floors and ceilings.

**Action: - remedial work in the undercroft should address many of the problems of the flats above. The drains throughout the estate are in poor repair often overflowing with sewage and should be thoroughly inspected and repair or replacement work undertaken. Residents should have a reliable and effective way of accessing repair teams when they need them. Repairs must not be done to a poor standard and only to mask existing and historic issues.**

Retrospective note: an emergency team came to assess the blocked plumbing causing back filling of kitchen sinks on 02.06.23 with the following conclusions:

- The stack is fully blocked in the undercroft and will need to be entirely replaced next week. It's four or five metres long. It goes into a drain cupboard that we did not see last night and this is filled with dead pigeons.
- The plumbers advised residents to use their kitchen sinks, run the washing machine etc. over the weekend and the non-sewage waste will simply run into the open undercroft.

#### **9-21 Vanbrugh Park Road:**



*Above: images showing overflowing drain beneath Vanbrugh Park Road mews flats and superficial and partly finished wall repairs.*

An access stair to 9-21 Vanbrugh Park Rd has been repaired in the last 2 weeks. The cement repairs to the steps are already crumbling and the repair is not going to last. Scaffolding was in place for 3-4 weeks for this repair. The wall immediately on the staircase was painted and had superficial repairs done whilst the wall it runs into was not touched. The door to the bin store is severely damaged but was not repaired at the same time as the staircase and remains open to the elements and deteriorating.

Many garages under these flats are either empty and/or neglected. One garage has raw sewage bubbling up and others have rat infestations. We weren't able to access this garage as the door was stuck, but have included a photo taken the day before.

**Action: - repairs to be done ‘in the round’ rather than piecemeal. Materials and workmanship to be improved. Garages to be cleaned, drains repaired and subsequently let to the many residents on the estate who are on the waiting list.**

## 2-20 Combe Avenue



*Above: Broken plumbing and guttering on Combe Avenue mews flats. Outdoor space used for small front garden with clear route to front door.*

Tony Gleeson and Richard Parkin reiterated the council’s ‘zero tolerance’ policy to fire risks which means that all plants and objects would have to be removed. Residents disputed the credibility of this policy given the inconsistent approach to fire risks across the estate (including the electrics in the undercroft as detailed above), and questioned the risk associated with the pots citing the evidence they had received from experts. Residents spoke about the part the planted areas play in their positive neighbour relations and that the removal would poorly affect residents’ mental and physical health. Parkin explained that RBG had self-referred and is under review because of fire safety lapses elsewhere.

Residents reiterated the advice from multiple qualified fire safety experts and the LFB who do not see the plants as a risk ([see attached reports](#)). Parkin and Gleeson agreed that the plant pots are ‘very low risk’ from a fire safety perspective, however their liability and staff resources are the main affecting factor for RBG. There was a discussion about possible ways to transfer liability including a change to leases/tenancies to encompass the small areas enclosed by the coal bunkers in the property boundaries.

Parkin was asked to provide an explanation of the ‘compromise’ he had agreed to in the last resident’s meeting held on 16.05.23. He explained that there are two approaches the council could take; a ‘zero tolerance/zero risk’ approach which included removing all objects from the landing, or a ‘managed approach’ where residents would be permitted gardens/benches outside their properties as long as they fell within certain parameters, which are thus far undefined. He explained that the ‘managed approach’ would require checks that the plants outside of properties continue to adhere to certain parameters, which would be decided upon with the advice of fire safety professionals and consultation with residents. Parkin said that the checks might have to incur a charge to the leaseholders. Leaseholders questioned why a ‘managed approach’ requires more checks than the ‘zero-tolerance’ approach the council tried to roll out prior to halts taking place. Gleeson explained that checking for zero tolerance would have taken place every 1/2/3 years when RBG conducts fire safety risk assessments, however had no response when residents questioned why checking parameters maintained in a ‘managed approach’ would require additional checks (and therefore additional charges).

RBG agreed to explore working towards a managed solution, and a pilot project with the estate was considered by residents and Parkin as a possible next step. Parkin agreed to take this proposal to his colleagues. Residents requested that they were kept up to date with any cost implications that might impact them relating to this project, including accurate breakdowns.

Other issues with blocked gutters and an overflowing sewer pipe at the back of 2-20 Combe Avenue and some empty garages underneath them were also highlighted.

**Action: Managed solution to maintaining access to be explored.**

#### **Westcombe Court.**

Westcombe Court was not visited but the group discussed the proposed refurbishment. A meeting was held for leaseholders this week but only two people attended. Communication with residents in Westcombe Court, including a lack of notice given for the meeting was acknowledged to be poor. Residents were told that throughout the works, access to a lift will be maintained. Residents queried the necessity of having scaffolding surrounding the entire block for the duration of the works, raising concerns for vulnerable residents if not minimised and well managed. Residents also raised concerns for the potential removal of the historic tiles on the lift shaft and water tower, at detriment to the architectural character and individual identity of the estate, and care should be taken to maintain and restore rather than remove.

**Action: Communication improvements, meaningful resident consultation on the proposals.**

#### **Conclusion:**

The meeting was useful and should benefit both the council and residents.

Carey Gay agreed that the grounds maintenance was over-zealous and that the contractors were not carrying out their duties in a sufficiently careful way.

Residents are keen to be part of a pilot scheme for a managed approach of the use of external areas with regards to fire safety.

Overall, improved communication and consultation across all issues was agreed upon by residents and RBG.

It was clearly communicated that many residents are living in great mental and physical stress because of the neglect of the fabric of the estate and that this cannot be allowed to continue. It would also be entirely unfair for residents to be surcharged for extensive repairs that have been solely caused by decades of poor maintenance by RBG – a good analogy would be the water companies, whose failure to invest in repairs and infrastructure over decades has now necessitated far greater investment at the expense of the customers. A situation that has been criticised across the political spectrum.

#### **Photos**

[More photos from the site visit can be found here.](#)

#### **Reports**

[Report from qualified fire engineers explaining why the estate front gardens are not a credible risk can be found here.](#)

[London Property Licencing safety inspection requested by residents can be found here.](#)

[Original RBG risk assessment for 2-20 Combe Avenue identifying 17 risks can be found here.](#)