

● **Staff finally moved from condemned building after being forced to work in 'dehumanising' conditions**

# Employees evacuated after gas leak

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Hundreds of employees from the social development and economic development, environmental affairs and tourism departments had to be moved to alternative, temporary offices at the weekend.

A gas leak on Thursday last week at the Beacon Hill, King William's Town, head office – housing employees from both departments – finally sparked some action after years of complaints.

Oversight visits revealed that apart from unsafe fire escapes, ventilation and air-conditioning problems, and condemned lifts, the building is in-

fested with reptiles and birds.

Finance MEC Oscar Mabuyane described the workers' conditions as dehumanising, saying he had reached a compromise with union members to move government employees from the condemned building to the old Standard Bank building in King William's Town.

"It's dangerous. I think we've allowed the situation to go on unabated for too long," Mabuyane said.

The landlord for the department of social development, Delta Property Trust, however, said on Tuesday they were struggling to get the green light to start with repairs to the building.

Social development portfolio chair Christian Martin said there were extreme and valid health concerns for all who worked there.

"One snake for me is one too many," Martin said.

He said his main concern was that services to the elderly and vulnerable would be interrupted by the hasty move – effected on Friday.

Otis Shabalala, the chief operating officer for Delta Property Trust which owns the building, confirmed the evacuation of the King William's Town building following a gas-leak incident in the server room.

"We understand that the tenant did not follow the safety protocol and failed to call out

the fire department, which is suitably qualified to decontaminate the building.

"Subsequently, the building had to be evacuated for us to decontaminate and clean it.

"Independent air quality reports are expected by Friday," he said.

Shabalala said they had been engaging with the department of public works since 2017 and had approved a R40m capital expenditure plan to upgrade the building.

"Because of the scale and nature of the refurbishments, certain areas of the building had to be vacated on a rotational basis.

"We therefore committed more than R1m to ensure the

safe and uninterrupted workflow of tenant staff," he said.

"We appointed a contractor in April 2017 to implement these upgrades but their efforts to commence work have constantly been frustrated.

"This forced our hand in formally writing to the tenant and considering all avenues open to us, especially as the safety of all tenants is non-negotiable."

Social development department spokesperson Mzukisi Solani confirmed that a contingency plan had to be put in place on Friday for hundreds of staff members to evacuate the building.

In November, Martin asked premier Phumulo Masualle to intervene in the matter.

A building inspection report by the National Occupational Safety Association listed several problems with the building, including a lack of air-conditioning and no ventilation, office workers suffering from heat stress in the building, as not all windows could be opened, water outages, faulty toilet doors, and lifts non-compliant with safety standards.

In a separate report by the department of labour and the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, it was noted that the fire escapes had been locked.

Martin said in his letter that many staff members had to be medically boarded because of the unhealthy conditions inside the building.

"The committee has noted with extreme concern the slow pace [at] which this important matter was being addressed . . . and respectfully felt that this issue is a ticking time bomb that needs your urgent intervention," he wrote.

Martin also said the committee feared a class action lawsuit from employees that could run into millions of rand.

"I am really worried how this would affect the services NGOs are rendering to the elderly and the vulnerable.

"People were collapsing inside that building. Something had to be done."

The DA's Kobus Botha said he too was worried about the impact on social services in the

province.

"It will take months before the department is fully functional again.

"Office equipment and documentation need to be moved while officials will battle with lack of connectivity.

"This will also have a negative effect on the fund transfer to over 3,000 NPOs [nonprofit organisations] across the province," he said.

Public works spokesperson Vuyokazi Mabanjwa said: "We are working on options with all the involved government departments.

"We will issue a statement when all has been finalised." – *Additional reporting Nomazima Nkosi*