

## **HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **FIRE SAFETY SCRUTINY REVIEW**

#### **Notes from the London Scrutiny Network meeting – 13 October 2017**

Cllr Mick O’Sullivan, Chair of the Housing Scrutiny Committee, and the committee clerk attended the recent London Scrutiny Network meeting on fire safety. The session included presentations from the Centre for Public Scrutiny, the London Fire Brigade, the London Assembly, and the Royal Society of Arts.

A number of points were made which were relevant to the committee’s review, as follows:

- Local authorities need to take responsibility for the housing stock they own, even if they do not manage it directly. Although Grenfell Tower was managed by Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, the local authority was being held to account for the failings that led to the fire.
- Local authorities need to engage with residents in a meaningful way, and build trust and positive relationships with local communities. Some local authorities tend to carry out resident engagement in a very formal way; it may be beneficial to carry out more engagement in community settings and online.
- Residents who are worried, distressed or angry may not engage with local authorities in a calm and controlled way. This does not mean their views should be discounted.
- High rise buildings will become increasingly common as the density of cities increases. In general, fires in tall buildings need to be tackled internally, as hoses from fire engines cannot reach the upper floors of tall buildings.
- The ‘Stay Put’ Policy is still supported by the London Fire Brigade. Many high-rise residential buildings are not designed to facilitate mass evacuation and therefore ‘Stay Put’ is the safest option. Mass evacuations can hinder the work of the Fire Brigade, and can contribute to the spread of fire if fire doors are propped open.
- Although the Stay Put policy was supported, the London Fire Brigade was campaigning for landlords to make evacuation plans for residents in case they had to leave their property. This was particularly important for vulnerable residents, who may require a personal emergency evacuation plan.
- The Fire Brigade was aware that some residents tampered with self-closing mechanisms on fire doors. As this compromised the safety of buildings, it was suggested that landlords should regularly check that these mechanisms are working properly.
- The Fire Brigade emphasised the importance of fire risk assessments being completed by a suitably qualified and competent person. It was suggested that fire risks could be assessed by a chartered fire engineer.
- The London Assembly was reviewing how it could contribute to scrutiny work being carried out following the Grenfell Tower fire. Possible topics included a review of mutual aid arrangements, how tenants are included in regeneration plans, and the governance of social housing in London. From April 2018 the London Assembly would have a Fire, Resilience, and Emergency Planning Committee.

## Notes from the London Build Expo Fire Safety Summit – 25 October 2017

Cllr Mick O’Sullivan, Chair of the Housing Scrutiny Committee, and the committee clerk attended the recent London Build Expo Fire Safety Summit. The event included a panel discussion on the fire safety work of local authorities, and presentations on fire safety in tall buildings, the benefits of retrofitting sprinkler systems, and the importance of professional fire engineering.

A number of points were made which were relevant to the committee’s review, as follows:

- Some local authorities had taken the decision to retrofit sprinkler systems in their housing blocks, including Waltham Forest and Croydon.
- If a local authority intends to retrofit sprinklers it needs to clearly communicate with residents about what is required of them during the installation, and take decisions on whether to provide sprinklers to all residents at cost to the local authority, or recharge leaseholders for the works.
- The cost of installing sprinkler systems was increasing. The cost of installing sprinkler systems significantly affected the housing revenue account, and authorities that had installed sprinkler systems had delayed other housing improvements as a result.
- Some local authorities were considering installing secondary stairwells in their properties, although it was recognised that this was complex work that would likely involve reconfiguring properties and rehoming residents.
- Around 400 new tall buildings would be built in London over the next three years. Many of these would be mixed use, and as a result different regulatory frameworks applied to different sections of the building. This created a complex environment for fire fighters to work in.
- The regulations on the installation of sprinkler systems varied across the UK. In Wales, sprinkler systems are required in all new and refurbished residential buildings. In Scotland, all new buildings taller than 18m must be fitted with sprinklers. In England, only new buildings taller than 30m are required to have a sprinkler system.
- There are various sprinkler products available. Different buildings need different systems depending on plumbing and the configuration of the building. Although some landlords are concerned about vandalism, some sprinkler systems are concealed in light fittings and are only visible in the event of a fire.
- The first high rise residential building in England to be retrofitted with a sprinkler system was Callow Mount in Sheffield. These works were carried out in 2011 at a cost of approximately £1,150 for each one bedroom flat. Retrofitting sprinklers in a three bedroom flat cost approximately £2,300.
- Sprinklers are very effective and it was suggested that retrofitting sprinklers is also cost effective given the significant costs associated with refurbishment and rehoming residents in the event of a fire.
- Sprinklers activated within 30 seconds of a fire starting. Research had demonstrated that it could take up to 20 minutes for fire fighters to begin tackling a fire, taking into account the time it takes for the fire to be identified, for a call to be made to the emergency services, and for them to attend and prepare their equipment.
- The Fire Industry Association recommended that a chartered fire engineer should be consulted from the design stage of a new build project through to completion. Although many developers employed a fire engineer to produce a building’s fire strategy, a professional fire engineer with the relevant competencies and experience could contribute to the design of the building and oversee construction to ensure that fire safety features are installed successfully.