

Fire Safety in Council Housing

REPORT OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**London Borough of Islington
January 2018**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fire Safety in Council Housing

Aim:

To review if the fire safety features of the council's housing stock and associated arrangements are sufficient

Evidence:

The review ran from July 2017 until January 2018. Evidence was received from a variety of sources:

1. Evidence from council officers

- Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager
- Damian Dempsey, Group Leader – Quantity Surveyors
- Jan Hart, Service Director – Public Protection

N.B. Sean McLaughlin, Corporate Director of Housing and Adult Social Services, and Simon Kwong, Director of Property Services, addressed the June 2017 meeting on urgent fire safety matters.

2. Evidence from witnesses

- Paul Hobbs, Borough Commander – London Fire Brigade
- John Venning, Head of Asset Management – Partners for Improvement in Islington

3. Documentary evidence

- Officers' written responses to the objectives of the review
- Report: Partners' management of fire safety
- Briefing note: Rehousing residents in the event of a fire
- Briefing note: HMO licensing and fire safety in HMOs

4. Scrutiny visits

- London Scrutiny Network meeting on fire safety, 13 October 2017
- London Build Expo Fire Safety Summit, 25 October 2017

Main Findings

- The Committee commends the council's response to the Grenfell Tower fire. One of Islington's emergency planning officers and several of the council's local authority liaison officers supported the emergency response. Four social workers were provided to support those affected by the fire. A relief Director of Housing was provided to the Grenfell Fire Response Team as 24-hour work was needed to support the survivors of the tragedy. Islington Housing Needs and Housing Operations staff were provided to help with the temporary housing of those who lost their home. Islington provided counselling services to firefighters who attended the scene, and empty properties were offered to those made homeless by the fire. In Islington, Housing Services worked quickly to offer reassurance to residents, communicate fire risks and submit cladding for testing. Work to review and improve the fire safety of the council's housing stock is ongoing.
- The Committee received a significant amount of evidence on how Islington Council and Partners for Improvement in Islington manage and respond to fire risks. This work includes regular risk assessment, the maintenance of safety features, joint work with key partners such as the London Fire Brigade, and engagement with tenants and leaseholders on fire safety issues.

- Officers advised the Committee that council is well prepared to deal with emergency situations, and Islington Council staff attending emergencies in other boroughs have been very well received. However, it was also recognised that emergencies on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire required cross-London support and coordination.
- The Committee highlighted the budget cuts to the London Fire Brigade, and asked if these had a detrimental effect on the service's responsiveness. In response, it was advised that although the resources to deal with major incidents were more limited, the cuts had not had a detrimental impact on the service's response times. Islington's Fire Brigade was able to respond to fires within six minutes of a call being received.
- The Committee accepts that there is public scepticism about the 'stay put' advice, as the advice was clearly not effective in the Grenfell Tower fire. However, the Committee considers that it is appropriate to follow the advice and expertise of the London Fire Brigade on matters related to fire safety. For this reason the 'stay put' advice is supported.
- The Committee welcomes the council's joint work with the Fire Brigade. Council officers meet with Fire Brigade colleagues on a weekly basis. The Borough Commander commented that Islington Council appears to be very proactive in managing fire safety risks, and was very willing to engage with the Fire Brigade.
- Housing services should support the Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service in locating vulnerable and disabled tenants and leaseholders who are not able to evacuate themselves from their properties. The Committee welcomes that an information box is being installed at Braithwaite House, and recommends that these are rolled out to high rise housing blocks across the borough.
- The Committee suggests that vulnerable and disabled residents who are unable to evacuate themselves require further advice on what they should do in the event of a fire. The council should co-produce an emergency evacuation plan with these residents, with remedial works or adaptations carried out to facilitate safe evacuation. Islington Council should engage with other housing providers in the borough to encourage them to also co-produce emergency evacuation plans with their residents.
- The storage of items in communal areas can be a sensitive issue. However, given that items in communal areas can be a fire hazard and an obstruction, the Committee supports a zero tolerance approach to storing items in communal areas. It is suggested that targeted communications are issued in blocks where there are ongoing problems.
- The Committee would support the installation of sprinklers in all council blocks over six storeys in height, which equates to approximately 18 metres. However, the Committee also appreciates the significant cost of sprinkler systems, and technical and operational challenges related to asbestos removal, water pressure, providing access, resident acceptance of trunking/boxing, and ongoing maintenance. Officers advised that the indicative cost of installing sprinklers in blocks of 10 storeys and above could be anywhere between £43million and £97million, and it is noted that the government has ruled out providing funding for these works. It is suggested that the council review the feasibility of installing sprinklers, the anticipated cost of the works, and model the financial impact of the works on other aspects of the housing service.
- Officers advised that the council has sufficient resources to ensure that its properties comply with current fire safety regulations. However, if regulations were to change or additional works were commissioned, then additional investment would be required. Since the Grenfell Tower fire the government has repeatedly ruled out providing funding for local authorities to

fit sprinkler systems. Given the financial constraints on local authorities and the lack of available funding, the Committee considers that the cost of carrying out fire safety work should be met by central government.

- It is intended to scrutinise the council's response to the various Grenfell reviews as they conclude, to ensure that Islington Council learns from the reviews and carries out any actions recommended to ensure the safety of residents.

Conclusions

The Committee welcomes the council's response to the Grenfell Tower fire. Islington Council has provided support to the emergency relief effort and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and stepped up work to review and improve the fire safety of the council's housing stock.

Housing Services and the Emergency Planning team have effective working relationships with the London Fire Brigade. Local agencies, including Partners for Improvement in Islington, work together through the Homes and Estates Safety Board to proactively manage fire risks and other safety matters.

The Committee has made 21 recommendations in response to the evidence received. These focus on maintaining and improving the safety features of the council's housing stock, managing the fire risks to vulnerable and disabled tenants, and ensuring there is ongoing review and scrutiny of how the council manages fire risks.

The Committee expresses its condolences to all of those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. The Committee would like to thank the emergency services, council officers, and others who have worked to ensure the safety of Islington residents in the months following the fire.

In carrying out the review, the Committee met with council officers, the London Fire Brigade, industry experts and others to gain a balanced view. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

Recommendations

1. Islington Council should follow all relevant recommendations for local authorities and social landlords arising from the Grenfell Tower inquiry and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, and any fire safety guidance issued by the Local Government Association.
2. Following the conclusions of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, the review of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, a report should be submitted to the Housing Scrutiny Committee detailing what actions the council will be taking in response to the recommendations.
3. The Housing Scrutiny Committee notes the London Fire Brigade's continued support of the 'Stay Put' policy. Islington Council should clearly communicate the London Fire Brigade's advice to tenants and leaseholders, and promote understanding of when residents should 'Stay Put' and when they should evacuate. Guidance on this should be available in a range of languages and should be displayed in prominent areas.
4. The council should maintain the dedicated email address for residents to report fire safety concerns to the council. This should be displayed in prominent locations and promoted regularly. This information should also be provided to new tenants in a welcome pack.
5. Islington Council should work with vulnerable and disabled tenants and leaseholders to co-produce personalised emergency evacuation plans. These must be realistic and achievable. Any remedial works or adaptations that are required to facilitate safe evacuation should be carried out as soon as possible.
6. Islington Council should encourage Partners for Improvement in Islington, TMOs and Housing Associations operating in the area to co-produce personalised emergency evacuation plans for their disabled and vulnerable residents, and carry out remedial works or adaptations as necessary.
7. Islington Council should maintain an up-to-date list of vulnerable council tenants and leaseholders who may need assistance to evacuate and make this available to the London Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service. This should detail their flat number and floor, and the assistance they require. This information should be kept in a secure information box at the premises.
8. Islington Council should encourage Partners for Improvement in Islington, TMOs and Housing Associations operating in the area to make information available to the London Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service on the location and assistance needs of vulnerable residents.
9. Islington Council and the London Fire Brigade should explore the feasibility of developing a secure electronic solution to accessing the location and assistance needs of disabled and vulnerable residents in an evacuation.
10. Islington Council should consider retrofitting sprinkler systems in all high rise housing blocks. The council should review the feasibility of installing sprinklers, the anticipated cost of the works, and model the financial impact of the works on other aspects of the housing service.

11. Islington Council should make representations to the government that the cost of retrofitting sprinkler systems and carrying out any necessary fire safety works in local authority housing should be met by central government, given that no additional funds have been allocated to date.
12. The Housing Scrutiny Committee supports the zero tolerance approach to keeping items in communal areas adopted by Islington Council and Partners for Improvement in Islington. The Committee would support more targeted communications being issued to residents where problems persist.
13. Islington Council should consider if a suitably qualified and experienced fire engineer is needed to supplement the risk assessment work carried out by the council's in-house fire safety officers. This may provide additional reassurance that fire risks are being managed effectively.
14. The council should consider consulting a suitably qualified and experienced fire engineer at the design stage of new build projects. This would help to ensure that properties are designed to the highest possible safety standards.
15. Given that hoarding can be a fire hazard, the council should further promote the services available to help hoarders, and consider installing mobile sprinkler systems in the homes of vulnerable people who are known to hoard.
16. Housing Services should work further with the Season Health Intervention Network (SHINE) to target interventions at vulnerable residents who are known to light their homes through candles rather than electricity.
17. The council should routinely monitor if communal area fire doors and front entrance fire doors are working correctly.
18. To allow the fire safety features of properties to be easily monitored, the housing asset management plan should be revised to detail the fire safety features of components.
19. Dry risers in the council's housing blocks should be checked for damage regularly. Staff on estates should be encouraged to report any visible damage or vandalism which would affect their functioning.
20. Housing services should maintain a register of fires in council housing. It is suggested that this register is backdated for ten years. Recording the cause, extent, and other details of fires may help to inform the council's fire prevention work.
21. The Director of Housing Needs and Strategy should author a report to the Housing Scrutiny Committee detailing her experiences and any learning points from her secondments to the Grenfell Response Team and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2017/18

Councillors:

Councillor Mick O’Sullivan (Chair)
Councillor Marian Spall (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Alex Diner
Councillor Gary Doolan
Councillor Aysegul Erdogan
Councillor Troy Gallagher
Councillor Osh Gantly
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE

Resident Observers:

Rose Marie McDonald
Dean Donaghey

Substitutes:

Councillor Satnam Gill OBE
Councillor Gary Heather
Councillor Jenny Kay
Councillor Una O’Halloran
Councillor Olly Parker
Councillor Angela Picknell
Councillor Dave Poyser
Councillor Nurullah Turan

Acknowledgements:

*The Committee expresses its condolences to all of those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire.
The Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.
The Committee would also like to thank the emergency services, council officers, and others who have worked to ensure the safety of residents in the months following the fire.*

Officer Support:

*Stuart Fuller – Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager
Damian Dempsey – Group Leader, Quantity Surveyors
Jonathan Moore – Senior Democratic Services Officer*

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The review was carried out in response to the tragic Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017. The Grenfell Tower fire caused 71 deaths and over 70 injuries. Over 200 people lost their homes and possessions. The Committee considered an urgent item, Fire Safety following the Grenfell Tower Fire, at its meeting on 20 June 2017. The Committee formally commenced the review at its July 2017 meeting.
- 1.2 The overall aim of the review was to review if the fire safety features of the council's housing stock and associated arrangements are sufficient.

The Committee also agreed the following objectives:

- To evaluate how fire risks in council properties are identified, assessed, and responded to.
 - To review if the council's capital programme includes all of the fire safety works it should; and to understand the feasibility of fitting alarm systems, sprinklers and fire escapes to council housing.
 - To review the Housing Service's emergency response arrangements in the event of a major fire; including evacuation and re-homing plans, and ongoing support arrangements.
 - To assess how the council ensures that its housing stock is compliant with fire safety regulations, London Fire Brigade advice and best practice guidance.
 - To identify if there are adequate communications channels for residents to report fire safety concerns to the council, and to assess how these are responded to; and to consider the fire safety advice provided to residents.
 - To review if there are sufficient capital resources to complete any required fire safety improvements to the council's housing stock.
 - To review if there are sufficient revenue resources to ensure that the council's housing stock remains compliant with fire regulations, building control and health and safety standards, and that any fire risks are proactively managed.
 - To evaluate how the council works with Partners and TMOs to ensure that council-owned properties which are not directly managed are compliant with fire safety regulations.
 - To review how fire safety is considered at the design stage of refurbishment works and new developments, and to review how decisions are made on matters which affect fire safety.
 - To review the working relationships between the council's Emergency Planning team and Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade;
 - To review how vulnerable residents are incorporated into evacuation plans and how these plans are stored and accessed in the event of an emergency;
 - To review the risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats
 - To review tenancy conditions related to the storage and use of barbecues and gas canisters.
- 1.3 In carrying out the review the Committee met with officers responsible for fire safety, the capital programme, and emergency planning. The Committee also received evidence from the London Fire Brigade, Partners for Improvement in Islington, and industry experts. The Chair attended a relevant conference and scrutiny network meeting.

Local context

- 1.4 Islington Council owns over 35,000 homes. Around 25,800 are tenanted properties, and around 9,300 are leasehold. Around 3,800 homes are managed by tenant management organisations and co-operatives, and around 6,300 homes are managed by Partners for Improvement in Islington under two private finance initiative contracts.

- 1.5 Since the Grenfell Tower fire there has been considerable concern, locally and nationally, about the safety of council housing and high rise housing blocks. Causes for concern include if there are adequate safety features such as escape routes, alarm systems and sprinklers; the flammability of building materials, such as Aluminium Composite Materials (ACM); structural issues such as the integrity of compartmentation; and management issues, including how resident concerns about fire safety are reported and responded to.
- 1.6 Islington Council owns 126 housing blocks of six storeys or higher, which contain over 6,200 flats. 55 of these blocks have cladding, however only eight have panel cladding. Samples of panel cladding from each block were submitted for testing by the Buildings Research Establishment, as required by the Department for Communities and Local Government. It was found that only one Islington Council block, Braithwaite House, contained ACM cladding. Whilst the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire is still ongoing, it is recognised that ACM cladding contributed to the spread of the fire. As a result, the council started to remove the cladding from Braithwaite House in late June 2017.
- 1.7 The Committee's review did not focus on the fire safety of particular housing blocks, as a technical review was already being carried out by the council in partnership with the London Fire Brigade. Instead, the review focused on strategic and policy issues, such as the management of fire risks, compliance with regulation, resident engagement, working relationships between key agencies, and the council's preparedness for a major fire.

2. Findings

Awareness of other reviews

- 2.1 In carrying out the review the Committee was mindful of other reviews commenced in response to the Grenfell Tower fire. It is expected that the Grenfell Tower fire will have far reaching implications for landlords, local authorities, the building sector, the emergency services, and others. The Committee notes that the Grenfell Tower inquiry and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety are underway, and are expected to make recommendations to help ensure that a tragedy on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire does not happen again.
- 2.2 The Committee also notes that the Equality and Human Rights Commission's 'Following Grenfell' review is reviewing equality and human rights issues associated with the fire; such as the support received by victims, victims' access to housing and justice, and if victims have been discriminated against.
- 2.3 Changes to guidance and regulation are anticipated. The interim report of the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety found that the current regulatory system for ensuring fire safety in high-rise and complex buildings is not fit for purpose. Although the final outcome of these reviews is not yet known, the Committee considers that Islington Council should follow all relevant recommendations of these reviews when they are available, as well as any relevant guidance issued by the Local Government Association.
- 2.4 **It is recommended that Islington Council should follow all relevant recommendations for local authorities and social landlords arising from the Grenfell Tower inquiry and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, and any fire safety guidance issued by the Local Government Association.**
- 2.5 The Committee has expressed its intention to continue reviewing fire safety matters on an ongoing basis. It is intended to scrutinise the council's response to the various Grenfell reviews as they conclude, to ensure that Islington Council learns from the reviews and carries out any actions recommended to ensure the safety of residents.

- 2.6 **Following the conclusions of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, the review of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, a report should be submitted to the Housing Scrutiny Committee detailing what actions the council will be taking in response to the recommendations.**

'Stay put' and compartmentation

- 2.7 Following the Grenfell Tower, the official advice for residents to 'stay put' in the event of a fire received considerable public scrutiny. As part of the review the Committee wished to assess the appropriateness of this advice.
- 2.8 The advice on how you should respond in the event of a fire varies depending on the type of building and how the fire is affecting your property. For fires in purpose built blocks of flats, the advice is that residents should stay put unless their flat is affected by fire or smoke, in which case they should evacuate.
- 2.9 The Committee received evidence from the London Fire Brigade on the 'stay put' advice. The advice is central to how buildings are designed and how firefighters tackle fires in purpose built blocks of flats. Purpose built blocks of flats are designed with compartmentation, barriers in the building which should ensure that any fire is contained to a single unit and should not spread between floors, to neighbouring properties, or into communal areas. Successful compartmentation allows residents to safely stay in their property when there is a fire in another part of the same building.
- 2.10 It has been reported that the rapid spread of the Grenfell Tower fire may indicate that the block suffered from faulty compartmentation. The Housing Scrutiny Committee has been assured that that officers are reviewing the compartmentation of council housing blocks and will rectify any defects as required.
- 2.11 Many purpose built blocks of flats are designed with only one entrance and exit because compartmentation should successfully contain any fire. As a result, such buildings are not intended to facilitate mass evacuation. The London Fire Brigade emphasised that mass evacuation of a tower block would hinder the work of the Fire Brigade, as firefighters would need to access the building and tackle the fire through the single entrance. Evacuation can contribute to the spread of fire if doors are propped open, and evacuation may be unsafe for vulnerable or disabled residents.
- 2.12 The Committee accepts that there is public scepticism about the 'stay put' advice, as the advice was clearly not effective in the Grenfell Tower fire. However, the Committee considers that it is appropriate to follow the advice and expertise of the London Fire Brigade on matters related to fire safety. It should be noted that the London Fire Brigade reissued their 'stay put' advice following the Grenfell Tower fire and continue to promote it. The Committee considers that the council should assist the London Fire Brigade in communicating its advice to residents.
- 2.13 **The Housing Scrutiny Committee notes the London Fire Brigade's continued support of the 'stay put' policy. Islington Council should clearly communicate the London Fire Brigade's advice to tenants and leaseholders, and promote understanding of when residents should 'stay put' and when they should evacuate. Guidance on this should be available in a range of languages and should be displayed in prominent areas.**
- 2.14 Many of Islington Council's properties are not purpose-built blocks of flats and therefore the 'stay put' advice is not appropriate. The Committee noted that letters had been sent to all tenants and leaseholders to communicate the relevant fire safety advice for their property. The Committee welcomes that work is underway to install linked fire alarms in street properties, which do not

have compartmentation. This will ensure that all residents in a street property are alerted to evacuate in the event of a fire.

The council's management of fire risks

- 2.15 The Committee received a significant amount of evidence on how Islington Council manages and responds to fire risks. The council manages fire risks through regular risk assessment, the maintenance of safety features, joint work with key partners such as the London Fire Brigade, and engagement with tenants and leaseholders on fire safety issues.
- 2.16 Every council block has its fire risk assessment reviewed at least every three years, or every year for properties over six storeys. These reviews are carried out by in house officers, including former building control and fire service personnel. The fire risk of every block is rated as either Tolerable (low risk), Moderate (medium risk), or Substantial (high risk). Blocks rated as having 'Moderate' risk receive a fire risk assessment annually; those rated as having a 'Substantial' risk are reviewed within three months. The vast majority of Islington Council blocks are rated as Tolerable. Any required actions identified in a fire risk assessment are assigned to the relevant officer and entered into a web-based application. This allows fire risks and progress to be monitored by management, and provides an audit trail of fire risks and actions taken in response.
- 2.17 The council brought its housing management function back in-house in 2012, having previously been managed by an arms-length management organisation, Homes for Islington. Officers advised the Committee that that the fire safety information received from Homes for Islington at this time was exemplary.
- 2.18 In 2012 the council established a Homes and Estates Safety Board, which has a similar structure to the council's adult and child safeguarding boards. The Board is independently chaired and a number of local agencies are represented at meetings, including the London Fire Brigade and Partners for Improvement in Islington. The Executive Member for Housing and Development attends Board meetings. The Board meet quarterly to consider safety issues. The Board examines six key safety areas, including fire safety, and reviews management arrangements, trends and current issues, and monitors performance through a quarterly key performance indicator report.
- 2.19 The council also holds regular liaison meetings with the London Fire Brigade. These meetings consider general safety issues, as well as specific casework related to those most at risk from fire. For example, the meetings may consider the specific needs of residents who are frail or have physical impairments, those who have mental health issues, hoarders, heavy smokers and people with substance abuse issues. Social care representatives also contribute to these discussions.
- 2.20 The Fire Brigade is invited to comment on planning applications considered by the council as the local planning authority. This allows the Fire Brigade to consider any fire risks associated with new developments and make recommendations as required.
- 2.21 The Committee welcomes the council's joint work with the Fire Brigade. The Fire Brigade carries out 'post-fire visits' jointly with housing officers to evaluate the causes and impact of fires in council properties, and occasionally carries out joint inspections with housing officers if there is a specific fire safety concern. Since October 2017 a senior Fire Brigade officer has been co-located at 222 Upper Street every Tuesday morning. This allows regular dialogue between housing officers and the Fire Brigade, and any fire safety issues are able to be discussed openly. The Borough Commander informed the Committee that Islington Council appears to be very proactive in managing fire safety risks, and was very willing to engage with the Fire Brigade. The Borough Commander explained that although he had only been in post for a few months, he had not faced any barriers to working with the council, which was not the case in all boroughs.

- 2.22 The Committee noted the fire safety works carried out through the capital programme in recent years. Following the Lakanal House fire in 2009, the Local Government Association issued guidance on purpose built blocks of flats which recommended the installation of self-closing front entrance fire doors as a matter of priority. The council's capital programme has therefore focused on the installation of self-closing fire doors in recent years. Islington Council is responsible for upgrading the doors to tenanted properties, whereas leaseholders are responsible for fitting such doors to their own properties.
- 2.23 The Committee notes that the council has taken a stronger stance on leaseholder installation of fire doors following the Grenfell Tower fire. The council has contacted leaseholders without fire doors advising that they needed to either fit their own door or opt-in to the council's door fitting scheme within seven days, otherwise the council would seek a court injunction requiring them to fit a compliant door. The Committee notes that there have been discussions between the council and leaseholders about the council's powers to require leaseholders to fit fire doors. Officers have clarified that the Fire Brigade and Building Control are the enforcing authorities for fire safety concerns, however the council as landlord had a duty of care to all residents in its properties and would take action in instances where leaseholders would not fit fire safe doors.

Partners management of fire risks

- 2.24 The Committee received evidence from Partners on how they manage fire risks in the properties they manage on the council's behalf. It was noted that Partners holds regular fire safety meetings and attends Islington Homes and Estates Safety Board meetings. Fire safety matters could also be considered in contract performance meetings with Islington Council. Partners officers commented that they took their fire safety responsibilities very seriously.
- 2.25 The most significant fire risk to Partners' properties is the lack of linked fire protection systems. Street properties do not have compartmentation and therefore the 'stay put' policy is not appropriate; a fire in a first floor flat could feasibly spread to the flats above and below. For this reason, linked fire alarms are to be installed in all Partners properties between 2018 and 2020. Emergency lighting is to be installed in communal areas also. This work is being carried out by Islington Council rather than Partners.
- 2.26 Partners has a Fire Safety Policy, which was independently audited by a health and safety consultant in February 2017. Partners had made changes to risk assessment forms as a result. Following the Grenfell Tower fire Partners asked its independent health and safety consultant if a re-audit was required and received advice that this was not required. Partners is confident that its Fire Safety Policy is fit for purpose. The Committee has suggested that a second opinion on the policy may provide additional reassurance.
- 2.27 Partners carries out fire risk assessments every three years. Communal area risk assessments are carried out more regularly. Communal areas in higher risk properties are inspected every six months, other properties are assessed at least every two years. Partners manages 404 'higher risk' properties, which are designated 'higher risk' as they have four or more flights of stairs. Some properties have emergency lighting and this is tested on an annual basis.
- 2.28 Most Partners properties are fitted with a hard wired smoke detector. The Committee was advised that 108 properties did not have a hard wired detector; however, these would be installed by the end of October 2017. The Committee considered concerns that these alarms were not always accessible to vulnerable and disabled people; a member of the Committee provided an example of an elderly person in a Partners property in Milner Square with very high ceilings. It was commented that the alarms can only be tested and deactivated manually, so residents who are not able to use ladders are resorting to using broomsticks or other aids. The

Committee noted that remote-controlled alarms are available and commented these would be much more suitable in these properties, particularly for vulnerable and disabled people. The Committee raised this with Partners and it was advised that the alarms were installed in 2003 and there were no plans to install new alarms before the next scheduled maintenance work in 2018. The Committee suggests that such issues should be addressed on a more regular basis, and safety features in properties should be appropriate to the type of property and needs of the resident.

Resident Engagement

- 2.29 The Committee considered the importance of engagement and communication with residents on fire safety matters. Local residents, particularly those in high rise blocks, are concerned about fire safety. Shortly after the Grenfell Tower fire a small fire on the Harvist Estate prompted 200 people to evacuate a block, with one woman suffering injuries after jumping out of a second floor window. It is essential for housing providers to engage regularly with residents on safety matters, to be open and honest in their approach, and to offer reassurance and to respond to resident concerns. Housing providers must work with local communities on safety issues such as the use of barbeques and obstructions in communal areas; a lack of official and credible guidance can lead to the spread of misinformation and poor fire safety practices.
- 2.30 The Committee welcomes the work of officers to reassure residents following the Grenfell Tower fire. A letter was sent to all Islington Council and Partners tenants advising them of the fire safety works already underway, how to report fire safety concerns, and advice on how to respond in the event of a fire. This advice was tailored to the type of property the resident lives in. Following the Grenfell Tower fire officers also attended estate meetings to answer questions from residents, and door-knocking exercises took place to offer advice and answer questions.
- 2.31 Following the Grenfell Tower fire, the council developed the Fire Safety pages on its website, incorporating a Frequently Asked Questions document and other key information. In June 2017 the Council passed a motion requiring that the council make public its fire risk assessments for high rise properties. These began to be published in September 2017. The council also promoted its dedicated fire safety email address, firesafety@islington.gov.uk
- 2.32 Both Islington Council and Partners periodically provide fire safety advice to residents through newsletters and other communications channels. Advice is also provided in the new tenant sign-up pack which explains fire safety strategies and basic advice on preventing fires. The new tenant sign-up process also offers all new tenants the opportunity to request a Home Fire Safety Visit from the London Fire Brigade.
- 2.33 The Committee emphasised the importance of transparency in fire safety matters. The council and all housing providers must be responsive to the concerns of residents, and be proactive in encouraging residents to report any concerns they have. The Committee suggests that the dedicated fire safety email address should be maintained and promoted regularly. Information on the reporting of fire safety concerns should be prominent in the new tenant pack.
- 2.34 **The council should maintain the dedicated email address for residents to report fire safety concerns to the council. This should be displayed in prominent locations and promoted regularly. This information should also be provided to new tenants in a welcome pack.**

London Fire Brigade

- 2.35 The Committee received evidence from the London Fire Brigade on various matters, including their responsiveness, how they tackle fires in high rise properties, and their work with Islington Council. Details of the Fire Brigade's partnership work with the council is covered elsewhere in this report.
- 2.36 The Borough Commander is responsible for the operational response to fires in Islington. Around 80 individuals are employed by the Fire Brigade in the borough, based across two sites. Two fire engines are assigned to the borough, however engines based in neighbouring boroughs are available if requested. The nearest available fire engine is always despatched to a fire, so those living near the borough boundary may be served by fire engines based in other boroughs. Major fires require attendance by several fire engines and a cross-London response; in such instances fire engines on standby will be relocated across London to ensure that no area is left vulnerable to fire.
- 2.37 The Committee highlighted the budget cuts to the fire service, and asked if these had a detrimental effect on the service's responsiveness. In response, it was advised that although the resources to deal with major incidents were more limited, the cuts had not had a detrimental impact on the service's response times. Islington's Fire Brigade was able to respond to fires within six minutes of a call being received.
- 2.38 Islington previously had six fire engines stationed inside the borough. Although Islington now had four fewer engines, the Borough Commander advised that response times had been maintained through an increased focus on fire prevention. The London Fire Brigade had increased its focus on home safety visits, hoarding, and problematic smoking in recent years. The Fire Brigade commented on the importance of working with local authority partners and other landlords. The Fire Brigade regularly held familiarisation meetings in larger housing blocks so they were aware of their structure, safety features and access routes.

Emergency Planning

- 2.39 The Committee wished to review the council's preparedness for an emergency on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire and received evidence on the council's emergency planning function. The council has statutory duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to prepare for emergencies. The council's Emergency Planning service is comprised of three officers who work in partnership with other services and agencies to meet the council's duties under the Act.
- 2.40 Islington Council has an emergency planning officer and corporate director on duty at all times in case of emergencies. The council has also appointed 23 Local Authority Liaison Officers (LALOs), council officers who are trained in emergency response and making decisions in emergency situations. 60 staff are trained to manage rest centres, and 150 staff in total were available to attend an emergency situation if required. The Committee welcomed that this is a higher resource level than other local authorities have available. Officers noted that most London local authorities appointed around five LALOs, however Islington's approach is that a number of staff should be trained to respond and make decisions in emergency situations. Officers commented that the council has swift response times. For example, following the Finsbury Park terrorist attack council officers were in attendance and offering assistance within 30 minutes.
- 2.41 Islington Council had a contract with the Red Cross to provide emergency clothing, toiletries and bedding if required. There was also provision to provide residents with emergency money. In an emergency situation any rest centres would be located in the borough. However, if residents were unable to return to their home then they would likely be offered hotel accommodation which could be outside of the borough. In this instance each resident would have a named contact officer to liaise with.

- 2.42 London boroughs offer mutual aid to each other in emergency situations. Islington officers had assisted Kensington and Chelsea following the Grenfell Tower Fire, and Camden following the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate. Islington's own emergency plans have been revised in light of officers' experiences of attending those emergencies. In particular, it is now recognised that the council needs to be prepared to deal with large emergencies which continue for several weeks. As a result, the council is seeking to train more officers in emergency response, so that a rest centre and other emergency provision can be maintained for longer periods in a sustainable way.
- 2.43 The council could request mutual aid by triggering London Local Authority Gold Arrangements. This results in a single London local authority chief executive taking control of the strategic response to an emergency. A London Local Authority Coordination Centre is then established to coordinate the emergency activities of all local authorities. There is a London local authority chief executive on call at all times to coordinate gold arrangements if required. Such arrangements are in place as it is recognised that some emergencies are so significant that a cross-London response is necessary.
- 2.44 Officers advised the Committee that council is well prepared to deal with emergency situations, and Islington Council staff attending emergencies in other boroughs had been very well received. However, it was also recognised that emergencies on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire required cross-London support and coordination. The Committee noted that there had been a delay to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea triggering gold arrangements; officers thought that local authorities would learn from this and would not delay the trigger of gold arrangements in future.
- 2.45 A member commented on his experience of a recent fire in the early hours of the morning. He advised that the fire fighters attending the scene did not seem to be aware of the council's emergency procedures, and concerned residents contacted an elected member for support, who was not aware of who to contact. The situation was resolved by the councillor contacting a corporate director by telephone. In response, it was advised that out-of-hours emergencies should be reported to Contact Islington on 020 7527 2000; which was staffed 24 hours a day. It was also commented that the emergency services control room was able to contact the council in an emergency. It was advised that a note would be circulated to all councillors to clarify this position. The Committee suggested that training should be given to councillors to help them to better understand how they can assist in an emergency situation. It was suggested that a demonstration of how gold command was triggered and worked in practice would also be useful.
- 2.46 The Committee queried if the council should hold practice evacuations in high rise blocks to prepare residents for emergency situations. It was advised that there were no plans to hold practice evacuations; this would be a significant task and would cause distress and inconvenience, particularly to vulnerable and disabled people.
- 2.47 Officers advised that the Emergency Planning service has a well-established relationship with all emergency services in Islington and across London including with the London Fire Brigade. This has enabled the Emergency Planning service to develop training links with local fire stations whereby the council's Local Authority Liaison Officers attend a station and carry out training on the Fire Brigade Command Units alongside Fire Brigade Officers; this provides a realistic experience in the workings of the command units and their integral part of co-ordination during an emergency.

Ensuring the safety of vulnerable and disabled residents in an emergency

- 2.48 The Committee was keen to review the council's processes for ensuring the safety of vulnerable and disabled residents in an emergency such as a fire. It was queried if the council had evacuation plans for housing blocks, and if these were shared with the Fire Brigade. In response, it was advised that the housing service did not maintain evacuation plans as mass evacuation was not encouraged or expected. It was reiterated that the fire safety advice for larger blocks was to 'stay put' unless the fire is directly affecting your property. In such circumstances, residents were expected to evacuate themselves.
- 2.49 The Committee queried if the council had details of vulnerable and disabled residents who may be unable to evacuate themselves in a fire, and if this information was shared with the Fire Brigade. In response, it was advised that information on vulnerable residents was held and had previously been provided to the Fire Brigade, however the Fire Brigade had commented that it contained too much information. Officers suggested that the Fire Brigade was primarily concerned with the location of fire hazards, such as residents with oxygen canisters for medical purposes.
- 2.50 The Committee raised this point with the Borough Commander of the London Fire Brigade. In response, it was commented that greater information on the location and needs of disabled and vulnerable people would help in an emergency, however clear guidance would be needed on where the information was stored and who would be responsible for maintaining its accuracy. The Committee noted that an information box was being installed at Braithwaite House which would hold such information. The Housing Service had previously considered installing local information boxes at several larger blocks, however it was decided not to take this up due to concerns over data protection and how the information would be kept up to date.
- 2.51 The Committee asked officers how disabled and vulnerable people would be evacuated in an emergency situation. It was advised that in the case of a planned evacuation a multi-agency meeting would be held to prepare for evacuation and after care. For example, it was commented that rest centers are not appropriate for vulnerable people with complex needs, and social services would need to find suitable temporary accommodation before the evacuation commenced. However, officers advised that in an urgent emergency situation with limited time to prepare, the reality would be officers knocking on doors to establish who was in each property and identify their needs. In that scenario, information on resident vulnerabilities would be ascertained from the residents themselves and their neighbours, friends and family.
- 2.52 The Committee suggests that further work is needed to ensure the safety of disabled and vulnerable residents in emergency situations. Housing services should support the Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service in locating tenants and leaseholders who are not able to evacuate themselves from their properties. The Committee welcomes that an information box is being installed at Braithwaite House, and recommends that these are rolled out to high-rise housing blocks across the borough.
- 2.53 **Islington Council should maintain an up-to-date list of vulnerable council tenants and leaseholders who may need assistance to evacuate and make this available to the London Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service. This should detail their flat number and floor, and the assistance they require. This information should be kept in a secure information box at the premises.**
- 2.54 The Committee asked if Partners had a register of their vulnerable and disabled tenants which they could refer to in the event of a fire. In response, it was advised that Partners did maintain a list of disabled and vulnerable tenants, including hoarders, however this largely relied on tenants self-identifying as vulnerable or disabled and it was acknowledged that the data may not be

complete. To improve their data, all Partners staff were required to feedback any concerns about vulnerable residents to their manager. The Committee hopes that this will result in Partners holding more accurate data on the needs of their residents.

- 2.55 The Committee notes that the council is one of many social housing providers in the borough, and the emergency services may not have information on the needs of vulnerable and disabled people residing in properties managed by other organisations. It is therefore recommended that the council should engage with other housing providers and encourage them to make such information available to the Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service.
- 2.56 Islington Council should encourage Partners for Improvement in Islington, TMOs and Housing Associations operating in the area to make information available to the London Fire Brigade and Emergency Planning service on the location and assistance needs of vulnerable residents.**
- 2.57 The Committee received evidence from a wheelchair user who lives in a council housing block. She commented that she was unable to escape her property in the event of a fire. Her plan was to escape to the balcony, and although her neighbours had helped to clear access, she was unable to access her balcony as the door needed adjusting. She commented that these issues had been raised with the Housing Service however had not been followed up. The resident also expressed concern that the Fire Brigade may be unaware of her specific needs. Officers contacted the resident to follow up these matters outside of the meeting.
- 2.58 The Chair attended a London Scrutiny Network session on fire safety, which included a presentation from the London Fire Brigade on fire safety in flats. The Fire Brigade representative stated that 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 is particularly important for vulnerable residents, who may require a personal emergency evacuation plan.
- 2.59 The Committee considers that vulnerable and disabled residents who are unable to evacuate themselves require further advice on what they should do in the event of a fire. The council should co-produce an emergency evacuation plan with these residents, with remedial works or adaptations carried out to facilitate safe evacuation.
- 2.60 Islington Council should work with vulnerable and disabled tenants and leaseholders to co-produce personalised emergency evacuation plans. These must be realistic and achievable. Any remedial works or adaptations that are required to facilitate safe evacuation should be carried out as soon as possible.**
- 2.61 Islington Council should engage with other housing providers in the borough to encourage them to also co-produce emergency evacuation plans with their residents.
- 2.62 Islington Council should encourage Partners for Improvement in Islington, TMOs and Housing Associations operating in the area to co-produce personalised emergency evacuation plans for their disabled and vulnerable residents, and carry out remedial works or adaptations as necessary.**
- 2.63 The Committee noted data protection concerns related to keeping information on the location and needs of vulnerable and disabled residents in information boxes. It is suggested that an electronic solution could hold this data in a secure and practical way, and an app could be developed for this purpose.

2.64 Islington Council and the London Fire Brigade should explore the feasibility of developing a secure electronic solution to accessing the location and assistance needs of disabled and vulnerable residents in an evacuation.

Sprinkler systems

- 2.65 Several London Boroughs, including Waltham Forest, Croydon, Enfield and Wandsworth, have decided to retrofit sprinkler systems to their high rise housing blocks following the Grenfell Tower fire. The Committee considered the merits of installing sprinkler systems in the council's high rise housing blocks.
- 2.66 The Committee notes the different regulatory regimes relating to sprinklers across the United Kingdom. In England, sprinkler systems are required in all new residential blocks over 30 metres in height. In Scotland, it is a requirement to install sprinkler systems in new residential blocks over 18 metres in height. In Wales, sprinkler systems are required in all new and refurbished residential buildings.
- 2.67 There is no regulatory requirement anywhere in the UK for sprinkler systems to be retrospectively fitted. The Local Government Association's Purpose Built Blocks of Flats guidance, published in 2011 following the Lakanal House fire, states *'It is unlikely that retrofitting sprinklers or water mist systems would be reasonably practicable for existing blocks.'* However, the London Fire Brigade is now campaigning for landlords to voluntarily retrofit sprinkler systems in all high-rise tower block over 18m in height. The London Fire Brigade's view is that sprinklers are an effective means of detecting and suppressing fire, which save lives and property and improve firefighter safety. The Royal Institute of British Architects has recommended to the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety that sprinklers (or similar automatic fire suppression systems) are retrofitted to existing residential buildings over 18 metres in height, and perhaps extended to all residential buildings above three storeys in height. The interim report of the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety has not made firm conclusions on the use of sprinklers.
- 2.68 A variety of different sprinkler systems are available; the most appropriate system is dependent on the configuration of the building and its plumbing. Sprinklers are activated through temperature control and activate within 30 seconds of a fire starting. Research has demonstrated that it can take up to 20 minutes for fire fighters to begin tackling fires, 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 the Fire Brigade to attend and prepare their equipment.
- 2.69 The Committee would support the installation of sprinklers in all council blocks over six storeys in height, which equates to approximately 18 metres. However, the Committee also appreciates the significant cost of sprinkler systems, and technical and operational challenges related to asbestos removal, water pressure, providing access, resident acceptance of trunking/boxing, and ongoing maintenance. Officers advised that the indicative cost of installing sprinklers in blocks of 10 storeys and above could be anywhere between £43million and £97million, and it is noted that the government has ruled out providing funding for these works. It is suggested that the council review the feasibility of installing sprinklers, the anticipated cost of the works, and model the financial impact of the works on other aspects of the housing service.
- 2.70 Islington Council should consider retrofitting sprinkler systems in all high rise housing blocks. The council should review the feasibility of installing sprinklers, the anticipated cost of the works, and model the financial impact of the works on other aspects of the housing service.**

- 2.71 The Chair attended the Fire Safety Summit at the London Build Expo. Evidence was received from the British Automatic Fire Sprinkler Association on the cost of retrofitting sprinkler systems. It was advised that the Callow Mount tower block in Sheffield was retrofitted with a sprinkler system in 2011 at a cost of £1,148 per flat. However, it was noted that the cost of installing sprinkler systems is rising. In 2017 the London Fire Brigade estimated that the cost of fitting a sprinkler system was approximately £1,500 to £2,500 per one-bedroom flat. These costs do not include ongoing maintenance.
- 2.72 There is research to indicate that retrofitting sprinklers is cost effective given the significant costs associated with refurbishment and rehousing residents in the event of a fire. The London Fire Brigade estimates that the cost of re-furbishing a one-bedroom flat after a fire is about £77,000. However, the retrofitting of sprinkler systems would be a significant cost for Islington Council, likely costing tens of million pounds. It is expected that this would have a very significant impact on the housing revenue account, which is a protected fund relating to the council's landlord function. As councils are not permitted to make up any deficit on the housing revenue account from their own resources, any additional pressure on the housing revenue account would likely have a detrimental impact on the provision of other housing services.
- 2.73 Evidence received from officers advised that the council has sufficient resources to ensure that its properties comply with current fire safety regulations. However, if regulations were to change or additional works were commissioned, then additional investment would be required. Since the Grenfell Tower fire the government has repeatedly ruled out providing funding for local authorities to fit sprinkler systems. Given the financial constraints on local authorities and the lack of available funding, the Committee considers that the cost of carrying out fire safety work should be met by central government. It is recommended that representations are made to government on this matter.
- 2.74 Islington Council should make representations to the government that the cost of retrofitting sprinkler systems and carrying out any necessary fire safety works in local authority housing should be met by central government, given that no additional funds have been allocated to date.**

Communal Areas

- 2.75 The Committee understands that the storage of items in communal areas can be a sensitive issue. However, given that items in communal areas can be a fire hazard and an obstruction, the Committee supports a zero tolerance approach to storing items in communal areas. Partners previously had a 'managed use' policy on keeping items in communal areas, however since the Grenfell Tower fire Partners had re-introduced a zero tolerance approach.
- 2.76 The Committee heard concerns that some residents were continuing to store items in communal areas, despite fire safety advice being circulated following the Grenfell Tower fire. It is suggested that targeted communications are issued in blocks where there are ongoing problems.
- 2.77 The Housing Scrutiny Committee supports the zero tolerance approach to keeping items in communal areas adopted by Islington Council and Partners for Improvement in Islington. The Committee would support more targeted communications being issued to residents where problems persist.**
- 2.78 The Committee queried if fire extinguishers should be provided in communal areas of council properties. In response it was explained that the London Fire Brigade advised against this, as people put themselves in danger by attempting to tackle fires themselves. Different fires required different types of extinguishers, and using the wrong type of extinguisher on a fire could make the fire worse. It was therefore not intended to provide fire extinguishers in council housing.

- 2.79 Communal fire alarms are not fitted in high rise housing blocks. LGA guidance on purpose built blocks of flats describes communal fire alarms as ‘unnecessary and undesirable’, suggesting that communal systems inevitably lead to a proliferation of false alarms, which would impose a burden on fire and rescue services and lead to residents ignoring warnings of genuine fires.
- 2.80 Officers advised the Committee that a single staircase as a means of escape is not uncommon or considered to be a major concern. However, it is important to protect this means of escape through suitable self-closing fire doors. It was suggested that providing additional means of escape would likely be costly, encounter planning difficulties, and may lead to security concerns.

Fire Engineers

- 2.81 The competency of those carrying out fire risk assessments was raised as a possible issue at the London Scrutiny Network meeting on fire safety. There is no legal requirement for fire risk assessors to hold professional qualifications or be accredited by a professional body. A representative of the Fire Brigade emphasised the importance of fire risk assessments being completed by a suitably qualified and competent person, and suggested that local authorities may wish for their fire risks to be assessed by a fire engineer. Fire engineers hold professional qualifications to at least degree level and are accredited by the Institution of Fire Engineers. They are recognised experts in engineering and fire safety, and work to minimise fire risks by influencing the design and construction of buildings.
- 2.82 The council's fire risk assessments are carried out by in-house fire safety officers. Although these officers are not fire engineers, they do have considerable professional experience of working in Building Control and the London Fire Brigade. The Committee did not receive any evidence to suggest that the council's fire risk assessments were deficient. However, it is suggested that the council consider if a fire engineer is needed to supplement the risk assessment work of the council's fire safety officers.
- 2.83 **Islington Council should consider if a suitably qualified and experienced fire engineer is needed to supplement the risk assessment work carried out by the council's in-house fire safety officers. This may provide additional reassurance that fire risks are being managed effectively.**
- 2.84 The Committee also suggests that it might be appropriate to consult a fire engineer at the design stage of new build projects. At the Fire Safety Summit attended by the Chair, a Fire Industry Association representative recommended that a chartered fire engineer should be consulted from the design through to completion on new build schemes. This would enable the engineer to influence the design of the building, develop the fire strategy, and oversee construction to ensure that fire safety features are installed successfully. The Committee recognises that this may be useful, however the appropriateness of consulting a fire engineer would depend on the type of housing being developed and any unique circumstances and features of the property.
- 2.85 **The council should consider consulting a suitably qualified and experienced fire engineer at the design stage of new build projects. This would help to ensure that properties are designed to the highest possible safety standards.**

Supporting fire prevention for vulnerable people

- 2.86 The Committee considered if the council could better support fire prevention for vulnerable people. A member advised the Committee of a vulnerable resident with mental health issues. The resident was a known hoarder and had been asked to remove a number of items stored on her balcony. It was understood that the resident had received correspondence about the fire risks associated with hoarding, however it was suggested that the resident did not have the capacity to understand these risks and remove the items herself. The Executive Member for Housing and

Development advised that there was support available for hoarders and agreed to take up this case with officers. The Committee considered that this may not be an isolated incident, and suggested that services for hoarders could be promoted further. Increased take up of support services would help to reduce fire risks.

2.87 It was also suggested that mobile sprinkler systems could be installed in the homes of hoarders. Funding for this may be available through the London Fire Brigade Fire Safety Investment Fund, which provides preventative equipment to vulnerable residents. Around £31,000 of the fund has been spent in Islington, out of a total of £2,00,000 awarded across London. Typical purchases include fire retardant bedding and sprinkler systems for bed bound residents.

2.88 Given that hoarding can be a fire hazard, the council should further promote the services available to help hoarders, and consider installing mobile sprinkler systems in the homes of vulnerable people who are known to hoard.

2.89 The Committee is also concerned about fuel poverty, and the possibility of vulnerable residents increasing their fire risk by lighting their homes through candles. It is noted that approximately 6,600 Islington residents are in fuel poverty; the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee has previously reviewed this issue and made recommendations to improve services for people in fuel poverty. It is thought that further work with the Seasonal Health Intervention Network may assist in supporting these vulnerable people and reducing their fire risk.

2.90 Housing Services should work further with the Seasonal Health Intervention Network (SHINE) to target interventions at vulnerable residents who are known to light their homes through candles rather than electricity.

Ensuring ongoing fire safety

2.91 The Committee made a number of suggestions for how the fire safety of the council's housing can be promoted.

2.92 The Committee received evidence on the importance of fire doors, which are designed to contain fires to a single property. In recent years the council had made significant investments in upgrading the front entrance doors of tenanted properties, and was seeking to take action against leaseholders who had not installed compliant fire doors. The Fire Brigade advised that some residents tampered with self-closing mechanisms on fire doors and compromised the safety of buildings as a result.

2.93 It is recommended that the council should routinely monitor if communal area fire doors and front entrance fire doors are working correctly.

2.94 The Committee notes that the Housing Asset Management Plan may not have comprehensive information on the fire safety specifications of all council properties. It is thought that further information on the fire safety features of components will assist the council in prioritising improvement works in future.

2.95 To allow the fire safety features of properties to be easily monitored, the housing asset management plan should be revised to detail the fire safety features of components.

2.96 The maintenance of dry risers is essential to ensure that fire fighters are able to tackle fires within council properties, particularly on the upper floors of high rise blocks. It is suggested that the council could raise awareness of the importance of functioning dry risers among staff, and staff on estates could be encouraged to report damage or vandalism to ensure that these are returned to working order as quickly as possible.

2.97 Dry risers in the council's housing blocks should be checked for damage regularly. Staff on estates should be encouraged to report any visible damage or vandalism which would affect their functioning.

2.98 As part of the review the Committee requested details of fires in council properties, as this would help to illuminate the fire risks to Islington Council homes and the most frequent causes of fires. It was thought that this could help to inform how fire risks are communicated, and how communications and interventions are targeted. This information was not available to the Committee as a comprehensive register of fires of council housing is not maintained. It is recommended that such a register should be developed, with data backdated for ten years.

2.99 Housing services should maintain a register of fires in council housing. It is suggested that this register is backdated for ten years. Recording the cause, extent, and other details of fires may help to inform the council's fire prevention work.

Learning from Grenfell

2.100 The Committee commends the council's response to the Grenfell Tower fire. One of Islington's emergency planning officers and several of the council's local authority liaison officers supported the emergency response. Four social workers were provided to support those affected by the fire. A relief Director of Housing was provided to the Grenfell Fire Response Team as 24-hour work was needed to support the survivors of the tragedy. Islington Housing Needs and Housing Operations staff were provided to help with the temporary housing of those who lost their home. Islington provided counselling services to firefighters who attended the scene, and empty properties were offered to those made homeless by the fire. In Islington, Housing Services worked quickly to offer reassurance to residents, communicate fire risks and submit cladding for testing. Work to review and improve the fire safety of the council's housing stock is ongoing.

2.101 Islington Council's Director of Housing Needs and Strategy, Maxine Holdsworth, was seconded to the Grenfell Response Team in July 2017. Her responsibilities included rehousing more than 200 families affected by the fire. Shortly after Grenfell responsibilities were returned to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Maxine Holdsworth was again seconded to Kensington and Chelsea to take on the role of Director of Housing Needs and Supply, continuing her work to rehouse those affected by the fire.

2.102 The Director of Housing Needs and Strategy is expected to return to Islington Council in 2019. It is thought that there will be many learning points from her experiences of working for the Grenfell Response Team and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and it is therefore recommended that a report summarising her views is submitted to the Housing Scrutiny Committee at that time.

2.103 The Director of Housing Needs and Strategy should author a report to the Housing Scrutiny Committee detailing her experiences and any learning points from her secondments to the Grenfell Response Team and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

TMOs in Islington

- 2.104 Grenfell Tower was managed by Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, which was criticised in the aftermath of the fire for not taking action on fire safety concerns raised by residents. In December 2017 Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation decided that it could not guarantee the delivery of its services to a standard that residents should expect, and agreed to temporarily hand back management of its properties to the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.
- 2.105 Following the Grenfell Tower fire there was some concern in the national media about Tenant Management Organisations' (TMO) management of social housing. Around 3,800 council homes are managed by Islington's 22 TMOs and co-operatives. Islington's TMOs are responsible for inspecting their managed areas, ensuring there are no obstructions to emergency access or exits, and checking dry risers.
- 2.106 Kensington and Chelsea TMO is a very different type of organisation to the TMOs which manage some Islington Council properties. Although Kensington and Chelsea TMO has eight residents on its Board, it is effectively an arms-length management association for all housing owned by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The organisation managed around 9,500 properties and had an annual turnover of £17.6 million.
- 2.107 In contrast, the TMOs in Islington are smaller scale community organisations led by the residents who live in the properties they manage. The council monitors and supports these organisations through a dedicated TMO team. This support includes fire safety matters; all programmed fire risk assessments on TMO managed estates are carried out by the council. At the Committee's June 2017 meeting, the Corporate Director for Housing and Adult Social Services emphasised that there were no plans to bring TMO management in-house; the council considered that Islington's TMOs were well run and their contribution to the borough's housing mix was valued.
- 2.108 Whilst receiving evidence from the London Fire Brigade, the Committee asked if the Fire Brigade was confident that tenant management organisations in Islington were sufficiently aware of fire risks and their responsibilities. Whilst the Fire Brigade was not familiar with the management arrangements of different blocks, it was commented that succession planning was particularly important for resident-led housing management organisations, as smaller organisations tended to only have one person who was knowledgeable of fire risks and responsibilities. The Committee would encourage tenant management organisations and co-operatives to consider the advice of the London Fire Brigade when reviewing their fire safety arrangements.

HMOs in Islington

- 2.109 The Committee received evidence on fire safety in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs). There are around 1,750 HMOs in Islington. All HMOs are required to have adequate means of escape in case of fire. HMOs require a mandatory licence if they occupy at least 3 storeys, at least five tenants share a household, and tenants share toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities. Only 322 HMOs in Islington meet the conditions to require a mandatory licence. In response to concerns about non-licensable HMOs complying with fire safety regulations, the council introduced an additional licensing scheme for all HMOs on Caledonian Road and Holloway Road.
- 2.110 Around 214 properties are required to be licensed under the additional licensing scheme. The scheme allows Environmental Health to monitor the fire safety of HMO properties. Licences may be refused if a property is not compliant. Environmental Health officers consider that

there is a high level of compliance with fire safety requirements for licensed HMOs. The additional licensing scheme resulted in one application being refused and 46 applications granted with conditions that works were carried out within one to three months. 100% compliance was achieved.

- 2.111 Since January 2016 the council has carried out seven prosecutions for failing to license an HMO, four of these HMOs had fire safety hazards which were legally required to be improved. 323 HMOs have been inspected and 63 significant fire safety hazards have been reduced.
- 2.112 Officers expect that a new definition of a licensable HMO will come into force in April 2018. It is anticipated that at least 200 additional properties will be required to be licensed. This will allow the Environmental Health team to assess if those properties are compliant with fire safety regulation.

Re-homing and ongoing support in the event of a fire

- 2.113 The Committee received evidence on re-homing and ongoing support arrangements in the event of a fire. If residents were unable to return to their home, they would be asked if there were any friends or family they could stay with. If this is not possible, the council would find emergency temporary accommodation. Some self-contained rooms in Reception Centres are kept vacant for this purpose. If there were not enough rooms in Reception Centres, residents would be offered hotel rooms. Depending on the nature and size of the emergency, a rest centre may be established to support residents while temporary accommodation is being sought.
- 2.114 Residents would only be expected to stay in hotel or Reception Centre rooms for a short period of time and would be offered more appropriate temporary accommodation, either from council stock or sourced from the private sector, if they were likely to be displaced from their home for a longer period. If the resident was unable to return to their home, then they would be awarded a high number of points that would allow them to bid for properties through the choice based lettings scheme.

Other findings

- 2.115 The Committee considered the risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats. Officers advised that the London Fire Brigade is the enforcing body for commercial properties, however there are mechanisms for the council's Environmental Health team to notify the London Fire Brigade of any concerns during routine visits and inspections.
- 2.116 The Committee considered tenancy conditions related to the storage and use of barbeques and gas canisters. The storage of gas cylinders and bottles is specifically prohibited in the council's tenancy agreements. Although there is no specific condition on barbeque use, officers consider that there are adequate tenancy conditions to prohibit their use.
- 2.117 The Committee noted concerns raised in the housing press that the roofs on some tower blocks may present a fire risk. Three tower blocks in Northern Ireland were found to have roofs which prevented effective ventilation, which could result in smoke not clearing from lobbies and stairwells in the event of a fire. The Committee suggests that such issues are taken into account by officers when assessing the risks to Islington properties.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 The Committee welcomes the council's response to the Grenfell Tower fire. Islington Council has provided support to the emergency relief effort and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and stepped up work to review and improve the fire safety of the council's housing stock. Housing Services and the Emergency Planning team have effective working relationships with the London Fire Brigade. Local agencies, including Partners for Improvement in Islington, work together through the Homes and Estates Safety Board to proactively manage fire risks and other safety matters.
- 3.2 The Committee has made 21 recommendations in response to the evidence received. These focus on maintaining and improving the safety features of the council's housing stock, managing the fire risks to vulnerable and disabled tenants, and ensuring there is ongoing review and scrutiny of how the council manages of fire risks.
- 3.3 The Committee expresses its condolences to all of those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. The Committee would like to thank the emergency services, council officers, and others who have worked to ensure the safety of Islington residents in the months following the fire.
- 3.4 In carrying out the review, the Committee met with council officers, the London Fire Brigade, industry experts and others to gain a balanced view. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

| SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID) |
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| Review: Fire Safety in Council Housing |
| Scrutiny Review Committee: Housing Scrutiny Committee |
| Director leading the review: Simon Kwong, Director of Property Services |
| Lead officers: Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager Damian Dempsey, Group Leader – Quantity Surveyors |
| Overall aim: To review if the fire safety features of the council's housing stock and associated arrangements are sufficient |
| <p>Objectives of the review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To evaluate how fire risks in council properties are identified, assessed, and responded to. • To review if the council's capital programme includes all of the fire safety works it should; and to understand the feasibility of fitting alarm systems, sprinklers and fire escapes to council housing. • To review the Housing Service's emergency response arrangements in the event of a major fire; including evacuation and re-homing plans, and ongoing support arrangements. • To assess how the council ensures that its housing stock is compliant with fire safety regulations, London Fire Brigade advice and best practice guidance. • To identify if there are adequate communications channels for residents to report fire safety concerns to the council, and to assess how these are responded to; and to consider the fire safety advice provided to residents. • To review if there are sufficient capital resources to complete any required fire safety improvements to the council's housing stock. • To review if there are sufficient revenue resources to ensure that the council's housing stock remains compliant with fire regulations, building control and health and safety standards, and that any fire risks are proactively managed. • To evaluate how the council works with Partners and TMOs to ensure that council-owned properties which are not directly managed are compliant with fire safety regulations. • To review how fire safety is considered at the design stage of refurbishment works and new developments, and to review how decisions are made on matters which affect fire safety. • To review the working relationships between the council's Emergency Planning team and Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade; • To review how vulnerable residents are incorporated into evacuation plans and how these plans are stored and accessed in the event of an emergency; • To review the risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats • To review tenancy conditions related to the storage and use of barbeques and gas canisters. |

How is the review to be carried out:

Scope of the review

The review will focus on:

1. Fire risks

- How risks are reported
- How risks are assessed and responded to
- Risk assessments and how risks are managed
- The resources available to proactively manage risks
- The risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats
- The risks posed by the storage and use of barbeques and gas canisters, and if tenancy conditions are sufficient to control this risk.

2. The Capital Programme

- The fire safety works already carried out to council properties
- What fire safety works are scheduled to be carried out
- What fire safety features are not included in the capital programme and why
- How fire safety is considered when planning capital works
- How capital works are monitored to ensure that they are being carried out to the agreed specification
- How decisions are made which affect fire safety
- The resources for fire safety improvements

3. Emergency response arrangements

- Evacuation and re-housing plans
- How emergency plans are triggered and what these entail
- How vulnerable residents are incorporated into evacuation plans and how these plans are stored and accessed in the event of an emergency

4. Working with others

- The council's responsibilities in regards to PFI and TMO properties
- How the council works with Partners and TMOs on fire safety matters
- Partnership work between Housing Services, Emergency Planning, Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade
- How residents can raise fire safety concerns to the council
- How fire safety concerns are responded to
- The responsibilities of tenants and the responsibilities of leaseholders
- How fire risks and advice is communicated to residents

5. Compliance

- Compliance with fire safety, health and safety, and building control regulations
- Compliance with advice and guidance from the London Fire Brigade and others

Types of evidence

- Evidence from officer
- Evidence from the London Fire Brigade
- Evidence from independent experts on fire safety matters
- Feedback from residents
- Documentary evidence
- Scrutiny visit or other sessions as required

Additional information:

The review will not include a detailed scrutiny of the fire safety of particular housing blocks, as this is already being reviewed by the council's Housing Service in partnership with the London Fire Brigade.

The review will be carried out at the same time as the Grenfell Tower inquiry. The review will not directly consider the issues raised during the inquiry, but the inquiry is of significant interest to the Housing Scrutiny Committee and the implications arising from the inquiry's conclusions will be reported to the Committee in due course.

In carrying out the review the committee will consider equalities implications and resident impacts identified by witnesses. The Executive is required to have due regard to these, and any other relevant implications, when responding to the review recommendations.

Programme

| Key output: | To be submitted to Committee on: |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Scrutiny Initiation Document | 17 July 2017 |
| 2. Draft Recommendations | 16 November 2017 |
| 3. Final Report | 11 December 2017 |

Witness Evidence Plan

| Committee Meeting – 4 September 2017 | | |
|---|--|---|
| Who / What | Organisation / Purpose | Other key information |
| <p>Damian Dempsey, Group Leader – Quantity Surveyors, and Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager.</p> | <p>To provide a range of information on how the council ensures fire safety in its properties.</p> | <p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council's responsibilities for directly managed properties, PFI properties, and TMO properties • The responsibilities of tenants and the responsibilities of leaseholders • how fire risks in council properties are identified, assessed, and responded to • The communications channels for residents to report fire safety concerns to the council, and how these are responded to • What general fire safety advice is provided to residents • If it is feasible to fit alarm systems, sprinklers and fire escapes to council housing. • If capital resources are sufficient to complete any required fire safety improvements to the council's housing stock • If revenue resources are sufficient to ensure that the council's housing stock remains compliant with fire regulations, building control and health and safety standards, and that any fire risks are proactively managed. • How fire safety is considered at the design stage of refurbishment works and new developments, and to review how decisions are made on matters which affect fire safety. • How capital works are monitored to ensure that they are being carried out to the agreed specification • How the council works with Partners and TMOs on fire safety matters. |

Committee Meeting – 3 October 2017

| Who / What | Organisation / Purpose | Other key information |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Paul Hobbs, Borough Commander, London Fire Brigade</p> | <p>To provide the Committee with advice and guidance on fire safety, and information on working relationships with the council.</p> | <p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fire risks to council housing • If any additional risks are posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats, as well as the storage of barbeques and gas canisters • The council's compliance with advice and guidance from the London Fire Brigade • Working relationships between Housing Services, Emergency Planning, Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade • Can Islington Council do anything additional to ensure that a major fire is prevented. |
| <p>Jan Hart, Service Director, Public Protection</p> | <p>To understand the work of the Emergency Planning unit and how the council would respond in the event of a major fire.</p> | <p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How emergency plans are triggered and what these entail • Working relationships between Emergency Planning, Housing Services, Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade |
| <p>John Venning, Head of Asset Management, Partners for Improvement in Islington</p> | <p>Partners for Improvement in Islington – to provide information on the organisation's fire safety procedures and joint-working with the council.</p> | <p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the council works with Partners on fire safety matters • How Partners works with the fire brigade and others • How Partners assesses and responds to fire safety risks • The communications channels for residents to report fire safety concerns, and how these are responded to • What general fire safety advice is provided to residents |

Committee Meeting – 16 November 2017

| Who / What | Organisation / Purpose | Other key information |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Briefing note: Rehousing residents in the event of a fire | To note the council's arrangements for rehousing residents in the event of a fire. | |
| Notes of sessions attended by the Chair | Notes taken at a recent London Scrutiny Network meeting and the London Build Expo. Both sessions had a focus on fire safety. | |

Key dates:

11 December 2017: Draft Recommendations

30 January 2018: Final Report