

# Housing Scrutiny Committee

4 September 2017

## Fire Safety in Council Housing – Witness Evidence

The following information has been provided by officers in response to the objectives of the review. The Fire and Gas Safety Manager and Fire Safety Work Group Leader will be present at the meeting to discuss the evidence with the Committee.

<b>To evaluate how fire risks in council properties are identified, assessed, and responded to</b>	
Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager	<p>The council is required under Article 9 of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (RRFSO) to carry out Fire Risk Assessments (FRA) to the common areas of its housing stock in order to identify the general fire precautions required to protect 'relevant persons' from the risk of fire. FRA are currently completed by in house officers, including former building control and fire service personnel.</p> <p>FRA are carried out on a rolling programme due to the high number of properties under the Councils control – approx. 1800. There is no defined review period in the RRFSO and the FRA review period is dictated by the overall fire safety rating awarded for each block, which are as follows; Tolerable (Low Risk) – 3 years; Moderate (Medium Risk) – annually; Substantial (Higher Risk) – within 3 months.</p> <p>The overwhelming majority of blocks are rated as Tolerable, although the council has recently given a commitment to completing FRA on all blocks over 6 storeys (127 total) on an annual basis. The formal FRA process is supplemented by routine inspection by the local Area Housing Office Estate Services teams, which also identify fire safety concerns (i.e. access) or repairs issues (such as defective door closing devices).</p> <p>Actions raised during the FRA are assigned to various departments within the council and uploaded to a web-based application. This allows others to review actions assigned to them and close them out appropriately. This system provides an auditable trail of actions taken and also allows any reports generated to present the most up to date status. Actions arising will be shown on the FRA report as 'open', 'closed', or 'on-hold'. The action status is monitored at various levels throughout the organisation.</p>

**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**

Damian Dempsey,  
Fire Safety Work  
Group Leader, and  
Kevin Byrne, Housing  
Investment Manager

The LGG's Purpose Built Blocks of Flats guidance document (published in 2011) highlighted a number of concerns arising from the fatal fire at Lakanal House in July 2009. The key recommendation was to ensure that flat front entrance doors were of a suitable standard and effectively self-closing, "*in the short term as a matter priority*". This has been the Council's primary focus in recent years, along with the interlinked detection and warning programme for converted street properties where it is known that compartmentation is unlikely to effectively support a stay-put fire strategy.

*Communal Fire Alarms – The same guidance reaffirms the view that "in general needs blocks designed to support a 'stay put' policy, it is unnecessary and undesirable for a fire alarm system to be provided. A communal fire detection and alarm system will inevitably lead to a proliferation of false alarms. This will impose a burden on fire and rescue services and lead to residents ignoring warnings of genuine fires. A fire alarm system ought to be provided only in a building in which some control can be achieved over the occupants to ensure that they respond appropriately. For most blocks of flats, it would be unrealistic to expect this. Nor is it necessarily desirable that evacuation should take place from areas remote from the fire, unless and until these areas themselves become threatened by the fire"*.

A simultaneous evacuation of a large block presents significant operational difficulties for the fire and rescue service. Tenanted properties have mains-powered smoke/heat detection and warning alarms installed as part of Decent Homes work, Voids and the cyclical electrical testing regime where required.

*Sprinkler/Suppression Systems - The purpose built blocks of flats guidance suggests that; other fire safety technology cannot always readily be applied to existing buildings. It is unlikely that retrofitting sprinklers or water mist systems would be reasonably practicable for existing blocks.* A list of considerations for any future feasibility study might include;

- Building Regulations – currently required for buildings >30m in height, not retrospective
- Indicative costs anywhere between 4.3m and 97m – blocks 10 storeys and above only
- Asbestos removal – inconvenience/cost/time (also usually last resort)
- Resident acceptance (trunking/boxing) & leaseholders/access/duration of works
- Water Pressure – likely to require boosting equipment/tanks
- Effectiveness in multiple actuations/lack of expertise/specialist installers
- Vandalism/accidental damage/annual maintenance

*Fire Escape (Additional) – A single means of escape staircase is neither uncommon, or in itself considered a major concern. Protecting the single means of escape is paramount, which highlights the importance of suitable, self-closing doors. Additional means of escape are likely to be costly, encounter planning difficulties and may lead to security concerns. A simultaneous evacuation of a large block with several hundred residents is again likely to cause operational difficulties for fire-fighting personnel.*

Imminent works identified through the Fire Safety Working Group within Housing Property Services and the FRA programme include fire stopping; upgrading and/or replacement of communal doors to current standards; and the street property detection/warning programme.

**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**

Billy Wells, Acting Head of Service, Housing Operations

*The Committee will receive evidence from the council's Emergency Planning team at a future meeting.*

A report/procedure is currently being put together by service development (Paul Byer, Service Improvement and Involvement Manager) to confirm how housing will respond to emergencies. Interim arrangements are in place. The report will need to be signed off by the housing department's management team.

**To assess how the council ensures that its housing stock is compliant with fire safety regulations, London Fire Brigade advice and best practice guidance.**

Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager

The council's FRA questionnaire is based on the Publically Available Specification (PAS79:2007) – Fire Risk Assessment Guidance and Recommended Methodology. Other primary references to ensure compliance with legal requirements and best practice include;

- The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
- Fire Safety in Purpose Built Blocks of Flats Guidance – LGG/CFOA
- The Building Regulations 2010 – Approved Document B (Fire Safety)
- LACORS – Housing Fire Safety Guidance (street properties/HMO's etc.)

The council established a Homes and Estates Safety Board in 2012, which meets on a quarterly basis, has an independent Chair and is attended by key stakeholders (including LFB's Borough Commander) and the Executive Member for Housing and Development. The HESB examines 6 key areas, including fire safety, reviewing not only management arrangements, trends and current issues but also monitoring performance through a quarterly KPI report.

In addition to the HESB, quarterly strategic liaison meetings are chaired by the Corporate Director of Housing and Adult Social Services and attended by LFB's Borough Commander. The Construction, Fire and Gas Safety Manager also holds quarterly meetings with the Borough Commander and Fire Safety Regulation Team Leader to review fire incidents, including both operational and enforcement matters.

Joint inspections with LFB personnel are also carried out periodically, to look at issues highlighted by either party. This collaborative approach is demonstrated by LFB's involvement in forming the council's street properties detection/warning programme. Representatives from the Construction and Fire Safety Team also attend quarterly meetings of the Fire Safety in Social Housing forum which is made up of other local authorities and social housing providers to discuss common issues.

**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.**

Stuart Fuller,  
Construction, Fire and  
Gas Safety Manager

The council has dedicated Fire Safety pages on its website, providing advice to residents and also linking to the LFB website. 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 LFB. This visit includes bespoke fire safety advice for the property and lifestyle factors in evidence, as well as the installation of battery operated smoke alarms if these are required. Fire safety advice is also provided periodically through newsletter articles to residents, in addition to the FAQ's on the council's website following the tragic events at Grenfell Tower.

Routine enquiries from residents, AHO staff and leaseholders etc. are generally via the generic fire safety inbox, which all members of the team have access to. The Council adopts LFB's (and current guidance for purpose built blocks of flats) stance that if there's a fire elsewhere in the block, residents are usually safer to remain in their homes unless directly affected by smoke, heat or fire. Where the strategy requires simultaneous evacuation (street properties and a limited number of mansion blocks), Fire Action Notices are installed advising of the actions to be taken in the event of fire.

**To review if there are sufficient capital resources to complete any required fire safety improvements to the council's housing stock.**

Damian Dempsey,  
Fire Safety Work  
Group Leader, and  
Kevin Byrne, Housing  
Investment Manager

There are currently sufficient resources within the council's 30-year investment plan to invest in fire safety improvements and periodic maintenance. It should be noted however that significant investment need in fire safety improvements arising from the Grenfell Tower inquiry would necessitate a review of the council's short/medium term priorities and there may be a detrimental impact on other mainstream investment. The council recognises its duty of care to residents and in delivering of its capital programme schemes. The first call on available financial resources are invariably to general health and safety and/or fire safety issues.

**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.**

Damian Dempsey,  
Fire Safety Work  
Group Leader, and  
Matt West, Head of  
Repairs and  
Maintenance

It is considered there are sufficient revenue resources in place to ensure the councils housing stock remains compliant. We are currently carrying out sample checks within properties/blocks and checking on compartmentation and all contractor's works are post inspected to ensure that any breaches to compartmentation/fire breaks are re-instated with correct materials following completion of the work.

These post inspections will also be rolled out to the in house repairs service to ensure compliance and managed with our new system Oneserve. All housing repairs service staff have received training or ongoing tool box briefings to ensure that this is adhered to, and to highlight any areas where breaches/non-compliance exist within the properties/blocks are suitably re-instated. We also have our cyclical testing contractors that are carrying out compliance checks to various properties/blocks currently, reporting any findings back to be proactively managed and addressed.

**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.**

Stacey Wright,  
Housing Partnerships  
Clienting Manager

**TMO's** - Whilst the council is largely responsible for the structure and design of its properties, TMO's are generally responsible under their management agreements (contracts) for repair and services which may be associated with a range of fire safety aspects of a building. Example of these include communal fire doors and windows, removal of bulk or stored items in common parts and the security of roof access.

In addition, TMOs are responsible for regular inspections to their delegated managed areas and this includes all common parts, ensuring there are no obstructions to emergency access or exits, checking electrical intake cupboards and dry risers and the removal of items on the estates such as bulk refuse and lumber. TMO management agreements make a general reference to the organisation adhering to all current health and safety regulations.

A comprehensive quarterly estate inspection is carried out jointly with the Estate Service Co-ordinators (ESC) and TMO's and a template checklist is used to inspect and assess areas such as caretaking, internal communal areas, estate repairs, grounds maintenance, lumber collection and broader estate issues. Areas of responsibility for actions are flagged within a report and should be carried out by the delegated organisation responsible for the specific works.

All programmed Fire Risk Assessments (FRA's) on TMO managed estates are carried out by the council.

**PARTNERS** - Partners fire safety measures centre on their Fire Risk Assessments (FRA's) of their managed properties and their Communal Area Risk Assessments (CARAs). FRA's are completed every three years, with the next round due to start later this year. CARAs are conducted twice a year for High and Medium risk properties, and annually for the lower risk blocks. The risk level is based on the number of flights of stairs in the building (+4 is high, 3 is medium and less than 3 is deemed low risk). Partners are re-introducing the zero tolerance policy on items being stored in communal areas to minimise fire risks.

All gas inspections are conducted annually and form part of Partners contractual KPI's and performance is reported monthly to the PFI Clienting team. This is in addition to monthly performance reporting on the 5 yearly programmed fixed wire electrical checks. Partners have promoted fire safety through their regular newsletters to residents 'Partners Gazette' with an 'Important fire safety' article in the July 2017 edition and the 'Fire Safety – Know the Plan' article in the January and April 2017 editions.

Partners also attend the Councils quarterly Homes & Estates Safety Board Meetings where they report on a range of H&S areas related to the PFI Street properties and are kept in the loop on key issues and changes in practises. Partners also feed into the FRA Street Property Meetings on the forthcoming programme to install heat and smoke detection systems into communal parts of street properties. Partners hold an internal quarterly Health and Safety Group meeting which incorporates Partners and its contractors to review all aspects of H&S issues and performance monitoring.

There are also circa 100 high risk, vulnerable residents in deemed available dwellings who have already been visited by Partners or will be visited over the next six months. All these dwellings will be fitted with smoke alarms and Partners will also be referring vulnerable residents to the LFB's 'Home Fire Safety Visits'.

**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.**

Damian Dempsey,  
Fire Safety Work  
Group Leader

New Build (Pre-Planning) Scheme proposals are discussed with Planning and LFB are consulted as part of the planning application process, ensuring that projects are compliant with current Building Regulations and to ensure access arrangements, fire-fighting facilities (DRM etc.) are considered and incorporated as required.

In respect of the Cyclical Improvement Programme (CIP), FRA are provided to the project teams during the planning stages, where fire safety improvements can be considered and incorporated into the CIP project if possible. Long term improvements/upgrades or high value repairs are allocated to CIP through the FRA programme. Due to the level of work and urgency required post-Lakanal House a decision was taken to establish a dedicated fire safety works team and complete many fire safety projects on a 'standalone' basis outside of CIP

The Construction and Fire Safety Team provide the health and safety competence to collaborative project team approach, liaising with in house fire risk assessors as required to inform the projects. Expectations in respect of fire safety are set out in the Council's Code of Conduct for Contractors and within our Pre-Construction Information Packs (PCIP) required for major projects under the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015.

**To review the working relationships between the council's Emergency Planning team and Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade.**

Daniel Lawson, Head  
of Emergency  
Planning and  
Business Continuity

The Emergency Planning Unit 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 Unit to develop training links with local fire stations whereby our 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.

Our group of 30 LALO's are all trained to a level of LALO Module 2, which includes; Introduction to Emergency Management, LALO Module 1 (Civil Contingencies, LALO role) and LALO Module 2 (Scene Management, Silver/Tactical Meetings, Major Incidents, Emergency Services).

The LALO's form part of the Council's Crisis Response Plan which is often activated, albeit to different levels. Recently the Emergency Planning Unit were requested to assist Kensington & Chelsea and Camden by providing LALO's and EPO's to run rest centres and emergency services liaison. At the height of our assistance we had LALO's in Kensington & Chelsea whilst still being able to respond to the Finsbury Park Terrorist Attack in our own borough.

**To review how vulnerable residents are incorporated into evacuation plans and how these plans are stored and accessed in the event of an emergency.**

Stuart Fuller,  
Construction, Fire and  
Gas Safety Manager

Vulnerable resident data has been offered to LFB previously but presents a number of difficulties in terms of storing/interpreting data, preventing unauthorised access/use of such data and ensuring it remains up to date. It is understood the vulnerability codes used by housing management were scrutinised as part of the Committee’s review of Housing Services for Vulnerable People, and are likely to be reviewed/rationalised. It is suggested that following this review, further dialogue with LFB will be required to establish the level of information which is both useful and manageable. This may be limited to properties where there are significant outstanding risks, for example residents that use medical oxygen and properties with significant hoarding issues.

It should be noted that most general needs, purpose built blocks of flats were constructed on the ‘stay-put, unless directly affected by smoke/fire’ principle and as such a simultaneous evacuation strategy is not only undesirable, but also presents operational difficulties for LFB. Where a fire strategy of simultaneous evacuation is required (i.e. converted street properties with interlinked smoke/heat detection and warning systems) this will require liaison with housing management and potentially adult social services in some cases. There is an assumption that residents would be able to self-evacuate in event of a fire in their own property in most cases however.

**To review the risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats.**

Stuart Fuller,  
Construction, Fire and  
Gas Safety Manager,  
and Ellis Turner,  
Environmental Health  
Manager

Typically, where commercial properties are below residential Council accommodation these are on very long term leases, which required the leaseholder to comply with all applicable legislation including fire safety. Enforcement of the RRFSO in commercial property is the responsibility of LFB and such premises will be audited periodically to assess compliance with the Order.

There are mechanisms in place for the Councils environmental health (EH) teams to notify LFB of any fire safety concerns identified through their own routine visits/inspections. The quarterly liaison meetings with LFB’s Borough Commander referred to earlier in this statements are also attended by the Service Manager (Environmental Health) or the Service Director (Public Protection). It has been highlighted through this close working relationship that there is often a strong correlation between poor fire safety regimes and poor food hygiene standards and so information sharing has proved highly valuable for both LFB and LBI.

**To review tenancy conditions related to the storage and use of barbecues and gas canisters.**

Billy Wells, Acting  
Head of Service,  
Housing Operations

The standard conditions of tenancy state:

***You must not have or use, or cause or allow anyone else to have or use:***

- *any inflammable materials in the property, shed or garage except those reasonably needed for normal domestic use; or*
- *gas cylinders or bottles in the property.*

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It is considered that existing provisions in policy are clear enough – fire hazards are already covered in the condition of tenancy, although not explicit on BBQ’s. There isn’t a current need to amend the existing conditions of tenancy at the moment but this may be necessary in the future depending on guidance/legislation changes.