

Committee	Dated:
Housing Management and Almshouses Sub Committee	26 September 2016
Subject: Fire Safety Protocol – Communal Areas in Residential Blocks	Public
Report of: Director of Community and Children’s Services	For Decision
Report author: Amy Carter, Community and Children’s Services	

Summary

The report asks Members to approve a new protocol relating to fire safety on our estates. In particular, it relates to the placing of plants, outdoor furniture and other items on landings and communal areas.

The protocol has been produced as a result of a recent London Fire Brigade inspection at one estate, where the inspecting officer expressed serious concern about the quantity of plant pots, garden furniture and other items on a communal area.

Whilst understanding that some residents who have no garden do like to have some plants in communal areas, this protocol seeks to restrict this to a reasonable and safe level, maintaining access at all times.

Recommendation

Members are asked to endorse the protocol, for immediate adoption and implementation.

Main Report

Background

1. Many of the flats on the City’s housing estates have no garden and very limited outdoor space. For this reason, some residents have placed containers of plants outside their properties and on communal areas.
2. This is not a problem, provided that the plants do not impede accessibility and do not pose a fire risk. However, there are occasions when the quantity and type of items do exceed what is safe and reasonable.

Current Position

3. In July 2016 an officer from the London Fire Brigade (LFB) arrived at one of the City’s estates to carry out an unannounced fire safety inspection. His inspection was largely satisfactory and he made only minor recommendations, except in relation to one area.

4. In this area, he noted a large display of plants, plant pots, garden furniture, candles, water features and other ornamental items, covering a significant area on a communal landing and taking up space on walkways. He expressed serious concern about accessibility, the hazards the items would pose to both residents and firefighters in the event of a fire, and the combined weight of these items on an upper floor.

5. His report stated that:

The Buildings Manager brought me to [location deleted] where on the top floor I was confronted by a garden centre. The landings and walkways were full of plants, furnishings seating, flooring, candles and quantities of Peat. The means of escape from flats and access for the Fire Brigade had been compromised and the fire loading on this floor is unacceptable. It had been accepted practice to allow some plant pots in the past but the tenants were now compromising the fire safety of the block. I required the building manager significantly reduce the fire loading.

6. Managers do monitor walkways and communal areas regularly on all estates, and residents are asked to remove items which are felt to be excessive. Most residents are happy to comply. However, as, at present, there is no clear protocol setting out exactly what is reasonable, it is difficult for managers to enforce restrictions if residents are resistant.

7. It is for this reason that a protocol has been drawn up and the endorsement of Members is requested.

Proposed Protocol

8. The draft protocol has been developed in liaison with the London Fire Brigade, the City's Fire Safety Advisor and the Barbican & Property Services Division.

9. Because this protocol is required on health and safety grounds, and is needed urgently to tackle the issues highlighted by the LFB inspection, it is not felt that resident consultation is appropriate.

10. The protocol allows residents to place a certain amount of plants in communal areas, thus recognising that this is important to some residents, and can enhance the appearance of an estate. However, it restricts the depth, height and location of any plant displays to quantities as advised by the Fire Safety Officer.

11. Certain items are not permitted in communal areas under the draft policy. These include:

- Flammable items of any kind;
- Furniture, other than that which can be removed and stored in residents' properties each evening;
- Barbeques except in gardens and podium areas where risk assessments have been carried out and insurance is in place.

12. The protocol sets out a procedure whereby managers can remove items after giving 7 days written notice, or if they are causing a fire risk or obstruction.

13. The protocol does allow exceptions to be made by the Estate Manager, in consultation with the Fire Safety Advisor. However, permission for such exceptions must be obtained in writing.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

14. The Comptroller has been consulted about this protocol and has no comments to add.

Conclusion

15. The approval and implementation of this protocol will allow residents to display plants in communal areas to a reasonable level, but will also give managers the authority they need to address any problems which arise and thus prevent further risks to the safety of all residents.

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