

Committees:	Dates:
Housing Management & Alms houses Sub-Committee	03 July 2017
Community & Children's Services Committee	14 July 2017
Audit & Risk Management Committee	24 July 2017
Subject: Fire Safety in the City's Residential Blocks	Public
Report of: Director of Community & Children's Services	For Information
<p style="text-align: center;">Summary</p> <p>The purpose of this report is to update Members following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower. The report outlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire safety measures in place prior to the fire • Our immediate response to the fire • The next phase of work to be undertaken • Issues for consideration for possible future inclusion in programmes of work <p>Recommendation</p> <p>Members are asked to note and comment upon the report.</p>	

Main Report

Background

1. Following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in West London, concerns have, understandably, been raised by City Corporation Members and residents about the safety of our homes and the possibility of a similar incident in one of our tower blocks.
2. Although the cause of the fire and how it appeared to spread so quickly are still being investigated and are unlikely to be formally confirmed for some time, government has already been in contact with local authorities and housing associations collating information relating to their housing stock and the number and type of residential blocks of flats with six or more floors. Further figures have been requested for blocks of four or more floors. It is highly likely, in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, that new legislation will be introduced to improve fire safety in residential blocks of flats.

3. The City of London currently has 44 residential blocks of flats with four or more floors, of which 37 have six or more floors. A list of those blocks is attached at Appendix A to this report.

Existing fire safety measures

4. All our residential blocks have a comprehensive fire risk assessment (FRA), carried out by a specialist company. The most recent assessments were completed between July and November 2016 by Frankham Risk Management Services Ltd.
5. The risk assessments do not highlight any areas of high risk. They make a number of medium and low risk recommendations, which were already being addressed through day to day repairs, the major works programme and estate inspections.
6. Our approach to fire safety is not restricted to FRAs. We have robust procedures in place to ensure, as far as possible, that our residents remain safe in their homes. These procedures include:
 - a. Carrying out regular reviews of the FRAs to ensure they remain valid, compliant and fit-for-purpose;
 - b. Carrying out inspections of fire doors and other related fire safety measures;
 - c. Carrying out regular estate inspections to ensure that any potential fire and other safety hazards are identified and removed.
 - d. All Estate Managers and Estate Officers have fire risk assessment training and carry out weekly and monthly checks, dealing with hazards as part of their normal work. Our cleaners also receive fire training so that they can identify hazards as they go about their day to day work;
 - e. Updating the design of our Fire Log Books and the information collated in them;
 - f. Producing guidance notes on fire management plans and fire compartmentation that are applied to all refurbishment works carried out in our homes;
 - g. Fitting hard-wired smoke alarms in our tenants' homes as part of the Decent Homes programme;
 - h. Maintaining up to date and detailed plans of our estates in fire safety boxes, attached to the outside of buildings and accessible only to fire services. This includes the details of people with mobility issues where these are known to us;
 - i. Educating our residents and raising awareness of fire safety issues. We recently published a new fire safety leaflet for social estate residents, giving advice which includes evacuation issues, knowing fire escape routes and keeping walkways and balconies clear. A series of posters accompany this and we also publish frequent reminders of fire safety in newsletters.

- j. Working with residents who do not comply with fire safety guidelines and persist in blocking exits and walkways. This can be a sensitive issue and we have always tried to balance the risk against the personal impact, when a resident is reluctant to comply or has mental health issues.

Immediate response to the incident

- 7. As soon as we became aware of the fire, a number of measures were taken:
 - a. Estate staff carried out immediate checks on fire escapes, emergency lighting and fire boxes;
 - b. A review of our fire risk assessments took place and the addressing of the medium and low risks was reassessed;
 - c. Technical data on all blocks of six or more floors was reviewed and produced in response to requests from the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG). This focused on a range of issues, including the construction of the buildings and the nature of any cladding. Our returns confirmed that only Great Arthur House and Twelve Acres House (the new block at Avondale Square Estate) include cladding. The cladding at Twelve Acres House is a small area of rainscreen, which poses no risk.
 - d. A statement was issued to all residents, reassuring them that none of our blocks was of a similar construction to Grenfell Tower and reminding them of fire safety advice;
 - e. A detailed assessment of the works being undertaken at Great Arthur House was carried out to ensure that they remained compliant with our specification, which stipulated that all materials used in the construction must be non-combustible;
 - f. Void properties in our stock were identified, in case these were to be required for families evacuated from Grenfell Tower. Staff also initiated a collection of essential items for the survivors;
 - g. The recent fire safety leaflet was reprinted, so that this could be distributed to every home on our social housing estates again, with a letter offering home visits for anyone wishing a fire safety check or to be shown escape routes. A new version was produced with information specifically for Barbican residents, so that the leaflet could also be delivered to homes there.

Great Arthur House

- 8. Immediate assurance was sought, and given, that the main cladding panels at Great Arthur House comprised only non-combustible material. However, a subsequent re-inspection revealed that a 300mm wide section of insulated aluminium cladding did not meet the requirements of our specification. This was removed immediately as a precautionary measure.

9. A letter was delivered to Great Arthur House residents to advise them of the steps that we were taking to ensure their safety. At a subsequent resident meeting organised by Members on 26 June, a number of further issues were raised and these are now being worked through so that a full Q&A sheet can be produced for all residents.

Works to be carried out next

10. A number of actions have now been identified for officers to work on during the coming weeks.
11. Previously, our policy has been to commission independent fire risk assessments every three years, and to have these reviewed annually, by trained staff. This was entirely consistent with best practice. However, we have now decided to have new fire risk assessments done by independent specialists every year. Frankham Risk Management Services Ltd have been commissioned to carry out new risk assessments on all our blocks, starting in July. In the light of recent events, we anticipate that some of the previously medium and low risk recommendations will be revised.
12. We will be holding drop-in sessions for residents to talk to senior managers about fire safety and our plans for improvements on all our estates over the next few weeks.
13. The majority of entrance doors to individual flats in our blocks are original and, in general, give fire resistance of 15-20 minutes. There is no legal requirement to replace these with more fire resistant doors. We have replaced doors with more fire-resistant models as they required repair or were due for replacement, and had intended to continue with this programme. However, we will now be embarking on an enhanced front door replacement programme to bring all front doors up to a 60 minute fire resistance standard, starting with our tower blocks. The cost of this is estimated at £3-5m, depending on the level of specification and coverage required. Consideration will need to be given to a number of factors, including planning guidelines (for buildings with listed status or in conservation areas) and possible objections from leaseholders to having this work imposed upon them.
14. Estate staff are responding to any requests for home visits and are actively door-knocking to reassure residents, show them fire safety escapes and to pro-actively identify any vulnerable residents that we are unaware of, so that records can be kept up to date.
15. Where there are residents who are not complying with guidance on keeping walkways and fire escapes clear, we are now be taking a much firmer line and decisive action. We will still endeavour to address issues sensitively, giving adequate notice and using mediation where appropriate to try and achieve co-operation, but we will not be able to compromise on this matter.

Items for future consideration

16. We will clearly continue to monitor progress with the investigation into the Grenfell Tower fire to understand what caused it and any implications this may have for the City in relation to the safety and integrity of its homes. Due consideration will also need to be given to any resulting legislation or recommendations from government.
17. In anticipation of this, we have already commenced a feasibility study to evaluate the potential for retro-fitting sprinkler systems and fire alarms into our tower blocks.
18. If the City were to decide to fit sprinkler systems in its high rise blocks, it would need to budget for a likely cost of £15-20m, depending on the level of specification required.
19. Other issues to be taken into consideration would include:
 - a. The level of disruption to residents for what would be extensive work;
 - b. Planning requirements;
 - c. The need to install water tanks on and in buildings. This will require significant additional space that may result in the loss of residential space or the extension of buildings;
 - d. Future maintenance costs, which, given the legionella risk of storing water and the potential for misuse of the system, could be considerable.
20. There is no legal requirement to retro-fit fire detection and alarm systems in buildings. In the past, fire services have expressed firm opposition to the fitting of fire alarm systems in communal areas, due to the level of abortive or nuisance calls they receive where this is the case, and the high cost of responding to these. Apart from in a limited number of hazardous areas such as plant rooms, and in our sheltered schemes, there are no fire alarms fitted in our blocks.
21. If the City were to decide to fit fire alarms to common parts in its blocks, the likely cost would be in the region of £3-5m, depending on the level of specification and coverage.
22. Other factors to consider would be how to reduce misuse of alarms through vandalism and accidental activation.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

23. Clearly, there are serious financial implications of carrying out these improvements, and there will be an impact on the Five Year Major Works Programme and/or the programme for building 700 new homes on our social housing estates. There will also be a financial impact on homeowners, as the Housing Revenue Account cannot subsidise works to privately owned homes. However, this must be weighed against the safety of our residents, which must be paramount.

24. The reputation of the City would also be at serious risk if reasonable measures are not taken. The key issue for Members will be to decide what action and expenditure is reasonable and proportionate to the risk.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Table of City of London residential blocks with four or more floors.

Background Papers:

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