

18 July 2017		ITEM: 6
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Fire Safety in Tower Blocks		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: No	
Report of: John Knight, Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Head of Service: John Knight, Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris, Corporate Director Adults, Housing & Health.		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

The tragic events at the Grenfell Tower block in Kensington on 14 June 2017 triggered an urgent review of fire safety arrangements in Thurrock's tower blocks.

This report summarises a) the fire safety regime in place for Thurrock's comparable stock and b) the actions taken by the Council since June 14th to provide reassurance to residents, co-operate with the government's investigation into the causes of the Grenfell fire, and achieve a 'double assurance' of the safety of our tower block accommodation.

The report also outlines the further measures we are taking to ensure the safety of all of our Council housing, and notes some of the potential implications of the events at Grenfell Tower.

- 1. Recommendation(s)**
 - 1.1 That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes and comments on the report.**
- 2. Introduction and Background**
 - 2.1 Within the Borough of Thurrock there are fifteen tower blocks containing 981 purpose built flats. These tower blocks are located in three different areas of the borough, Grays, Chadwell St Mary and Tilbury.
 - 2.2 All fifteen tower blocks were constructed circa 1970 or shortly before using a concrete frame, with infill brick works, and concrete panels to form the exterior façade. All property elements blocks have been maintained and

refurbished through ongoing maintenance and capital improvement programmes, covering external features, individual dwellings and communal areas.

3. Fire Safety regime in Thurrock

- 3.1 The Housing service follows Thurrock Council's agreed fire safety policy which covers the Council's overall approach to asset management. The over-arching policy is subject to regular reviews and updates to ensure it has remained relevant to current legislation. The latest of these exercises was completed in September 2016 with the next planned review in September 2019 under the three years stipulated in the policy.
- 3.2 Comprehensive Fire Risk Assessments are undertaken across all of the housing stock on a rolling three year programme. Intermediate assessments are also undertaken on an individual basis if there are any major works or alterations completed within the three-year period. These assessments are completed by an independent consultant with the relevant skills and knowledge, with the last appointee being a recently retired firefighter with the required specialist expertise.
- 3.3 Thurrock Council's fire risk assessments for the high rise blocks are undertaken in accordance with the guidance set out for the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Local Government Association documentation (Fire safety in Purpose-built blocks of flats). In addition to this Thurrock Council work in partnership with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service with regards to emergency procedures in the event of a fire. Based on the information and guidance above, Thurrock Council implements the "Stay Put Policy" in high rise residential accommodation.
- 3.4 All 15 tower blocks within the Thurrock Borough were designed, built and have been maintained for the implementation of the 'stay put' policy. This principal is based on ensuring that necessary 'compartmentation' systems and structural elements are in place to stop and delay the spread of fire, giving sufficient time for the Fire and Rescue service to attend and either extinguish the fire, or undertake a controlled evacuation procedure if this becomes necessary.
- 3.5 Housing staff carry out pre-defined checks on a daily, weekly and monthly basis – such as manually triggering the alarms on each floor - to ensure these systems operate as required. Any defective elements are quickly identified and addressed. External contractors are utilised to undertake quarterly servicing and maintenance on fire detection systems within our high rise blocks, covering elements such as smoke detection systems, dry risers and emergency lighting.

- 3.6 The tower blocks within the Thurrock borough are fitted with fire detection systems within the communal areas and the residential flats themselves. The communal fire detection system has been specifically designed as a non-audible system, but it controls self-closing fire doors to prevent the spread of smoke and fire. The communal fire detection system is non-audible in order to adhere to the principles of the stay put policy.
- 3.7 The fire detection systems within each flats is a `stand-alone' system comprising a heat detector in the kitchen and a smoke detector in the hallway. These devices are audible, ensuring that any resident immediately affected by a fire will be alerted and can leave the property quickly, closing the front door which is fire door designed to contain the fire inside the unit.

4. Cladding on Thurrock Council's Tower blocks

- 4.1 All of the fifteen tower blocks, with the exception of those in Chadwell St Mary, had thermal improvement works completed circa. 2000, including the installation of a new facade via an external cladding system.
- 4.2 None of the cladding systems on Thurrock's tower blocks are of the same materials or construction details of those used on Grenfell Tower. The cladding used Kensington is comprised of an Aluminum composite material (ACM) with polyisocyanurate (PIR) insulation board. The cladding in Thurrock is made from a glass fibre reinforced polyester resin substance, covering a mineral wool slab insulation. Both the cladding material and the insulation material used in Thurrock have the highest classification for fire safety, i.e. A1 for combustibility and Class O for spread of flame. The cladding system is therefore, categorized as a `not readily combustible' installation. .
- 4.3 Following the fire in to the Grenfell Tower, Central Government requested that every local authority provided information on their high rise buildings and particularly cladding systems. Based on these returns, the Building Research Establishment (BRE) working on behalf of the Government requested samples of cladding where appropriate for combustibility testing. Thurrock Council was not required to provide any cladding samples for testing.
- 4.4 Notwithstanding this a decision was taken to commission an independent consultant to undertake an assessment of the cladding systems in place in Thurrock to ensure the system meets all current legislative requirements. On site checks should commence during July.

5. Actions since the Grenfell fire

- 5.1 Following the fire at Grenfell Thurrock immediately moved to a number of measures to reassure our residents of their safety. A letter containing an extract from the 'stay put' policy other information was hand-delivered to 981 flats by June 16th. Officers engaged in an estimated 700 face-to-face discussions. allowing them to provide additional reassurance and giving residents the opportunity to raise any concerns.
- 5.2 In partnership with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service, all 15 tower blocks were immediately assessed to ensure that the standards that Thurrock Council implements on a day to day basis had been maintained. We can confirm the only salient point that arose from these inspections that required addressing was related to parking around the high rise accommodation to ensure it remained clear for emergency services vehicles. This is now being addressed through a combination of parking enforcement and additional structural works such as installing extra bollards to prevent unauthorized access to areas near the blocks. The Council and Fire Service staff are now working to a programme to complete a comprehensive check of all 15 high rise blocks by the beginning of August. .
- 5.3 On the 27th June 2017 all tower block residents were issued with a more detailed letter, in a 'Frequently Asked Questions' format. This letter is attached at Appendix A, and has been added to the website and shared with members and media outlets as necessary. We have also held residents' meetings for each area to give residents a further opportunity to seek assurances and to contribute to the service's response. These meeting were held between Wednesday 28th June and Friday 7th July 2017.

6. Fire Safety across Thurrock Council Housing Stock

- 6.1 Whilst the current national focus is centered on high rise residential accommodation, as a large social landlord covering a multitude of different building archetypes and tenures it is our duty to ensure that we maintain a consistent approach for the safety of all residents of Thurrock.
- 6.2 Thurrock Council currently has no overdue Fire Risk Assessments for any of our social housing stock. In 2016/17 £220k of capital improvement works were carried out through a bespoke programme to ensure maintain fire safety across our stock.

6.3 In accordance with the three year risk assessment policy, new assessments completed for all sheltered complexes and low rise blocks during 2017/18. Although none of these assessments is currently overdue, the programme has been accelerated in light of recent events elsewhere.

7. Future Implications

7.1 Whilst the full implications of events that occurred in Kensington are not yet apparent, the housing department will be keeping the situation under review and assessing whether any 'ripple effects' are likely which will have an impact on our services. For example, there may be an inflationary effect on the local temporary accommodation market if London boroughs are required to rehouse large numbers of tenants currently occupying blocks where similar cladding has been used.

7.2 It can be anticipated that fire standards in private sector properties will also become a focus of concern. Our Housing Enforcement team already deals effectively with category one hazards in this type of accommodation, and we will intensify our efforts to encourage local landlords to provide safe homes.

7.3 Finally, we will work closely with central government and other regulatory bodies to respond to any wider changes as they occur in terms of improvements to fire safety, to ensure they are fully embedded in Thurrock where necessary. In view of this the Council has begun a feasibility study into the retro-fitting of sprinkler systems through the tower blocks in Thurrock – potentially a jointly funded project with the Essex Fire Service. We will of course monitor the national development of these issues, and move quickly to respond to any legislative and regulatory changes as they occur.

7.4 The fire has led to a wide-ranging public debate on issues ranging well beyond the fire itself, such as the possible accelerated demolition of high rise blocks across the sector, the financing of social housing, and the procurement arrangements which have potentially led to the use of materials with questionable safety ratings across a large number of authorities. The longer-term impacts of the tragedy can at this juncture only be a matter for conjecture – even at this stage, however it seems likely that significant changes may arise from this appalling tragedy.

8. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

8.1 This report has no direct impact on the above.

9. Implications

9.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Julie Curtis**
HRA and Development Accountant

The Council's residential housing assets are managed within the Housing Revenue Account.

Financial forecasts for the HRA have not been adjusted at this stage. To reflect the possibility of additional expenditure on relevant capital works – for example the fitting of sprinkler systems in all the tower blocks managed by Housing - we have more generally recognised the financial risk by adding a pressure of up to £1m at this stage until more details are known.

9.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Martin Hall**
Housing Solicitor

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Legal Services are available to give legal advice as specific queries or issues may arise in respect of fire safety, in particular, advice on duties of a landlord and freeholder, powers under tenancy agreements and long leases to enforce inspections, reviews and remedial works – such as entrance doors that are fire safety compliant, gas installations, and other issues that might arise following inspection by Essex Fire.

9.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Price**
Community Development Officer

The Council's tower block accommodation, like its entire remaining social housing stock, provides accommodation for a wide range of residents including disproportionate numbers of elderly and disabled people and those with other vulnerabilities. The measures in this report will ensure that these residents are not put at risk because of the nature of their housing tenure, and will contribute to the social cohesion of the borough.

9.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

- Not Applicable

10. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

11. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 - Letter to residents of tower blocks, June 2017

Report Author:

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