

5 February 2019		ITEM 8
Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee		
Update on Fire Safety, including a Review of Fire Suppressant (Sprinkler) Systems		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: No	
Report of: Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director Housing		
Accountable Assistant Director: Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris, Corporate Director, Adults, Housing & Health		
This report is: Public		

Executive Summary

This report updates members on fire safety measures undertaken by the council and addresses the question of retrospective installation of sprinklers in the council's 15 high-rise blocks.

The report outlines details of proposed changes in regards to fire safety legislation for social landlords following the publication of the Hackitt report and how the Council's current approach already covers some of these recommendations. Thurrock Council have always prioritised resident safety in the management of our assets to ensure that we maintain and improve our buildings so they provide the highest level of fire safety in line with the applicable fire safety standards for each property type.

1. Recommendation

1.1 The Committee is asked to comment on the contents of the report and the ongoing fire safety work undertaken by the housing service to ensure all council owned property is safe.

2.0 Introduction and Background

2.1 Thurrock Council have always taken a proactive approach to fire safety across the housing stock to ensure that our residents live in safe and secure accommodation. The council works closely with the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service to complete audits of applicable blocks in the borough on an annual basis. These inspections are in addition to the formal fire risk assessment undertaken by an external professional consultancy that are completed on a three year rolling programme, both of these are

supplementary to the day to day management inspections completed by Thurrock Council officers.

- 2.2 Over the last 12 months the Council in partnership with our contracting partners have been working through our fifteen tower blocks in the borough to maintain and improve the communal fire compartmentation measures and emergency lighting in the blocks. Further works are now planned to be completed in early 2019 to improved smoke ventilation to some of the communal areas in line with the recommendations of the fire risk assessments.
- 2.3 In regards to the wider portfolio, by the end of March 2019, all of the applicable properties within the Thurrock Council housing portfolio will had a new up to date fire risk assessment completed since October 2017. This ensures the Council remains compliant with its fire safety policy of having risk assessment completed with a three year rolling period.
- 2.4 Since the tragic events in June 2017, there has been a complete review of fire safety in social housing and all the relevant and legislation applicable to this. The first review to be finalised and published was the “Hackitt Review” **Building a Safer Future**, this report was an independent review of the building regulations and fire safety. The report made a total of 52 recommendations in regards to fire safety as a whole and specifically high rise residential accommodation blocks. In response to this report the MHCLG set up eleven expert working groups to ensure there is a full depth review of each recommendation. The aim of the working groups is to produce an integrated statutory regulatory framework in relation to fire safety. The working groups have been set to specifically focus on the different construction and professional roles in the industry, the eleven working groups are as follows:
- Working group 01: Engineers
 - Working group 02: Installers
 - Working group 03: Fire Engineers
 - Working group 04: Fire Risk Assessors
 - Working group 05: Fire safety Enforcement Officers
 - Working group 06: Building control / Building Standards
 - Working group 07: Architects and Building Designers
 - Working group 08: Building Safety Manager
 - Working group 09: Site Supervisors
 - Working group 10: Project Managers
 - Working group 11: Procurement
- 2.5 The Hackitt review took a holistic approach to the matter of fire safety and a number of the recommendations are in relation to resident engagement and a “residents” voice. This was matter was also identified in the recently published Social Housing Green Paper and went further to suggest a that a new regulator with stronger enforcement powers should be in place to increase transparency and improve overall engagement. The Green Paper also identified the need to review the current decency standards and raised the question if these are still relevant or if these should be higher.
- 2.6 The MHCLG is currently formulating an official response to the Hackitt report and this is due to be published in early 2019 whilst no date has officially been

set for this release, it is indicated that a new law / regulatory framework will be coming into force by 2020. This time frame is to allow a consultation to be undertaken in relation to building control documentation for the United Kingdom.

- 2.7 Whilst the final document has not been released it is clear that based on the breadth and depth of the recommendations set out there are going to be fundamental culture changes in the social housing and construction sectors. These are likely to include the creation of a Joint Competence Authority, a new “gateway” process for the signing off of construction activities and explicate roles and responsibilities in organisations. This is to ensure there is a clearly defined responsible person for each section of building safety with the appropriate accountability assigned to this role. It is suggested this approach should take a similar framework as CDM 2015 Regulations (Construction and Design Management).
- 2.8 It is also proposed to redefine high rise residential building as HRRB’s (High risk residential buildings) and these will be subject to new more robust regulatory setting and overseen by a licenced Building Safety Manager with specific enforcement and prosecution powers. Throughout the report and all supporting publications in the industry has placed significant amount of emphases on competence in relation to all sections of fire safety and it is proposed that all professionals involved in the implementation of construction related activities will have to demonstrate their competence prior to being able to the implementation of any works on HRRB’s.
- 2.9 Thurrock Council have always worked to deliver a practical and robust approach to asset management and policy for fire safety to ensure it’s a consistent standard across the portfolio and we utilised the resources available effectively. Whilst there will always be room for review and improvement it must be noted that there have been a number of fires in the Council stock of both high and low rise flatted accommodation and all fires have been successfully contained in the flat / compartmentation area where it originated. The most significant fire in recent years in one our high rise blocks occurred in 2018 in Chadwell St Mary, whilst this fire completely destroyed the windows to the external façade, internally this was completely contained to the flat. In this instance the fire service implemented the stay put policy in the block which operated very successfully.

3.0 Thurrock Council’s current approach

- 3.1 Thurrock Council are continuously monitoring the industry and publications to ensure that we are best placed to adapt and implement changes when these come into force. However, the Council has also started to implement changes to enhance previous approaches as we recognise that some of the suggested changes offer tangible benefits to our residents and the Authority as a social landlord.
- 3.2 In regards to community engagement applicable Council Officers have been attending certain resident steering groups to discuss fire safety to allow residents to understand the approaches that we are taking in respect to building management and repair and maintenance works in our buildings. It is proposed to continue and increase resident engagement in regards to fire

safety to provide them with the necessary platform to be able to share their view and raise specific concerns that they have.

- 3.3 As previously identified works are undertaken year on year across the portfolio in regards to fire safety, as part of these works a large amount of resident flat front entrance doors have been upgraded, however, these have been completed based on condition and not in a programme due to financial constraints and to ensure other priority works are completed. However, we are pleased to confirm that we are now about to deliver a programme to upgrade circa 350 flat front entrance doors to new FD30s fire doors. As part of this programme we will ensure any doors that needs to be replaced as a priority will be completed first, however, it is then proposed to upgrade all doors in complete blocks so we have a consistent standard in Thurrock's high rise buildings, whilst this programme will not replace all doors this year, it is planned to deliver a fire door replacement programme year on year moving forward.
- 3.4 Flat front entrance fire doors have been subject to an essential review by the Government in regards to regulatory compliance and again the Council have been very proactive in tracking and reviewing the documentation in relation to this. We can confirm that all new FD30s doors now being installed into Thurrock Council stock will meet the EN1634 fire and smoke resistance requirements. This new standard will be the UK's minimum mandatory fire performance requirement from 1 October 2019; however, we have taken the decision to only install doors that meet this regulation from this point forward.
- 3.5 At present one of the main challenges the Council face is in relation to management of communal areas within our high rise residential blocks, the issues relate to the discarding / dumping of items in defined sterile areas and frequent damage of communal fire doors / partitions in lobbies and stairwells. All fifteen tower blocks are covered by a dedicated caretaking services to identify and address these elements as they arise, however, because we are unable to identify how this has occurred we are limited in regards to effectiveness of preventing this happening again.
- 3.6 In order to help address the above issues the Council are currently consulting with the residents living in our tower blocks in regards to installing CCTV in the main communal areas on each floor of all fifteen blocks. This project is focused on maintaining safe homes for our residents and will enable the Council to review each floor if any of the above incidents occur or if any other anti-social behaviour incidents occur. Further to this it is proposed that in conjunction with the instillation of the CCTV, the smoke detection system that is in communal areas of all fifteen high rise blocks for controlling the fire compartmentation measures will also be linked back to the CCTV control room. This will enable the control room which is staffed 24/7, 365 days a year to immediately review the camera on the applicable floor where the smoke detector has been activated allowing them to take the appropriate course of action depending on the circumstances.
- 3.7 Thurrock Council is currently updating its fire safety advice booklet for all residents and it is planned for this to be finalised and published by April 2019.

4.0 Fire suppressant (sprinkler) measure

- 4.1 As documented in previous reports Thurrock Council took a proactive approach in reviewing their housing stock regarding fire safety and fire suppression systems and as part of this an initial feasibility study was completed in late 2017 to assess the benefits and costs of retrospectively fitting sprinklers into the fifteen high-rise blocks in the Borough.
- 4.2 All of Thurrock Council's high-rise blocks maintain and enforce "sterile" communal areas as these are kept free of combustible materials by the caretaking teams and the automatic door closing systems further limit the spread of heat and smoke. This combined with the instillation of CCTV into the communal areas further enhances fire safety. It is also very important to note the majority of fires start in individual flats and therefore this has been the focus of the assessment.
- 4.3 Sprinkler systems operate on the basis of 2 to 4 sprinkler heads set off by the heat working at any one time to suppress the initial fire. If the fire spreads the activation of additional sprinkler heads will cause the water pressure to drop in the system thereby reducing its effectiveness. The high-rise blocks within Thurrock range from 12-15 storeys in height and with the exception of the three tower blocks in Blackshots, the tower blocks are grouped in threes constructed in close proximity to each other. The feasibility assessment was based on a dedicated pump system purpose built centrally at the base of each cluster of three high-rise blocks that would serve all three blocks in the event of a fire.
- 4.4 The installation of sprinkler systems would require a stand-alone pipework system. This would need to be concealed in communal areas and contain anti-vandal fittings. Consideration would also need to be given to concealing the pipework in individual flats for aesthetic reasons.
- 4.5 It is estimated that the total cost of retrospectively fitting sprinkler systems into the borough's 15 high-rise blocks would be £3.3m. Grant funding of £10,000 per high-rise block has been made available to the council from ECFRS. This grant is only payable on completion of the works and at this stage is not time restricted. Whilst this is a significant amount of capital in the form of a grant it would still leave a £3.15m shortfall in the funding requirements if the council were to retrospectively fit sprinklers into each high-rise block.
- 4.6 Retro fitting a fire safety measure such as a sprinkler system into any building will always enhance fire safety if installed correctly for the appropriate building, however, sprinklers should not be seen as the panacea that must take precedence above all other measures. Whilst they do offer a tangible benefit, these should not be prioritised over the maintaining and upgrading of physical fire compartmentation measures that were fundamental to the building design such as passive fire stopping and fire doors etc. Therefore, there must be genuine and justifiable reasoning why a large-scale cost and programme of works is acceptable and prioritised over other key essential works, especially within occupied buildings such as general needs residential flats.

4.7 The high rise buildings in Thurrock like most other existing high rise building in the UK are of that age, where most of the original fire safety provisions are not always in line with modern standards. Therefore, consideration is always given to improving existing safety measures when an opportunity arises especially during refurbishment works and this is the approach that Thurrock Council currently adopts. Under the Regulatory Reform Order (Fire Safety) 2005, improvements where practicable can be made to achieve a reasonable standard to outdated fire safety measures. The considerations now, why is it deemed essential to retro fit an active life fire safety measure such as a fire sprinkler system within a building that was designed and constructed and deemed a safe residential building. Under the Regulatory Reform Order 2005, the aim is to provide an adequately safe building for its occupants and firefighting in practicable means, but not to upgrade/retro fit existing buildings to new standards.

4.8 At the time of preparing this report no government guidance or regulation had been received in relation to retrospective fitting of sprinkler systems into high-rise blocks. These will be kept under review.

5.0 Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 Residents in all buildings with communal entrances, including the high-rise blocks, have been provided with detailed information on all fire safety measures applicable to where they live. Fire safety information is posted on notice boards in all communal entrances.

5.2 There is a current consultation ongoing throughout January 2019 in relation to the proposed implementation of the CCTV project in the fifteen high rise blocks.

5.3 Any further fire safety improvement works to the buildings would require leaseholder consultation.

6.0 Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 The authority has corporate responsibility for all appropriate fire safety measures in dwellings with communal entrances, including low, medium and high-rise dwellings. Failure to provide adequate safety measures including the fabric of the building and the advice given to occupiers and visitors could be a breach of this corporate responsibility. The work undertaken to date to deal with any outstanding safety issues identified by ECFRS (Essex County Fire and Rescue Service), the ongoing work to upgrade fire safety measures in individual flats and communal areas and the regular updating of information for residents and visitors is essential in meeting our corporate responsibilities.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 The Council has continued to take a proactive approach to fire safety across the whole housing portfolio and has a robust and detailed approach to ensuring the safety of all occupants in its high, medium and low-rise blocks and other dwellings with communal facilities. This includes providing up to date advice to all residents and visitors, regular inspection, remedial action

where necessary and regular reviews of current measures. This also includes assessing the benefits of retrospectively fitting sprinklers to individual dwellings in high-rise blocks.

- 7.2 The Council will continue to maintain and improve our assets in relation to fire safety in an equal and balanced manner across the portfolio. The Council will continue to monitor and review all relevant documentation and will implement any changes to law or regulation when this becomes applicable.

8.0 Implications

8.1 Financial

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

The funding for the ongoing fire safety measures outlined above has been budgeted for in the current Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. Funding for the retrospective fitting of sprinklers into high-rise blocks is estimated to be in excess of £3m and would have to be met from the Housing Revenue Account. This would be a further pressure on the Housing Revenue Account and would need to be included in future HRA Business Plans.

8.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
Assistant Director of Legal and Monitoring Officer

The council currently meets all of its obligations regarding the health and safety of its tenants.

8.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
Community Development Manager

The council's fire safety and enforcement measures are applied equally to all residents and visitors in the council's managed and maintained stock, however, individual bespoke arrangements / systems are in place to meet the needs of vulnerable resident groups where deemed applicable.

8.4 Other implications

- None

9. Background papers used in preparing this report

- Essex County Fire & Rescue Service Sprinkler Funding Offer

- Hackitt Review, Building a Safer Future May 2018

10. Appendices to this report:

- None

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