

Housing Overview & Scrutiny - January 2022

Briefing Note: **Incident at Lionel Oxley House - December 2021**
Item of urgent business

Purpose of the briefing note: This briefing note has been prepared to update members of this group following an incident on 26 December 2021 at Lionel Oxley House in Grays.

- 1.1 On the 26 December 2021 at 11.29am the fire detection system triggered within the bin room and on the first-floor landing of Lionel Oxley House. This system is remotely linked to the CCTV control room in Thurrock which is staffed 24/7 365 days a year. Staff in the control room were able to review cameras located within Lionel Oxley House and note smoke within the bin room to the ground floor, at this point they contacted the (ECFRS) Essex County Fire and Rescue Service. The control room also notified Thurrock Council's contact centre who contact internal departments to make applicable Council officers aware of any incidents.
- 1.2 ECFRS attended the incident with five appliances and worked quickly to gain access to the bin room on the ground floor and extinguish the source of ignition. At 12.19pm ECFRS confirmed the source of ignition had been extinguished and that the rest of the building had been checked.
- 1.3 Council Officers arrived onsite between 12.00 and 12.45pm and liaised with incident command officers from ECFRS. Council officers were onsite from Tenancy Management, Technical Services and Caretaking Service. At 1.00pm ECFRS completed handover to Council officers and left site.
- 1.4 The source of ignition was found to be failure of main electrical infrastructure coming into the block, this infrastructure is owned and maintained by the (DNO) Distribution Network Operator who is (UKPN) UK Power Networks.
- 1.5 ECFRS notified UKPN upon attendance to the incident and an UKPN engineer arrived onsite at 1.50pm. UKPN isolated the damaged supply cables from their sub-station, which is located adjacent to the tower blocks. These substations are owned and maintained by UKPN and therefore can only be accessed by them and their directly appointed engineers. This means that none of the Council's contractor partners could isolate, work on or reinstate the damaged power cables and supply.

- 1.6 Following initial conversations with engineers from UKPN it was evident that the damage to the infrastructure meant that the supply would not be reinstated for a significant period of time.
- 1.7 At approximately 12.15pm the Tenancy Duty Officer (TDO), who was wearing a Thurrock Council coat with Housing boldly printed on the back, arrived on site and proceeded to door knock all properties with the assistance of some Fire Officers to ascertain whose power supply had been disrupted.
- 1.8 There are five main supplies serving Lionel Oxley House, one landlord supply and four supplies with the 58 flats split between them. This incident only affected one of the five supplies. The landlord's supply was isolated by ECFRS upon attendance by was reinstated at approximately 12.45pm.
- 1.9 The TDO found most residents at home and assured them that the fire in the bin room had been put out. The TDO returned at approximately 1pm to check all the electric meters with a Mears operative, all of which are situated in the drying room outside the properties and door knocked all 58 flats from the 14th floor to the ground floor. Most residents were home, so the TDO was able to speak to the majority of the Lionel Oxley House residents.
- 1.10 From these checks the TDO was able to establish that there were 14 households which were directly affected by the fire and did not have power. The TDO door knocked each of the properties and spoke to nine of the households to establish whether they required temporary accommodation. After leaving site at approximately 4 pm the TDO then telephoned the remaining five households, four of which he spoke to. He left a voicemail for the remaining resident who contacted him later that evening. The TDO provided all 14 households with his contact details.
- 1.11 Of the 14 households, 11 either made alternative arrangements or chose to remain in their flats for the night. With the assistance of the Housing Options Duty Officer, the remaining three were booked into the Premier Inn on a room only basis for the night. The three households consisted of:
- 2 adults
 - 3 children plus 2 adults
 - 1 adult
- 1.12 On Monday 27 December the TDO telephoned all 14 residents to establish whether they required temporary accommodation. Of the 14 households nine (including the three which were booked in the previous night) required temporary accommodation. Eight were booked into the Premier Inn on a room only basis for the night. The additional five households consisted of:
- 2 adults

- 3 adults and 3 children
- 2 adults and 2 children
- 2 adults
- One adult was moved to supported housing due to health issues

1.13 Two tenants asked whether the Council would provide them with food / a meal. The TDO, however, did not have access to a Council purchase card and so after establishing that the Thurrock Food Bank was closed and having tried unsuccessfully to source other food provision advised them to pay for a meal and to claim reimbursement later.

1.14 On Tuesday 28 December the TDO telephoned all 14 residents to confirm they could return to their properties and informed them that a Mears' operative would be on standby should there be any issues with electricity in their individual flats. This was followed up with the following text message to all 14 residents advising them on how to make a claim for expenses / spoiled food items after five residents had raised this with the TDO.

1. *Take a written and photographic record of food that has gone to waste due to there being no electricity in your flat*
2. *Put the spoiled food in black plastic bags and dispose of it properly.*
3. *Claim on your contents insurance. If you do not have content insurance, you can go online to UK Power Network website and claim*

1.15 The actual source of ignition / smoke emanated from the failed electrical head that was located in the ground floor bin room. At no point throughout the incident did any part of the building structure or any rubbish catch fire. To provide clarity to members, this bin room is only accessed externally to the blocks and is the bottom of the bin chute so all rubbish that comes down the chute from all floors drops into a large euro bin. This room is covered by a water suppression sprinkler system, however on this occasion this system did not activate because no fire actually took hold in the bin room.

1.16 Upon arrival to the incident the ECFRS, as standard operating procedure, connected up to the building's internal dry riser. The passenger lifts were also placed into the control programmes by the ECFRS. Unfortunately, these failed to go back into service immediately following the incident. Therefore, an emergency call out job was raised at approximately 2.00pm on the 26 December to the Council lift servicing contractors. The lift servicing contractors didn't attend until approximately 9.00am on the 27 December and therefore, the lifts didn't return to full service until approximately 1pm on the 27 December. The Council recognise the service failure here and are addressing this with our contracted partners.

- 1.17 The high-rise blocks of flats in Thurrock have a stay put policy in place, all details of this and the systems inside the blocks have been distributed to all residents in recent years and this has been done jointly with the ECFRS. It has been widely communicated there is no communal fire alarm system in place in these tower blocks. The fire alarm systems are installed individually into resident homes, and these will activate individually if that household is affected by heat and or smoke alerting the occupants to any fire and allowing them to evacuate. Flat doors have been upgraded within the last four years to provide a high level of fire and security protection for residents living in all 15 Council owned and maintained tower blocks. The alarm system within each resident's home is mains powered with battery backup and therefore, even properties off supply over the two days, still had an active fire alarm system in the home.
- 1.18 Officers would also like to further inform members that there is a current live project across our 15 tower blocks where all detectors are being upgraded and will provide enhanced detection into all rooms of the flats.
- 1.19 The fire detection system in place within the communal areas of the tower block is not an alarm system. As noted in 1.1 above, all the communal detection systems in the 15 high-rise blocks are linked to the CCTV control room in Thurrock. This is a unique system introduced into Thurrock Council's tower blocks to provide enhanced protection and safeguarding for our residents, this is not a legislative requirement. The primary function of the communal system is to control the fire doors throughout the communal areas of the blocks. Upon activation of the system, all fire doors that are on magnetic holds through the block, close to provide compartmentation to different sections of each floor. Therefore, the fail safe for the system if a fault occurs, is for all fire doors to close by going into free swing mode, providing maximum compartmentation protection throughout the blocks. On this occasion the communal alarm system activated as designed. However, when the communal power was disrupted upon initial attendance, a fault arose whereby the system went into battery backup mode. Thurrock Council's fire systems contractors attended on the 27 December and reinstated the system. In this period between the fault and the repair, the fire doors went into the failsafe mode, so the fire safety of the block was not compromised.
- 1.20 Thurrock Council continued to liaise with UKPN throughout the 26 and 27 December in regards to the timeline for reinstatement, so we could continue to manage from the Council perspective and ensure that all affected residents were provided with ongoing support until power was fully restored to all properties. UKPN reported that the repairs that were required to the infrastructure required input from various specialist teams in UKPN and their subcontracted network and therefore repairs actually fully commenced around 12.00pm on the 27 December. They remained onsite until the early hours of the

morning of 28 December completing the necessary reinstatement works. Power to affected homes started to return to affected homes between 9pm and 10pm on the 27 December. All provided alternative accommodation was extended until the 28 December.

- 1.21 On the morning of the 28 December Thurrock Council's responsive repairs contractors Mears attended Lionel Oxley House and tested the supply to the meters of all affected homes to ensure power was provided back to each home. Mears then contacted each affected household, including door knocking whilst on site to ensure that all power had been restored to their home. Mears, alongside the Tenancy Management Officer, telephoned the residents to advise them the power had been restored. All residents were advised to contact Mears repairs service if they experienced any further issues, and this would be responded to as an emergency call out.
- 1.22 There are three repairs elements that are currently outstanding. These include the replacement of the bin room roller shutter and replacement of the internal door to the landlord's intake room because access by ECFRS was gained by forced entry. The final reinstatement element is redecoration to the bin room that will be done as part of the major works that are currently onsite. It is anticipated the internal door will be changed within the next 14 days. The roller shutter will take longer due to a long lead in time for manufacture and therefore is likely to take up to six weeks.
- 1.23 Thurrock Council are now reviewing the incident with UKPN and their loss adjusting department. We as a Local Authority, building owner and landlord will be working with them to fully understand why this failure occurred. This exercise is done to ensure that, as far as reasonably practical, these types of incidences are avoided in the future and to also to review the response to this incident to ensure where possible lessons can be learnt to inform and improve the response to future occurrences of this nature. We will of course be discussing liability of this incident with UKPN and all losses and cost incurred by Thurrock Council and its residents will be discussed with their loss adjusting department.
- 1.24 The Council issued a proactive press release on the evening of 26 December providing an update on the incident and support for residents. The incident itself had already been covered by local media outlets including the information from the ECFRS website. A further release was issued on 28 December to confirm that power had been restored and residents had been able to return to their homes.
- 1.25 Thurrock Council is also undertaking an internal review of the incident, again as a lessons' learnt exercise. It is recognised that certain aspects of the response can be improved, and necessary amendments will be made to

processes and procedures to ensure that these are implemented moving forward.

- 1.26 We were also asked to update on the progress of the improvement works currently on site on these blocks. It was anticipated that there would be a period over the winter months when the blocks were without insulation. However, the programme has been impacted by the national shortages of materials in the UK and the time without insulation is longer than originally planned. It is anticipated that works will not commence with the reinstatement of the new cladding system and installation of the new windows until later in February. Residents and ward members were updated on this in November.
- 1.27 It is important to stress that this pause in the progress with the external cladding being stripped off does not compromise the safety of the building in any way but there is the possibility that some properties may experience the effects of being less thermally insulated. Temporarily this may result in the need to use heating more to maintain a comfortable temperature in certain rooms. We have taken a proactive stance to this we have given every one of the 348 households in the six tower blocks affected, a one-off payment of £120 to cover the additional costs.
- 1.28 This payment is coming from the cost of the programme and has been calculated based on the average winter temperatures over the last three years and the difference in heating required, with and without the external wall covering. The period of the calculation is from November to April. As we know energy costs have gone up for everyone recently, so the calculations that have been used are based on the costs of using economy 7 storage heaters and the predicted cost per Kwh over the next three months.