

Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Wednesday 6 September 2017

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Daryl Brown, Adam Connell, Alan De'Ath (Chair), Harry Phibbs and Donald Johnson

Other Councillors: Councillor Lisa Homan

Officers: Jo Rowlands – Lead Director of Regeneration, Planning and Housing Services, Jane Martin – Interim Director of Property Services, Graham Coupar – Compliance Consultant.

London Fire Brigade: Paul Kavanagh – Borough Commander

15. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

17. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 July 2017 were agreed to be accurate.

18. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR

The Chair welcomed Councillor Johnson as a new member of the committee, following his appointment at the last meeting of Full Council.

Councillor Phibbs was elected as Vice-Chair of the Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee.

19. FIRE SAFETY UPDATE

Councillor Homan explained that she had been deeply moved by the fire at Grenfell Tower in Kensington and that she was determined that Hammersmith and Fulham Council would do all that it could to prevent the same tragedy from affecting its' residents. A very close relationship with the London Fire Brigade had been developed to make sure that the Council kept residents safe in their homes.

Councillor Homan explained that as well as ensuring its' own residents were safe, Hammersmith and Fulham had first offered support to Kensington and Chelsea Council on the morning of the fire and had provided much assistance since then. Councillor Homan also explained that a series of meetings had been held with residents in the 2 weeks following the fire to provide advice and reassurance.

Graham Coupar told the meeting that the Council had started to improve its fire safety systems before the Grenfell Fire, although the devastating consequences of that fire had provided fresh impetus for the Council to get it right.

A new Fire Safety Strategy had been developed and its main purposes were to:

- Protect residents and their homes from fire.
- State clearly how the Council manages fire safety.
- Provide clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- Establish and maintain a process of robust control to ensure full compliance
- with fire safety regulations always.
- Establish a person-centred fire risk assessment regime for specialist
- housing.

The Council also used expert guidance from the Local Government Association and the National Fire Chief's Council to help it manage fire safety.

Graham Coupar explained that a person-centred fire risk assessment would be completed for all residents in sheltered accommodation schemes, by the staff working at the scheme who knew their needs best. These would then be fed into the fire risk assessment for the building as a whole.

The Council had launched the Fire Safety Plus Scheme. This was a targeted investment programme of £20 million over 2 years to improve the fire safety of buildings and residents' individual homes. The scheme included the reintroduction of concierge services, the installation of sprinklers, improved fire risk assessments, free fire safety checks, free replacement of appliances which failed electrical tests, and free plug adaptors. Lift upgrades to firefighting lifts would also be carried out where this was technically possible.

Mr Coupar explained that some parts of the Fire Safety Plus Scheme could be delivered quickly, as an example, he said that plug adaptors had already been distributed across the Council's housing stock, whilst fire safety checks, including Portable Appliance Tests, fire door checks and heat detector fitting,

were starting to take place. Installing sprinklers would take significantly longer as the best solution for each block needed to be identified, with residents' views and maintenance also needing to be considered.

Mr Coupar said that the Council had also started an amnesty for those who had carried out unauthorised works to their homes. This had been introduced because unauthorised works might have impacted on the fire safety systems of the property; they therefore needed to be identified to protect all residents of a block.

Graham Coupar stated that the Council's fire risk assessments were called 'Type One Fire Risk Assessments'; these looked at common areas of the building and would also highlight where more intrusive assessments might be needed. The Council had adopted a new procedure for completing these assessments, as follows:

- An initial assessment would be carried out by either internal staff (1-5 storey buildings) or external contractors (6+ storey buildings and sheltered schemes)
- The fire risk assessment would be reviewed by an expert employed by the Council.
- 1 in 5 of the Council's fire risk assessments would then be reviewed by an expert external contractor.

The Council had fire risk assessments for all blocks where they were necessary and a rolling programme to update these. The most important part of an assessment was the action plan and new software would manage actions arising from fire risk assessments.

Graham Coupar explained that BRE had tested the fire resistance of the cladding at the Edward Woods estate and these had passed their testing and were safe. The top floor of the blocks on the estate would be fitted with a wet riser whilst the fire alarm system was also to be upgraded. Window panels on the Charecroft Estate were to be replaced as there had been some concern over their ability to resist extreme fires. Fire wardens had been employed to keep residents safe and provide reassurance at both estates whilst work was done. Panels across the remainder of the Council's housing stock were being assessed and if removal was recommended this would be done.

Jane Martin said that the Grenfell fire had displaced 250 families to live across London. Hammersmith and Fulham now had 54 families living in hotels and temporary accommodation in the borough, down from a high of 70 families. A taskforce of officers from Housing, Childrens Services, Adult Social Care and other related services had been set up to provide practical and emotional support. Practical support included providing Oyster cards, vouchers for meals in restaurants, mobile telephones, clothes and similar necessities.

Jane Martin explained the support which had been given to Hammersmith and Fulham residents, especially on those estates from where Grenfell Tower could be seen. Meetings had been held and a regular drop in sessions had been arranged. Fire safety booklets had been distributed and a new section created on the Council's webpage dedicated to fire safety. Staff were also

being trained on fire safety and would be able to engage residents on the subject whilst carrying out their other duties.

Graham Coupar said that the Council would be seeking accreditation under the SP 205 standard; this was a difficult standard to reach and achieving it would ensure that fire safety would continue to improve in Hammersmith and Fulham.

A resident of Orchard Square / Cheesemans Terrace explained that the scheme had recently suffered from a gas leak. This had been repaired but it had identified issues with the consistency of gas checks and the provision of carbon monoxide monitors. Ros O'Connell, Chair of the Repairs Working Group, said that Mitie claimed to have people checking where gas inspections were needed and that 100% compliance was claimed; she was therefore worried to hear that this might not be the true picture. Councillor Homan confirmed that all properties with gas were supposed to have an annual safety check. She agreed to look into the issue.

A resident noted that leaseholders were not required to have annual gas safety checks carried out by law and asked whether a requirement could be added to their leases. Jo Rowlands explained that other Councils had examined this and there was no legal way to force leaseholders to have checks. However the Council would look to promote the benefits of the checks and offer the service to those living in its blocks.

A resident explained that a friend had had their kitchen door removed, with the relevant permissions, and asked whether it ought to be reinstated. Officers suggested that the resident book a Fire Safety Check where the circumstances could be looked at.

A resident said that non-resident leaseholders needed to be encouraged to make use of the amnesty offered on unauthorised works. Councillor Homan said that the issue was to be discussed at the next set of leaseholders' forum meetings. A resident said that she had identified potentially unauthorised works via a property lettings website; she would pass on the details to the Council. Councillor Connell asked whether anyone had taken advantage of the amnesty. Jane Martin said that no-one had yet approached the Council having made unauthorised works but that she expected the fire safety checks programme would lead to issues being identified and the amnesty being used. Jo Rowlands explained that the amnesty would be open for around 18 months and would be publicised further.

Chris Took, a local resident, said that the Council had listened well to residents and had very good fire safety policies; there were however some instances where these policies were not being implemented properly. He felt that residents should be allowed to be more involved in making sure that things were done well citing examples of errors in the Fire Risk Assessment for a block on the Charecroft Estate, and problems with the removal of bulky waste. Graham Coupar agreed to look at how TRAs could be involved in the fire risk assessment process, whilst Councillor Homan agreed to ask officers to look at the issue of bulky waste causing a fire risk.

A resident asked whether works by Mitie would trigger a new fire risk assessment. Graham Coupar said that major structural works would but minor works and repairs would not. Mitie were expected to work according to rules and regulations to ensure that work did not compromise fire safety.

Shirley Cupit asked whether the installation of firefighting lifts would be coordinated with the existing lift replacement programme. Graham Coupar confirmed that it would be; where a refurbishment was planned officers would try to get the lift apparatus upgraded to firefighting lift standards. It was intended that all blocks of 6 or more storeys would get a firefighting lift. He noted that there might be a few places where firefighting lifts could not be fitted owing to the constraints of the building.

Councillor Connell asked whether vulnerable residents in general needs housing would be offered personalised fire risk assessments. Graham Coupar confirmed that these were available, however, the council did not always have information on the health of residents in general needs housing and so these would need to be requested by residents. Paul Kavanagh said that the fire service would find it very useful to have information about vulnerable residents available to its crews on attending a fire as this would help them prioritise resources and save lives. Councillor Homan asked officers to look at how this information could be collated.

A resident asked Paul Kavanagh to explain the rationale behind the stay put policy as residents were anxious about it. Paul Kavanagh said he understood residents' concerns about the policy after seeing the effects of the Grenfell Fire. He explained that residents were asked to stay in their homes if they were not affected by smoke or heat from the fire because they were safe there; other parts of the building they might pass on their way out might be being affected by the fire whilst their flat would give them protection from fire owing to the design of the buildings. He added that all of the residents of a block leaving at once was very dangerous, with the potential for crush injuries, whilst firefighters access to the building was also likely to be impeded, making it harder to put the fire out. Mr Kavanagh said however that if a flat was being affected by the fire, people ought to get out; it was important that families knew escape routes and practiced using them. A resident asked what someone should do if they could not leave by the stairs and the lifts were out of action due to the fire. Paul Kavanagh said that if they were affected by the fire they move to the stairwell to take shelter and let the fire brigade know that they were stuck so that they could be helped; he explained that stairwells were designed to be safe places in the event of a fire.

Councillor Brown asked how the messages about fire safety was publicised to residents. Paul Kavanagh said that the LFB website had lots of information about fire safety on it, whilst each building should have its own fire evacuation information. Jo Rowlands suggested that more information and a video from the LFB could be placed on the Council's fire safety site. A resident said that she had been reassured about the stay put policy by the fire at Shepherds

Court and suggested that the effectiveness of the policy in all but the Grenfell tower fire be emphasised to residents.

Councillor Connell said that he was pleased that the Council had made a commitment to fitting sprinklers and asked how residents would be involved in the programme and whether sprinklers would be fitted inside flats. Graham Coupar explained that the possible options for each block would be developed and then these would be presented to residents for their views. Whether sprinklers were provided in flats would need to be discussed with residents as many had reservations about the idea. Councillor Phibbs asked whether leaseholders would be charged if sprinklers were fitted inside their flats. Jane Martin confirmed that they wouldn't be charged for the installation.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether there was any benefit in fitting sprinklers to buildings which were lower than six storeys high. Paul Kavanagh said that wherever sprinklers were fitted they made a building safer, although he noted resistance to them from residents who feared unnecessary activations which might damage their property, although these were now very rare due to very sophisticated sprinkler technology. Councillor Phibbs said that he felt the fitting of sprinklers to buildings ought to be the Council's priority as they were very effective. He said that a report on a Sprinkler retro-fitting project in Sheffield which had taken place in 2011 suggested that the cost per flat was only £1,150 and that the Council should be able to complete the whole of its stock for less than £20 million. Councillor Homan said that the Council would be working to install sprinklers in high rise buildings first, as they were of greatest benefit in those block; the Council could review whether it was good value to install sprinklers in low rise blocks as this programme progressed.

Councillor Phibbs said that he felt that the Fire Risk Assessments for all Council blocks needed to be published on the Council's website, with residents being encouraged to look at them. Graham Coupar said that the Fire Risk Assessments would be published as they were reviewed. Councillor Phibbs said that he felt that the Fire Risk Assessments needed to be published immediately, noting that the Information Commissioner had suggested that Councils needed to proactively publish them. Jo Rowlands said that the aim was to get them published by the end of December. Councillor Phibbs noted that he had requested a number of Fire Risk Assessments in July but that these had not been sent to him. Jo Rowlands agreed to ensure that his Freedom of Information Request was responded to as soon as possible.

Councillor Johnson said that he understood that the air venting system in Grenfell tower had caused smoke to be in the stairwells impeding access and evacuation. Graham Coupar explained that all of the systems in Hammersmith and Fulham's blocks complied with the relevant regulations. Paul Kavanagh explained that the investigation into the Grenfell fire was ongoing and that it was too early to know if regulations around air venting systems needed to be changed.

Councillor Johnson asked whether the Council had looked again at its emergency planning. Councillor Homan said that emergency planning was

being looked at, both in Housing and across the Council. Councillor Johnson also asked whether the Council's induction could be added to include more information on fire safety. Jane Martin explained that additional training was currently being delivered to relevant staff to ensure that everyone was aware of fire safety.

A local resident asked who would be paying for the Fire Safety Plus Programme. Councillor Homan explained that £20 million had been set aside to cover the costs of the work; the planned maintenance programme would be rescheduled to accommodate the fire safety work. It was hoped that economies could be found by doing some planned maintenance and fire safety work together.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether there were any concerns about the use of U-PVC windows in high rise blocks as these appeared to have melted in the Grenfell Tower fire. Graham Coupar explained that U-PVC windows complied with building regulations and, where necessary, fire retardant windows were used. Paul Kavanagh said that U-PVC windows were more flammable than metal windows, but that their insulation properties made them very attractive to residents. Officers said that the investigation into the Grenfell fire would identify if alternative windows were needed.

Councillor Phibbs asked how long the people affected by the fire were likely to remain in hotels for. Jo Rowlands said this depended on how quickly Kensington and Chelsea Council could find homes for their residents; however it was likely to take a considerable period of time.

The Chair thanked officers for their presentation and sharing their experience as well as all those present for taking part in a useful discussion.

A summary of the actions agreed at the committee is included below:

The Council to consider how to involve residents in:

- Estate Fire Inspections
- Planning Sprinkler Systems
- Proofreading FRAs

Officers to ensure that gas checks are carried out in all properties with gas, especially in Sheltered Accommodation. Also work to offer a service to leaseholders so that the safety of blocks is not compromised.

Officers to review the fire safety of bulk rubbish collection arrangements.

The Council to consider how it could help firefighters, for example, by collating information on vulnerable residents in general needs accommodation and installing fire information boxes.

Officers to update the Council website to explain the stay put policy.

Officers to review the fire safety of plastic window frames.

Fire Safety to be added to the induction for all of the Council's Housing staff.

Councillor Phibbs Freedom of Information requests to be responded to.

A potential illegal conversion, highlighted by a resident, to be investigated.

20. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

The date of the next meeting and the work programme were noted.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm

Meeting ended: 9.10 pm

Chair

Contact officer: Ainsley Gilbert
Committee Co-ordinator
Governance and Scrutiny
☎: 020 8753 2088
E-mail: ainsley.gilbert@lbhf.gov.uk