

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee

### Review on Fire Safety in High Rise Blocks (2017/18)

#### Notes of Evidence Sessions

##### 1. 3 October 2017

Members present: Councillors Wright (Chair), Connor, Gallagher and Ibrahim

*(a). Adreena Parkin-Coates (APC), London Fire Brigade*

Note – at the outset of the discussion, the Committee were reminded that there was a public inquiry due to commence into the exact causes of the Grenfell Fire, which would give the authoritative account and further issues for local authorities to consider. The scope of the Committee's present work was discussed with APC, who agreed that the current scope was a helpful start, and that the 18m definition of a high-rise building corresponded with the fire brigade's routine capability for tackling fires (that is, the reach of their ladders and hoses). Following the completion of the present work, it may be helpful to move on to other issues such as schools and sheltered housing.

APC outlined how the London Fire Brigade's responsibilities in relation to fire safety, and how it was organised across London and locally to fulfil those responsibilities under the *Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005*. 350 Fire Inspection Officers worked to give advice and undertake post-fire audits across London. These officers were regularly trained (at least quarterly) to ensure they were apprised of new issues or changes to requirements.

Following the Grenfell fire, high-rise buildings with the same Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding as Grenfell had identified and the cladding sent for testing. The Department for Communities and Local Government in their second round of testing found that approximately two thirds of buildings were non-compliant with fire safety requirements, and would therefore require further audits. There were 188 such buildings in London, and there was now data gathering underway on the type and size of these buildings to enable a risk assessment before determining which required further inspection before the end of the year.

The LFB had statutory powers to require corrective work to be undertaken if identified by their fire safety audits. In the past, cladding was not something that could be included as requiring change – as an external feature it was not within the remit of the 2005 Order, but they could recommend its removal be considered.

APC set out what would be taken into account when considering the fire safety of a building. For example, the number of means of escape (most residential blocks only had one), the ventilation systems, including smoke control systems, and the maintenance of corridors etc to ensure that they are kept clear. Sprinklers could be helpful in suppressing fire and as a mitigating measure, but it was not a panacea, as reflected in the different regimes across the UK in relation to requirements for

sprinklers. Where a building had undergone significant refurbishment, the building controller was required to consult with the LFB.

It was noted that problems could arise when residents compromise fire safety infrastructure – including changing fire doors, removing or damaging self-closing mechanisms, or where corridors were obstructed by bikes, pushchairs or mobility scooters.

The Committee noted that the LFB did not undertake regular inspections or certify the fire safeness of a building as a matter of course. The regulatory requirement was that the building manager was responsible for fire safety, and the LFB would decide whether a building required inspection based on its management information and maintenance record, as provided by a qualified assessor. The provision of quality information was a statutory requirement and crucial for the LFB to be able to prioritise its work and pinpoint where inspection was required.

The outcome of an inspection could be that the premises was compliant or that there were issues to be addressed – and if they were significant, there could be enforcement issues or the LFB could prohibit the use of the building. In relation to Grenfell, the public inquiry and the Hackitt Review would identify any issues relating to fire safety and compliance, which APC recommended should be taken account of by the Council.

APC recommended that the committee could consider some templates or samples of fire risk assessments. She understood the independent review would look at fire risk assessors, which may lead to there being a need for accreditation – rather the current situation where fire risk assessors were self-described.

On the ‘stay put’ policy, APC thought it would inevitably be part of the consideration of the independent query, and that it remained in place at present. APC agreed to send data about call-outs for domestic fires in Haringey and the Committee noted the headline that there had been six fires in Homes for Haringey stock in the past six years.

*(b). Chris Liffen, Homes for Haringey, and Michael Westbrook, Haringey Council*

The committee heard there were 54 blocks in Haringey over 18m, with 3337 dwellings. No Homes for Haringey properties had ACM cladding, and 26 of the 54 blocks had only a single stairwell escape route, the remainder had two exits at least. All the buildings above 18m had wet risers, and were inspected every 6 months (generally in HfH properties, only high risk buildings were inspected on a six monthly basis, medium annually and low risk every two years). This would be a visual inspection, rather than a more disruptive type. Estate Services would be expected to sign off any works post inspection to show that the recommendations had been acted upon. Homes for Haringey had an annual budget of around £3m for fire safety.

Under the 2005 Order, the onus of ensuring fire safety compliance was with the landlord. The Fire Brigade would provide support where asked, and often visited blocks to ensure familiarity in case of having to tackle a fire there. The Fire Brigade had undertaken one audit in the past year in a Homes for Haringey building.

Personally, Chris Liffen was comfortable with the current division of responsibilities, and was confident their internal systems, e.g. audit, and capability of staff mean that the many areas of compliance were managed effectively. A challenge in the future would be about ensuring the recruitment and retention of capable staff, with a growing competition for them meaning pay rates were rising in a challenging way, operating without as complete a set of records as would be desirable, and also the need to retain institutional knowledge – for example, if Homes for Haringey's relationship with the Council changed.

The Homes for Haringey Board was supported by an Audit and Risk Committee, which met monthly, and the Board had champion for Health and Safety compliance. The Homes for Haringey Residents Scrutiny Committee was a forum for residents concerns to be aired and the performance of the ALMO to be considered from residents' perspective.

Post Grenfell, risk assessments had been re-done, largely to reassure residents, and Homes for Haringey had bi-weekly fire safety meetings where they could look closely at issues of concern, including obstacles within evacuation routes in communal areas. It was noted that fire door repairs and accompanying fire-safety mechanisms was one of the larger maintenance demands, and where it was difficult to ensure residents' support – for example, seven fire doors were repaired in one tower block, of which four were found broken again within days [Tangmere, in Broadwater Farm].

Homes for Haringey had considered the cost implications of various fire safety measures, which may be required following the public inquiry and Hackitt review. The Committee heard that the potential merits, for example of sprinklers and alarms, were not without disbenefits – for examples, alarms may create unnecessary panic if triggered accidentally and cause more problems, and sprinklers could damage residents' property, often uninsured, if triggered without good cause.

Another priority after Grenfell was ensuring the occupancy of each property was known, and whether they had any vulnerabilities. This data could be shared with the Fire Brigade if needed, and vulnerable residents could have personal plans for evacuation. It was noted this was sometimes difficult to reconcile residents' willingness to be forthcoming with the need to prevent fraud. Homes for Haringey had held fire safety days for residents, and would look to engage with residents on the "stay put" policy if it were to be changed or needed to be communicated more clearly in the future.

## **2. 8 January 2018**

Members present: Councillor Wright (Chair)

*(a). Emma Williamson, Assistant Director for Planning and Bob McIvor, Building Control Manager*

The Council had been requested to provide information to the Government on use of cladding on private buildings and housing association buildings. As building developers could use private building control inspectors, rather than the Council's, the level of information held by the Council and possible assurance was limited.

The privatisation of building control in the 1980s meant more choice for developers and competition for building control inspections, but private operators could not undertake enforcement action and would have to refer such action to the local authority. Haringey's building control mechanism was well-regarded and competitive, having won awards, though they could not generate profit from their building control services. The Council provided about half the building control services in the borough and the team was possibly growing to reflect rising demand in the borough.

There was a backlog in the testing of suspect cladding, meaning reassurance was taking a while to provide. A number of inspections had been requested for Haringey, including the new Tottenham Hotspur stadium.

The Committee heard that there were some concerns around privately owned high-rise buildings, with seven such buildings appearing to have ACM cladding. There were also some buildings operated by housing associations that had ACM cladding [Newlon and One Housing Group].

Under the planning process, fire safety was not a material consideration available to the Council, so the Council's ability to create planning policies that incorporated fire safety measures, or collect relevant information, was limited. The insulation used and fire safety measures were not necessarily presented as part of a planning application, but some developers were providing more information for assurance and there were regulatory requirements for buildings over 10 stories, including evacuation routes and signage. If these requirements were changed, there could be some implications for buildings given planning consent but not yet constructed.

The issues for building control depended to some extent on the trends of building design, and the risks associated with materials that were being used at the time. The specific issues arising from Grenfell were not yet known, and they were not the only issues in relation to building control that were of potential concern – for example, there had been a building in Manchester with problems relating to wooden balconies. Aside from the specific recommendations relating to building materials that were likely to be forthcoming, the Grenfell fire had brought home the need to ensure transparency by developers on the buildings used.

Asked whether the scope of the Committee's enquiry ought to be widened, it was noted that there were more stringent health and safety regulations in effect in non-residential properties, and so there was a lower level of concern.

In relation to fire safety measures, the Committee heard that sprinklers were not a panacea, given they could be disabled and often ran from a tank, rather than the mains. It was noted that the efficacy of fire safety measures were balanced against their cost, and that there was not a straightforward response to the issue.