

Housing, Finance and Corporate Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Date:	11 September 2017
Classification:	General Release
Title:	CWH & WCC's Response to Fire Safety within WCC's Housing Stock in light of the Grenfell Tower fire
Report of:	Barbara Brownlee, Director of Housing & Regeneration
Cabinet Member Portfolio	Housing
Wards Involved:	All
Policy Context:	City for Choice, Heritage & Aspiration
Report Author and Contact Details:	Martyn Jones, Executive Director for Asset Strategy & Development, CityWest Homes Tel: 020 7245 2496 / Email: mjones@cwh.org.uk

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report considers the work undertaken by CityWest Homes (CWH) and Westminster City Council (the Council) in light of the Grenfell Tower fire on 14/15 June 2017. It focusses on the work associated with maintaining and enhancing the safety of the Council's housing stock, as opposed to the wider work undertaken by the Council and CWH supporting the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC).
- 1.2. CWH and the Council have engaged fully with the Government in response to various requests for information and tests.
- 1.3. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, there has been significant engagement with residents by CWH and the Council. Information regarding CWH' regime for maintaining fire safety of the housing stock was shared with and explained to residents, to provide reassurance. The tower blocks at Little Venice on the Warwick and Brindley estates have cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower and a bespoke communications plan was put in place for those residents.

- 1.4. All tower blocks over ten stories were visited within the first few days following the fire, to carry out visual checks and to ensure all fire related signs and guidance was up to date and appropriate. Independent and/or scheduled Fire Risk Assessments with London Fire Brigade (LFB) have been put into place. CWH' fire safety team are working closely with LFB to ensure the safety of the stock.
- 1.5. CWH has identified 22 initial projects covering all aspects of fire safety. Some of the resulting recommendations will be considered by CWH Executive and Board, whilst others will be referred to the Council for policy decisions.
- 1.6. CWH is in consultation with LFB on proposals to remove the cladding at Little Venice towers.
- 1.7. Although there is no requirement to retrospectively fit sprinklers, the Council has committed to provide sprinklers in all its housing stock over 30 metres. Independent experts have been commissioned to provide advice and options for installation.
- 1.8. CWH's Executive Team meets twice weekly to review progress of identified fire safety actions and the Board has been kept updated. At least weekly up-dates have been provided to the Cabinet Member for Housing, WCC's Chief Executive and Director of Housing & Regeneration.

2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

- 1) How effective has WCC/CWH been in responding to the concerns raised by tenants about fire safety?
- 2) What approach would the committee like to see taken with regard to ensuring leaseholder compliance with legal and contractual responsibilities
- 3) Are there any further actions that the Committee would like to see WCC/CWH take?

3. Background

- 3.1. This report provides a summary of the key issues arising for the Council following the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017. It concentrates on matters relating to maintaining and enhancing the safety of the Council's own housing stock, as opposed to the significant response and assistance that the Council and CWH provided to the RBKC.
- 3.2. Fire safety management and a focus on the safety of social housing is now in the national spotlight, and is likely to remain so over the coming years. There is the potential for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry to lead to new regulations governing the management of fire safety, new/revised building regulation standards for the stock and for co-ordinating responses to major emergencies.

4. Government Advice & Engagement

- 4.1. CWH as the responsible person under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order (RRO), is responsible for fire safety management across the Council's housing stock. In accordance with the duties under the RRO, CWH has completed risk assessments for all properties, which fall within the scope of the order (i.e. single family homes/ dwelling houses are excluded). Fire risk assessments are completed by in-house fire risk assessors, who hold the relevant professional memberships and third party certification to be deemed competent, in accordance with current Competency Council guidance.
- 4.2. Any deficiencies identified with the physical precautions within blocks or the management regime are dealt with by CWH and through the term repair and maintenance contracts or the capital work programme. The current fire improvement programme across the stock has been budgeted at circa £45 million pounds. Works are programmed according to risk and full delivery is scheduled over a ten year period.
- 4.3. Immediately after the Grenfell Tower fire, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) contacted local authorities to identify buildings that might have cladding of a similar nature to that at Grenfell Tower – known as Aluminium Composite Materials (ACM) panels. CWH and the Council have generally responded to each information request from DCLG within a 24 hour period.
- 4.4. The six tower blocks on the Warwick and Brindley estates (the Little Venice towers), have similar but not identical ACM cladding panels to that understood to have been on the Grenfell Tower. In addition, Parsons House just off the Edgware Road has an aluminium cladding system, although this is not ACM.
- 4.5. Shortly after the Grenfell Tower fire, the Government announced that it wanted local authorities to send samples for testing of the ACM panels; testing was being done by its Building Research Establishment (BRE). CWH provided a sample of the Little Venice towers cladding. These initial tests were widely reported as universally 'failing' across the Country.
- 4.6. In light of this, DCLG advised that local authorities engage with their local fire brigades, to assess whether there were significant risks. CWH's work with the LFB re-confirmed that they were satisfied with the works and fire risk assessments undertaken by CWH.
- 4.7. In light of the 100% failure of the first round of tests, DCLG announced that a second, more comprehensive round of tests were being undertaken by the BRE. This would test not just the outer panels, but also the insulation and fire breaks between floors. A series of six tests were planned, based on two types of insulation and three different types of outer cladding panels.
- 4.8. The Little Venice towers' cladding system was assessed under Test 2, namely where there is non-combustible insulation and a Category 3 cladding panel. The results of Test 2 were confirmed to the Council as having 'failed' early evening on Wednesday 2

August. The DCLG stated that it would be publishing the results the following day, and the Council should inform its residents as a matter of urgency.

- 4.9. Later that evening, DCLG released the test results for a number of councils to the press and regrettably, some residents learnt of the failure prior to being notified by the Council. DCLG released an apology the following day.
- 4.10. Following the outcome of Test 2, the Council immediately re-confirmed its plans to remove the existing Category 3 cladding at Little Venice, and replace it with Category 1 cladding (the highest safety-rated version). The removal of the cladding at the Little Venice towers is due to start in October, with all of the buildings scheduled for re-cladding by April 2018.

5. Fire Safety Management review, post Grenfell Tower fire.

- 5.1. Following the Grenfell Tower fire CWH instigated a full review of fire safety management. In conjunction with LFB, they commenced an immediate joint audit across all blocks over ten storeys, to review the existing fire risk assessments. In addition, CWH fire risk assessors visited the Little Venice tower blocks with members of LFB's central task force and engineering team to review fire safety at the blocks, given the presence of ACM cladding.
- 5.2. Subsequently an external certified consultant has been commissioned to undertake Type 4 (In-flat intrusive) fire risk assessments within all blocks over ten storeys, with enclosed communal parts.
- 5.3. In the isolated instances where the joint audits have identified deficiencies with a block's fire precautions, CWH has shared LFB's findings with residents, and CWH's subsequent response to ensuring matters are addressed.
- 5.4. CWH is also currently reprogramming the fire risk assessment review programme to ensure that all risk assessments on blocks over six storeys are reviewed within the next six months. Additionally, the scope of the fire risk assessments on purpose built blocks has been extended from Type 2 (communal) to Type 3 (In-flat, non-destructive). Additional competent in-house assessors have been appointed to enable completion of this escalated programme.
- 5.5. CWH has created and recruited (pre Grenfell Tower fire), a new post whose function is to ensure that fire improvement works are prioritised and delivered in accordance with best practice standards.
- 5.6. CWH are currently reviewing the ten year capital fire safety investment programme, to identify areas where works can be brought forwards and delivery timescales reduced.

6. Resident Engagement

- 6.1. The immediate priorities following the Grenfell Tower fire were to reassure residents, particularly those living in the 41 blocks of 10+ storeys across Westminster, and to check that effective fire safety measures were in place and managed rigorously.
- 6.2. A single point of contact was publicised for residents with fire safety related enquiries through which common concerns and issues were identified & monitored. The insight provided was then used to produce communications for all residents with answers to frequently asked questions.
- 6.3. In the first four weeks following the Grenfell Tower fire, over 430 enquiries were received. All were automatically acknowledged at the point of receipt with a standard fire safety message and each received an individual response. The themes that have come out of the enquiries include:
 - requests for copies of fire risk assessments
 - dates and proof of testing regimes for alarms, emergency lighting etc.
 - specific cladding testing & composition
 - safety of gas installations & testing
 - parking and arrangements for emergency services
 - removal of fire hazards from the common parts of buildings
 - fire doors and door closers
 - advice on leaseholder responsibilities
 - alterations and enforcing leaseholder responsibilities
 - requests for fire alarms, extinguishers, sprinklers etc.
 - fire action notices and the 'stay put' policy
- 6.4. Since 15 June, the residents of Little Venice have received eight letters and citywide, residents have received a minimum of three letters, with some blocks receiving more. Tailored letters were provided to specific blocks, for example, blocks undergoing major works, other tower blocks and to residents in community supportive housing.
- 6.5. There were unprecedented call volumes to CWH through the new contact centre following the Grenfell Tower fire. CWH had anticipated c.4.5k calls per week, and at its peak, call volumes reached c7.6k calls per week. Additional resources were put in place to deal with the increased call volumes.
- 6.6. Understandably, the tower blocks have generated more enquiries than low rise blocks, with most enquiries coming from the Little Venice tower blocks. One of the most common questions was 'why is there a stay put policy?' This has been covered in answers to frequently asked questions, sent to all residents in July and provided as Appendix 1 to this report. CWH has repeated the advice from LFB, which has not changed since the Grenfell Tower fire.

- 6.7. Guidance from LFB for most purpose built blocks is to 'stay put', unless the flat is being affected by fire or smoke. There is a Fire Action Notice in all blocks in the main building entrance explaining the action residents should take in the event of a fire.
- 6.8. Purpose-built maisonettes or blocks of flats are built to give some protection from fire and the structure is designed to hold back flames and smoke for 30 to 60 minutes.
- 6.9. Fire drills are not held as they would contradict the 'stay put' policy and create confusion amongst residents. In the event of an emergency which requires the phased evacuation of a block of flats, LFB would manage and direct the evacuation.

7. Little Venice Towers

- 7.1. A bespoke communications strategy has been established for the 750 homes in the Little Venice towers.
- 7.2. The estate office for the Little Venice area closed in early June, and was re-opened following the Grenfell Tower fire. A housing management team have remained on-site to provide fire safety advice and support to residents. This is not envisaged to continue indefinitely, but will be retained for the time being.
- 7.3. 24 hour security guards have been employed to monitor the six blocks.
- 7.4. The Leader of the Council, Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Housing & Regeneration, senior CWH staff and the LFB Borough Commander held an open meeting with residents on the estate on 24 July 2017. Concerns were raised, including cladding, and the timber decking installed on balconies, which it was agreed will be replaced, as explained at Section 10.

8. CWH Governance & Risk Assessments

- 8.1. On Wednesday 15 June, CWH Executive Team met and agreed a Disaster Response Strategy. This was shared with the Cabinet Member for Housing and WCC's Chief Executive and Director of Housing & Regeneration.
- 8.2. Since then, CWH's Executive Team has continued to meet twice weekly to review progress of fire safety actions identified.
- 8.3. CWH's Board has been kept fully informed and an open meeting for Board members was held on 28 June to provide an up-date and answer any questions. CWH's Finance, Audit and Risk Committee (FARC) received a detailed report at their July meeting, setting out the fire safety work programme and associated risk management. FARC will continue to receive regular updates as the programme is delivered. A full review of fire safety will be reported to the Board's next Health & Safety committee and the Board will receive a further presentation at the September meeting.
- 8.4. At least weekly up-dates have been provided to the Cabinet Member for Housing and WCC's Chief Executive and Director of Housing & Regeneration.

9. Fire safety Projects

- 9.1. 22 projects have been identified covering all aspects of fire safety. The programme is scheduled for delivery by May 2018. Follow-on projects may arise from these initial 22 projects. Further work is also expected following the public enquiry and coroner's enquiry. The initial findings of the public enquiry are expected to be published by Easter 2018.
- 9.2. Each project has specific timescales, a project manager, project sponsor and a risk register. Some of the projects are strategic reviews that will lead to recommendations for implementation. Some of those recommendations will be considered by the CWH Executive and Board, whilst others will be referred to the Council for policy decisions.
- 9.3. Where reviews of the stock are needed, work is being prioritised on a risk basis. This means starting with blocks of ten storeys or more, then six to nine storeys and then low rise blocks.

The projects include:

Property-related reviews of:

- fire safety management in high rise blocks
- fire risk assessment inspection strategy and procedures
- testing and solutions for cladding
- provision of gas supplies in tower blocks
- installation of sprinkler systems.

Information / education/training:

- designing and implementing an education program for residents in fire safety
- reviewing training for staff in fire safety and block inspections.

Estate management & tenancy/lease reviews of:

- enforcement of fire safety related leaseholder responsibilities
- leaseholder charging for fire safety works
- emergency plans to incorporate lessons learnt from the Grenfell Tower fire.
- the allocations policy relating to tower blocks and housing of residents who may be vulnerable in the event of a fire (WCC)

10. Little Venice Towers Projects

- 10.1. Following the results of the DCLG's cladding tests, CWH has been working with an independent cladding engineer; a main contractor and cladding installer to review the

options to effectively and efficiently remove the existing cladding, and replace it with a cladding system that has passed the Government's recent tests.

- 10.2. Prior to the installation of the cladding, the blocks suffered water penetration, particularly during driving rain, so replacing the cladding is essential.
- 10.3. LFB are developing their advice for tower blocks with cladding which has failed testing. CWH are in discussion with LFB regarding the timescales for removal of the cladding.
- 10.4. Residents expressed concern that there is wooden decking on balconies at Little Venice. Whilst the decking itself is considered to be relatively low risk, there is concern that debris could accumulate under it, which could be a fire hazard. Therefore, the Council has committed to removing the decking in tenants' homes, with the option for leaseholders to also have it removed if they wish (the decking is part of the leaseholder's demise and so the Council cannot enforce its replacement).
- 10.5. An alternative decking solution involving non-combustible tiles has been trialled at three empty properties, and residents have been invited to view them. The comments have been generally positive and are being used to inform the client brief.
- 10.6. There is no requirement to retrospectively fit sprinklers, however the Council has committed to provide sprinklers in its 22 housing blocks over 30 metres. This is broadly in line with building regulations which currently apply to new-build. Independent experts have been commissioned to review the 22 blocks and provide advice and costings for installation. This report will advise on the pros and cons of the options for installation.
- 10.7. There could be a different sprinkler system recommended for each building, as the system will need to deal with the bespoke nature of each block. Based on current benchmarks from retrospectively installing sprinklers elsewhere in the country, it is estimated that the programme could cost in the region of £12-15million.

11. Key Risks Identified

- 11.1. A number of risks have been identified, particularly around resourcing, expertise and financing for the additional fire safety related work. The combined risks are reviewed by CWH Executive regularly.
- 11.2. The HRA Business Plan is currently being reviewed to take into account the additional costs of fire safety works. To maintain the Council's ambitions of delivering more housing, other capital projects may need to be deferred.
- 11.3. Securing competent, suitably qualified staff and contractors, to deliver fire safety related work is a current issue. CWH has acted quickly to secure resources where possible, but there may be cost and time associated consequences.
- 11.4. The third area of resource-related risk is to CWH's 'business as usual' (BAU). Given the diverse programme of work being delivered by staff across CWH, there is a risk

that some BAU activities could be impacted by the requirement to undertake fire safety works.

- 11.5. CWH continue to work closely with the Council so that the impact of the additional fire related work is properly understood and informed decisions can be made together to use resources appropriately and maintain performance.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers please contact:

*Martyn Jones, Executive Director for Asset Strategy & Development,
CityWest Homes: Tel: 020 7245 2496 / Email: mjones@cwh.org.uk*

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1. Frequently Asked Questions sheet

BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None