

Fire safety and the council's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy

Briefing for Housing and Growth Committee – November 2019

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1 Introduction

1.1 In June 2017, a tragic fire occurred in Grenfell Tower, a block of flats owned by Kensington and Chelsea Council that changed the landscape of fire safety. This report provides an update of progress in addressing fire safety issues across the housing stock in Barnet, including Council Housing, Housing Association properties and the Private Sector.

2 Council Housing

2.1 The Housing Committee in June 2017 considered how to respond to this tragic event and what measures could be implemented to high rise properties owned by Barnet Council and managed by Barnet Homes to ensure such an event would not be repeated. The committee approved a recommendation, amongst others, that the approach to fire safety be reviewed to move from legislative compliance to one of best practice.

2.2 The consideration of the matter over subsequent meetings of the Housing Committee has enabled a well thought out approach to be taken as to how the commitment of moving to best practice should be implemented and to enable recommendations made by the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) and the Government to be considered, costed and programmed for implementation.

2.3 In summary, the fire safety delivery programme to the Council's housing stock is progressing well following a period of re-programming to incorporate all elements approved by the committee. All Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) and subsequent action deadlines are being achieved and the delivery programme has been prioritised according to risk.

2.4 The Housing Committee has agreed the following investment programme to improve fire safety in council housing:

Item	Cost
Granville Road cladding removal, recladding and associated costs	£5,922,900
Category 1 High Priority works	£9,220,433
Additional fire safety works to high rise buildings (Category 2 and 3a works)	£12,656,667
Installation of sprinklers to High Rise blocks with 2 stairwells	£3,220,000

Installation of sprinklers to sheltered housing blocks	£2,330,000
Installation of sprinklers to hostels	£150,000
Works to low and medium rise blocks (Inc. undertaking of type 3 FRA's and any urgent arising works)	£7,900,000
Replacement of composite fire doors	£10,500,000
Total	£51,900,000

Progress on fire safety measures to date

Granville Road Recladding

- 2.5 The works to replace the cladding system have progressed well and replacement works are now complete. Barnet Homes are currently working with the Greater London Authority (GLA) to facilitate payment of circa £5m of grant funding approved from the governments "Social Sector ACM Cladding Remediation Fund".

Category 1 High Priority Works

- 2.6 Good progress has been made on the delivery of high priority works. This has included works to the communal areas of high rise blocks on Whitefields, Granville Road, Grahame Park and Silk House & Shoelands estates.
- 2.7 Some of the high priority works have been included within packages of additional works that are being tendered, such as Longford Court and Prospect Ring. This is because combining the works together will provide a better long-term solution and enable the works to be coordinated with more disruptive works such as the installation of sprinkler and alarm systems.

Additional fire safety works (category 2 and 3a)

- 2.8 The tender process for the installation of alarm and sprinkler systems to Longford Court in Hendon has been completed and works are scheduled to start on-site on in January 2020. Work is also scheduled to start on site in January to the towers at Prospect and Norfolk in East Finchley. Statutory consultation with leaseholders has commenced as has non-statutory consultation with tenants. A short information booklet has been posted to all flats and drop in sessions were held for residents to discuss the proposed works and it is planned that before works commence on site a further series of resident drop in sessions will be held.
- 2.9 Barnet Homes commissioned a series of 4 fire safety videos (each being around 3 minutes long) which are available via their website. These cover different topics and will be used through new tenant sign ups, our social

media platforms and web sites to encourage further engagement and to further raise awareness of fire safety actions and behavioural change.

Installation of sprinklers to blocks of flats with 10 or more floors and 2 or more stairwells

- 2.10 These works will form part of the 5-year programme and these are currently scheduled for 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial years.

Installation of sprinklers to sheltered housing blocks and hostels

- 2.11 In the main these works will form part of the 5-year programme and these are currently scheduled for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 financial years, however consideration is currently being given to accelerating the installation to certain schemes where other disruptive works are scheduled as part of the wider capital investment programme. This includes the sheltered housing scheme at Vale Court and hostel at Friern Barnet Road.

Works to low and medium rise blocks (inc. undertaking of type 3 Fire Risk Assessments and any urgent arising works)

- 2.12 This FRA programme commenced during quarter 1 utilising Barnet Homes existing specialist assessors whilst tender documents for the appointment to a new contract are prepared. Type 3 FRA's have been completed initially and recommendations are being made for further destructive Type 4 surveys or remedial works as the need arises.

Flat Front Entrance Fire Doors

- 2.13 Following an issue highlighted by the Metropolitan Police as part of their investigation into the Grenfell Tower Fire, the Government undertook testing on "glass reinforced polyester" (GRP) composite fire doors, all of which failed to meet the required standard. The Government have since also completed a programme of testing timber door-sets, all of which passed.
- 2.14 There are around 5,000 composite fire doors installed to homes managed by Barnet Homes. The MHCLG recommended that property owners reviewed and updated their fire risk assessments for blocks which have GRP composite fire doors. This task has been completed for all Barnet Homes blocks and the findings of these have informed the proposed replacement programme and discussions with the contractors who supplied and fit the doors. A binding agreement has now been reached with the contractor responsible for replacing most of the doors on the basis that faulty doors will be replaced at the contractor's expense and liability will be resolved through independent adjudication when all the work is finished. Work will commence in December 2019 with all non-compliant doors currently planned to be replaced within the FRA deadlines.
- 2.15 As at the time of this report there are no compliant composite fire doors on the market and Barnet Homes (using independent experts and bespoke testing)

have agreed the exact timber door sets¹ to be used in all replacement programmes.

Whitefields Estate - tower blocks cladding system

- 2.16 Three blocks on the Whitefields Estate, Clare, Norden and Whychote Point, consisting of 44 flats each have been retrospectively fitted with a High-Pressure Laminate (HPL) cladding system installed in the early 1990's. These blocks are due to be demolished in 2023 as part of the wider Brent Cross regeneration master plan. After expert advice the cladding, combined with the non-combustible insulation backing is considered to be safe. A programme of work and management actions are in place to improve the front doors to flats and the fire alarm warning systems within the block.

Willow House Fire

- 2.17 A fire at Willow House in East Finchley caused significant damage to the roof of flats 1-12. Although the fire damage was limited, significant water damage took place when extinguishing the fire which resulted in the need to rehouse all 13 households in the block.
- 2.18 There have been delays in the commencement of works to the block due to the initial tenders not providing value for money. A second tender exercise has now been successfully completed and costs have been agreed with the insurance company, with work due to proceed shortly. Completion of works is anticipated in Q4 2019/20.

Large Panel System buildings

- 2.19 There have been various reports in the media of issues around high-rise Large Panel System buildings (LPS). Due to their design some high-rise² Large Panel System buildings (LPS) have been found susceptible to disproportionate collapse in the event of an internal (gas) explosion. Following government advice landlords who own LPS buildings have undertaken a prescriptive, Building Research Establishment (BRE) specified programme of inspection. Where defects have been found a programme of remedial work has been actioned that has ranged from removing the piped gas to demolition, depending on the severity of the defects. Barnet Homes manage four estates that have high rise LPS blocks, (West Hendon, The Avenue, Dollis Valley and Silk House & Shoelands), the tallest blocks being six floors in height.
- 2.20 Surveys are complex and invasive, requiring tenants to be decanted. Concrete must be removed, reinforcement visually inspected and calculations completed to assess the buildings integrity to withstand disproportionate collapse from an internal explosion. The reports on the Barnet Homes blocks

¹ A door set is the door, frame and associated hardware and glazing.

² High rise is defined as 5 storeys and above.

are becoming available over the next couple of months enabling options to be considered and decisions made.

- 2.21 Cognisant of the consequences of a gas explosion in LPS buildings the gas distributor, Cadent, are seeking reassurance from Barnet Homes that its LPS buildings are safe to retain piped gas. Barnet Homes are working with Cadent to provide this reassurance and will share the results of the surveys and engineering calculations being completed accordingly. Cadent have completed inspections of their gas supply assets serving all LPS blocks and advised that all are secure and in good condition. Barnet Homes and Cadent have also agreed a set of precautionary risk mitigation measures for the blocks on West Hendon and Dollis Valley which Barnet Homes are currently in the process of implementing.
- 2.22 As the surveys and subsequent structural engineering calculations are completed Barnet Homes are considering and making recommendations for next steps. This has been the case at Silk House, where the findings from the surveys recommended the removal of the piped gas supply to the block. Consequently, the gas supply to all properties was disconnected on 3 June 2019 whilst a replacement communal heating system is designed and installed. In accordance with BRE guidelines, further structural surveys have been completed and the findings from this work is currently being assessed. In the meantime, the building has been visited with Cadent who, as the piped gas has been removed, do not have concerns about the building. However, there is the potential of a disproportionate collapse in the event of accidental loading. Portable gas heaters are not permitted in high rise buildings but as a precaution, tenancy audits have been instigated to ensure portable gas appliances are not being used while the options and next steps are being considered.
- 2.23 To reduce disturbance to the tenants on the estates it was intended that the results of the surveys carried out in vacant properties in the Tyrell Way (West Hendon) and The Ridge (Dollis Valley) blocks could be used for neighbouring and similar properties on respective estates. Survey results for Tyrell Way & The Ridge, now decanted, have been received in draft form and do confirm that the blocks do not meet the required standard. Unfortunately, however, clarification on BRE guidelines state that due to the variation in the quality of LPS construction, it is not possible to draw such conclusions and surveys are now in progress for the Marsh Drive and Dollis Valley blocks, the results of which will be shared with residents and determine the next steps.

Additional Checks

- 2.24 Following the Grenfell Tower fire, Barnet Homes carried out checks of the external walls of all high-rise councils blocks and this included commissioning expert consultants to complete detailed surveys of all blocks with cladding systems. This included, for example, the block at Marsh Drive on the West Hendon estate which was evaluated in August 2017, the result of which confirmed that the cladding system was fit for purpose and met the building

regulations at the time of its installation. Additionally, this report along with the Agreement Certificate for the external cladding material has also been evaluated by Barnet Homes' expert consultant fire risk assessors and incorporated into their fire risk assessment for the block.

3 Registered Providers

- 3.1 As reported previously there are approximately 7,000 homes managed by RPs or Housing Associations in the borough and these are regulated by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH). RPs are required to carry out fire risk assessments and operate in a similar way to Barnet Homes in managing fire safety in relation to the housing it manages.
- 3.2 Following the Grenfell Tower fire, the council wrote to all Housing Associations with 10 or more units and received responses confirming that eight have blocks of flats over 5 stories in height and that all Housing Associations all of which have up to date fire risk assessments.
- 3.3 Three of the Housing Associations confirmed that they have ACM cladding on blocks, and for all three this has been tested by the government and failed.
- 3.4 One of these (Origin) has received advice from the LFB that the building is safe, and a replacement cladding product identified, which will be fitted one it has passed fire safety tests will. Works are expected to complete in the summer 2020.
- 3.5 Metropolitan Housing Trust has removed the existing combustible cladding and insulation and is currently in the progress of replacing with non-combustible terracotta tiles and render. This replacement is included as part of a major planned maintenance works programme which also includes the replacement of all doors and windows and the addition of a sprinkler system.
- 3.6 Genesis has now completed the replacement of ACM cladding on their high-rise stock in Barnet.
- 3.7 In addition, Sanctuary Housing Association has one block which they hold on a lease in Colindale that has failed the testing. There is an up to date fire risk assessment for this block and Sanctuary has stated that the freeholder is responsible any work associated with replacing the cladding. The owner of the building has recently confirmed that they are now planning to remove the cladding and which partially covers the exterior of the building, and replace it with fibre cement panels. The owners of the building have been liaising with the council's building control team and have applied to the MHCLG for funding to meet the replacement costs of the cladding.

4 Private Sector buildings (residential and commercial)

- 4.1 As previously reported to the Housing Committee, in the case of privately owned high rise blocks, the councils' power to act is limited as whilst Barnet is the planning authority for most new building works, the council's building control service competes with the private sector for the building compliance work. Additionally, building control services operate strictly within the building regulations and cannot withhold approval on materials that have been tested as suitable, they can only advise.
- 4.2 Owners are required to carry out fire risk assessments and spot checks are carried out by the LFEPA. However, these are restricted checking that fire doors, risers, and alarms are fully functional within the fabric of the building and therefore would not pick up faults in cladding systems or fire compartmentation outside the main structure.
- 4.3 The council has previously complied with a request from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to collect and submit data on the status of privately owned high rise blocks exceeding 18 metres in the borough, including whether they have ACM cladding and any actions that owners are taking to address this.
- 4.4 Following this exercise, it was confirmed that there are 2 privately owned blocks higher than 18 meters within Barnet that have ACM cladding which has failed the governments fire safety tests, including the one referred to in paragraph 46 above. The council's building control team has recently been in touch with the owners of these buildings, and one has confirmed that they have plans in place to replace the cladding. The other owner has advised that they are progressing plans to replace the cladding on their building and intend to seek funding from the Government to assist with this.
- 4.5 More recently, another high-rise block with suspected ACM cladding has been identified. A joint inspection has been carried out with the London Fire Brigade, who have identified a number of measures that the building owners need to take to ensure its safety. Investigations are currently underway to establish the exact use of the building which will determine where responsibility for any enforcement on the ACM cladding rests.
- 4.6 The council is also liaising with the MHCLG and the national Joint Inspection Team set up by the Government to support local authorities in using the Housing Act 2004 to assess the hazard risk of unsafe cladding in high-rise residential buildings and take enforcement action where appropriate.
- 4.7 Following concerns about the safety of some non-ACM systems, in July 2019, the Government issued a letter to all local authorities asking them to undertake a further exercise to identify the external wall covering on all building higher than 18 meters in their area. The review will also seek to identify the type of insulation used for each building and external features such as balconies. This exercise will be completed by the end of March 2020. Any concerns identified

will be raised with the owners of the buildings and the council will work with the Government and LFEPA to ensure the safety of residents.