

Report to Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 15 January 2019

Portfolio: Housing and Property Services

Subject: Fire Safety Policy

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Committee Secretary: Jackie Leither



Recommendations:

- 1) That the Select Committee considers the benefits of installing a sprinkler system into its “High Risk” accommodation, taking account of cost and benefit, and makes a recommendation to the Cabinet as necessary;**
- 2) That the Council reverts to a “Stay Put” policy in all its general needs flat blocks, at Norway House and at Hemnall House, whilst maintaining its advice to residents in each of its Sheltered Housing sites to evacuate in the event of a fire; and**
- 3) That the Select Committee considers the Fire Safety Policy set out in Appendix 2, and recommends its endorsement to the Cabinet.**

Introduction:

1. In January 2018, the Select Committee considered a report on Fire Safety in Council-owned Accommodation. The outcome of that meeting led to the following recommendations:

- that a feasibility study be undertaken into retro-fitting sprinklers into the Council’s Sheltered Housing sites, Norway House and Hemnall House;
- that a change in approach would be adopted whereby the Council would promote a “Stay Safe” Policy to replace the previous “Stay Put” Policy;
- that Leaseholders continue to be offered a 75% towards the cost of a replacement fire protected front entrance door; and
- that a detailed Fire Safety Policy for Council owned residential accommodation be prepared and brought back for further consideration.

Sprinklers

2. A copy of the report that was commissioned into the benefits of installing sprinklers is attached at appendix 1, and is to be considered alongside the estimated costs, when deciding whether to go ahead and install sprinklers. Below is a summary of the key findings:

3. The Council commissioned a specialist company to undertake a full assessment of all the Council's "High Risk" residential properties, including Norway House and Hemnall House, each of the eight Sheltered Accommodation sites as well as two general needs flat blocks listed as high risk due them having a single means of escape staircase.

4. From the report (see appendix 1), it notes that there is currently no legislation in existence that requires existing premises to be retro-fitted with a sprinkler system or watermist protection. Although, it does suggest it may sometimes be appropriate to consider localised fire suppression within a flat of a highly vulnerable resident.

5. The Consultant points out that within the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, it is the Landlords responsibility to undertake detailed fire risk assessments of each block, taking account of:

- Measures to reduce risk of fire and fire spread
- Vulnerability of residents
- Means of Escape
- Measures for securing that means of escape can be safely and effectively used
- Means for fighting fires
- Means for detecting and giving warning
- Action to be taken in event of fire - training - instruction - procedures
- Maintenance

6. When assessing the vulnerability of residents, it is recognised that those living in sheltered housing often suffer with mobility difficulties, reduced sensory capability and cognitive difficulties, all of which bring about greater risk from fire, both in terms of the likelihood of fire and vulnerability in the event of fire. It is also recognized that a disproportionate number of deaths from fire occur in blocks of flats and multiple occupancy dwellings, with those living in specialised housing being amongst the most vulnerable to hazards such as fires.

7. The National fire statistics (2015/16) conclude that:

- Vulnerable residents are at high risk
- Stay put is generally safe
- Those who die are, very often, directly involved in the fire
- Justification for high level of monitored smoke/heat detection
- Fire suppression for all **new** sheltered/extra care and high risk supported housing
- Detection/suppression may not save resident in room of origin
- Need for person-centred approach for high risk residents
- High reliance placed on fire prevention
- Possible need for personal protection water mist systems for extreme cases

8. The Consultants assessed the property types, construction, and the vulnerability of its residents. It also considered historical data relating to frequency of fires, detection and monitoring measures, escape procedures as well as systems in place to protect those in need of help. It concludes that:

Hemnall House would significantly benefit from the retrofitting of sprinklers, as it has both a mix of vulnerable residents, and is an old building that presents significant compartmentation issues which are unlikely to be easily or cost-effectively addressed due to the age of the building and nature of construction;

Norway House has a mix of vulnerable residents but has a significantly more robust level of compartmentation. However, this property has been subject to a number of small fires and therefore the retrofitting of sprinklers may be a consideration based on life safety risk.

Highwood Lane and Hilltop Court are both general needs and are reliant on effective compartmentation. Residents are also assumed to be more mobile, but the likelihood of accidental fires may be higher than compared to other premises. Therefore, the retrofitting of sprinkler systems would present a benefit in terms of life safety. However, statistical evidence to date from EFDC and both the Hackitt Review and NFCC definitions would suggest that these premises do not fall within the High-Risk category.

Sheltered Schemes all contain the most vulnerable residents. These schemes all have the benefit of high standards of both active and passive fire protection, and 24/7 monitoring. The retrofitting of sprinkler systems into these schemes would present a benefit in terms of life safety, although with high levels of existing active and passive fire protection coupled with increased compartmentation and 24/7 monitoring, benefits may not be as evident as with the other schemes.

9. Based on the risk assessments within the report, and working with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service, the Housing Assets Manager has obtained an estimate for the installation of a retro-fitted sprinkler system at Norway House, which would protect the communal areas as well as individual rooms, of around £145,000 (excluding the chalets) and £40,000 at Hemnall House. Using this information, the Select Committee is to consider the benefits of installing a sprinkler system into its “High Risk” accommodation, taking account of cost and benefit, and makes a recommendation to the Cabinet as necessary.

“Stay Put” or “Stay Safe”

10. The report to the Select Committee in January 2018 concluded that the Council would seek to adopt a “Stay Safe” policy for all of the Council’s flat blocks, with the exception of the Sheltered Housing sites, where an evacuation Policy would remain in place.

11. However, since that decision was reached, further discussions have taken place with the Essex Fire and Rescue Service, who firmly advocate the “Stay Put” policy following the release of the Hackitt review into the Grenfell Tower fire. Whilst the Essex Fire and Rescue Service would not make a recommendation one way or the other, they urged the Council to refer to their website, which continues to advise residents to “Stay Put”.

12. Based on the advice contained on the Essex Fire and Rescue Service website, it is recommended that the Council reverts to its policy of advising residents to “Stay Put” in the event of a fire.

Fire Safety Policy

12. Attached at appendix 2 is a copy of a draft Fire Safety Policy, which the Select Committee is asked to consider in detail and recommend its endorsement to the Cabinet. This takes account of a “Stay Put” policy in general needs flat blocks and HMPO’s, with an evacuation policy for all Sheltered Housing sites.

Resource Implications:

An estimate of around £145,000 (excluding the chalets) for the installation of a retro-fitted sprinkler system at Norway House and £40,000 at Hemnall House.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Housing Act 1985
Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
Building Regulations

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

This report considers fire safety in Council owned properties

Consultation Undertaken:

Essex Fire and Rescue Service

Background Papers:

None.

Risk Management:

The Fire Safety Policy looks at ways of minimizing the risks to occupiers of all Council owned residential properties.

The decision to install sprinklers should be taken by weighing up the likelihood, impact, costs and benefits. The likelihood and impact assessment within the Consultants report suggests a sprinkler system should be considered at Hemnall House.

Equality Analysis

The Equality Act 2010 requires that the Public Sector Equality Duty is actively applied in decision-making. Therefore, the required equality information will be provided as part of the further report to the Select Committee and Cabinet.