

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-004-2019/20

Date of meeting: 11 July 2019



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Housing & Property Services

Subject: Fire Safety Policy and installation of sprinklers - Council owned housing accommodation

Responsible Officer: Stuart Mitchell (01992 564548).

Democratic Services Officer: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That, following endorsement by the Communities Select Committee, the Fire Safety Policy for Council owned housing accommodation be adopted; and

(2) That, subject to obtaining building regulations approval and listed building consent, the retro-fitting of sprinkler systems into temporary housing accommodation sites at Norway House and Hemnall House be approved.

Executive Summary:

On 15th January 2019, the Communities Select Committee considered a draft Fire Safety Policy for Council owned housing accommodation and recommended its endorsement to Cabinet. The policy sets out the principles and guidelines that the Council will apply to identify, assess and reduce the risks to our residents of personal injury or damage to homes caused by fire and to ensure compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Its adoption is a key decision as it raises new issues of policy.

The Communities Select Committee also considered the retro-fitting of sprinkler systems into residential accommodation at Norway House in North Weald and Hemnall House in Epping and recommended their installation to Cabinet.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

An approved Fire Safety Policy will provide a robust fire safety framework that secures the safety and wellbeing of occupiers of, and visitors to, the Council's residential accommodation.

The installation of sprinkler systems into properties with vulnerable residents will enable them to live safely within this "higher risk" category of accommodation.

Other Options for Action:

Not to follow the recommendations of the Communities Select Committee and not endorse the Fire Safety Policy or approve the installation of sprinkler systems.

Report:

Background

1. Following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower on the 14th June 2017, the Communities Select Committee requested a report on fire safety procedures in Council owned housing accommodation. The report was considered by the Select Committee in January 2018 and it was resolved that officers bring back to the Select Committee a draft Fire Safety Policy and a feasibility study for the installation of sprinkler systems at each of the Council's sheltered housing sites, at Norway House in North Weald and at Hemnall House in Epping.

2. In January 2019, a draft Fire Safety Policy and a sprinkler systems feasibility study were presented to the Communities Select Committee with the outcome summarised below.

Fire Safety Policy

3. The Council aims to provide a safe environment in which our residents are assured that the risks of personal injury or damage to their homes caused by fire is minimised. The Fire Safety Policy sets out the principles and guidelines that the Council will apply to identify, assess and reduce these risks to ensure compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. The policy applies to occupiers and visitors of all the Council's sheltered and temporary accommodation and general needs blocks of flats.

4. The policy requires fire risk assessments to be undertaken and regularly reviewed by competent persons with a need to act upon any risks identified or recommendations made; fire risk audits to be completed in association with Essex County Fire & Rescue Service; fire safety awareness information to be made available to residents; undertake and maintain fire precautions measures; upkeep of fire prevention, warning and detection measures and equipment; and consideration, maintenance and improvement of fire safety in all works programmes undertaken.

5. Following consultation and advice from Essex County Fire & Rescue Service after the Hackitt review into the Grenfell Tower fire, the Fire Safety Policy incorporates a "Stay Put" Policy for all the Council's general needs flats blocks and an "Evacuation" Policy for sheltered and temporary accommodation blocks. The Fire Safety Policy also includes fire action advice for general needs houses and bungalows.

6. The Select Committee considered the draft Fire Safety Policy in detail and recommended its endorsement to Cabinet.

Sprinkler Systems

7. The Select Committee was asked to consider the costs and the benefits of installing sprinkler systems into "high risk" residential accommodation and to make a recommendation to Cabinet. "High risk" accommodation was considered to be the eight sheltered housing sites, Norway House, Hemnall House and two general needs flats blocks with a single means of escape staircase (Highwood Lane, Loughton and Hilltop Court, Woodford Bridge).

8. A feasibility study of the "high risk" properties was conducted by a specialist fire safety consultancy. Property types, their construction and the vulnerability of the residents were all assessed together with historical data relating to frequency of fires, detection and monitoring measures, escape procedures and systems in place to protect those in need of help.

9. Although there is currently no legislative requirement for existing premises to be retro-fitted with sprinkler systems, the consultants concluded 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 with significant compartmentation issues which are unlikely to be easily or cost-effectively addressed due to the age of the building and nature of the construction. The consultants also concluded that Norway House has a mix of vulnerable residents and, although it has a significantly more robust level of compartmentation, the property has experienced a number of small fires and therefore the retrofitting of sprinklers should be considered based on life safety risk.

10. With regard to the sheltered schemes, the consultants concluded that all contain the most vulnerable residents and that the retrofitting of sprinkler systems would present a benefit in terms of life safety. However, because they all have high levels of existing active and passive fire protection together with 24/7 monitoring and an increased level of compartmentation, the costs outweigh the benefits in this instance. The two general needs flats blocks were considered not to be classed as high risk by the consultants once statistical and peer review evidence had been taken into account.

11. The Select Committee considered the feasibility study and resolved that a recommendation be made to Cabinet based on estimated costs of £145,000 for Norway House (excluding the chalets), which would protect communal areas and individual rooms, and £40,000 for Hemnall House. The Select Committee noted the possibility that funding from the Essex County Fire & Rescue Service Sprinkler Fund may be available towards the two sprinkler installations of £50,000 and £20,000 respectively. However, this is subject to an application process and subsequent approval by the fire service.

Resource Implications:

An estimate of approximately £145,000 for the retro-fitting of a sprinkler system at Norway House and approximately £40,000 for Hemnall House. Both installations can be funded from existing budgets but applications will be submitted to the Essex County Fire & Rescue Service Sprinkler Fund for contributions towards both schemes.

Legal and Governance Implications:

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

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Fire safety in Council owned housing accommodation.

Consultation Undertaken:

Communities Select Committee and Essex County Fire & Rescue Service.

Background Papers:

Draft Fire Safety Policy.
DDS (International) Ltd fire safety consultant feasibility study into sprinkler installations.

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 is set out in the fire safety consultant's report.

Should the Council not secure listed building consent to install sprinklers at Norway House, regular fire risk assessments will continue to take place to mitigate the risks.