

Monday, 19 February 2024

Report of the Assistant Director, Assets

Update on Fire Safety across Council Assets

Exempt Information

Not exempt

Purpose

This report provides an update on the Council's approach to fire safety across its assets.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Committee notes and endorses the contents of this report.

Executive Summary

The Council in its capacity as an employer, an operator of buildings and as a Social Housing Landlord has a variety of statutory obligations in relation to Fire Safety. The Council has always taken these obligations seriously and has processes, procedures and measures in place to assess and address fire safety across its assets.

The key areas of Fire Safety considered are: -

Fire Risk Assessments [FRA] – there is a requirement to complete a FRA for all operational buildings occupied and/or managed by the Council. In addition there is an obligation to complete a FRA for flatted blocks across the Social Housing property portfolio. The Council engages the services of a third party compliance contractor, Graham, to complete FRAs across the various assets and report back on any findings, remedial works and improvements. The Compliance Team within Assets review these reports and make arrangements for any works identified to be completed by one of our approved contractors. In addition to the FRA that is completed by Graham, Premises Managers will also undertake general checks around the buildings for which they have responsibility. FRAs are reviewed and renewed on an annual basis.

Sprinklers – as has been previously reported to Members all of the high-rise blocks including the block at Eringden have the benefit of sprinklers having been installed. The sprinklers are serviced on an annual basis by a specialist contractor to ensure that they remain in good working order should they ever be needed.

Fire doors – a programme of renewing all fire doors in the six high-rise blocks in the Town Centre has been completed, this programme included the renewal of all main flat entrance doors along with doors in the communal parts of the block. All doors have been manufactured and installed to comply with the latest regulations. Further upgrades across other flatted blocks are planned. A programme of inspections is in place to ensure that fire doors across the blocks remain compliant, this inspection programme allows for early identification and rectification of defects.

Fire Detection – The Council’s larger operational buildings will have a full fire detection and alarm system that is maintained and tested regularly by specialist contractors. It is not commonplace to install integrated detection and alarm systems across the Social Housing assets, however there has been a programme of upgrades to detection systems across housing assets to ensure that homes are fitted with hard wired detection systems that comply to the current regulations. Detectors are also checked as part of the annual gas servicing programme.

Fire Fighting Equipment – where fire fighting equipment is installed (fire extinguishers and the like) a contract is in place with a third party specialist to service and where necessary renew equipment. The location and use of such equipment forms part of the staff induction process and falls under general building Health & Safety management.

Emergency Lighting – whilst not solely installed for the benefit of fire safety, emergency lighting can prove useful during an evacuation in the event of a fire. Contracts are in place with third party contractor to undertake the necessary checks, servicing and renewal of emergency light fittings. Where there is a Premises Manager responsible for a building they will also undertake tests on the emergency lighting.

Electrical Inspections – whilst not specifically related to fire safety it is recognised that electrical faults are a significant cause of fires. There is a programme of inspections in place across all buildings including individual domestic dwellings to ensure that an electrical inspection is carried out at least once every five years with an inspection certificate being issued upon completion of the inspection. Where defects or improvements are identified through the inspection process arrangements are made for the repairs contractor to carry out remedial works. An electrical inspection is also completed for every void housing property before it is re-let.

Building Safety Act – The Building Safety Act came into effect fully in October 2023 and applies to the six high-rise blocks in the Town Centre. All six blocks have been registered with the Building Safety Regulator; it is anticipated that the blocks will be subject to an inspection by the Regulator at some point in the future but the timing of any inspection is not known at this point. The installation of sprinklers and upgraded fire doors should place the blocks in a lower-risk category however standards will still need to be maintained and the relevant processes and procedures to manage the blocks needs to be reviewed and enforced.

Social Housing Act – building safety is a key component of the Social Housing Act which in some aspects goes above and beyond the requirements of the Building Safety Act. In addition to the six high-rise blocks in the Town Centre the Council has also had to report on the fire safety aspects of the block at Eringden and it is expected that the Regulator for Social Housing will want to see that appropriate measures (as set out in above) are in place across the wider property portfolio

Building Safety Manager – the legislative requirements on the role of Building Safety Manager (Building Safety Act) and Health & Safety Lead (Social Housing Act) have now been clarified. For both Acts it is acceptable for the Council to nominate the Executive Lead (Chief Executive) as the Accountable Person. However there is still a need under both Acts to have an operational lead. There has been a provision within the structure and budget for a Building Safety Manager role, this role has not been filled to date as clarifications were being sought as to the level of responsibility and accountability that this role would have. Now that there is clarity about the nature of the role the process of recruitment has begun.

Options Considered

This report provides an update only and no other options have been considered in the production of the report.

Resource Implications

No additional resources have been identified as a result of this report. The role of Building Safety Manager has been clarified and the recruitment process has begun. This role is already part of the establishment with funding in place.

Legal/Risk Implications Background

The need for the Council to comply with specific regulations relating to fire safety remains a key and significant risk for the Council and is one which needs processes in place to properly manage.

The ability to recruit into key roles remains a risk; there is a known shortage of suitable candidates made more difficult by the fact that there are a large number of building owners trying to draw on the small pool of resource.

The interaction with and management of Leaseholders may pose a risk going forward as some elements that will be essential to ensuring building safety are the responsibility of Leaseholders. It will important to highlight issues and engage with Leaseholders to ensure that they maintain compliance at all times.

Equalities Implications

None arising from this report

Environment and Sustainability Implications (including climate change)

None arising from this report

Background Information

None

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List of Background Papers

None

Appendices

None

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