

Housing Management Board

7 January 2020

FIRE SAFETY – Update and response to Grenfell Inquiry Phase One report

Purpose of report:

To up-date Housing Management Board (HMB) on our current position and future proposals regarding fire safety in our blocks, referring to the findings and recommendations from the Grenfell Inquiry Phase One report.

Key messages:

- Bristol City Council owns 62 High Rise (over 5 stories) blocks of flats let to council tenants and leaseholders
- None have the same cladding as Grenfell Tower. Just over half of our high rise blocks have cladding of a different design and material. The blocks perform well in the event of a fire and this has been proven on several occasions in blocks with cladding, where the cladding has not burned or spread the fire.
- Bristol has taken fire safety very seriously for a number of years, investing over £2m per year since 2012 in fire safety improvement measures.
- Our blocks are very safe in the event of a fire. All fires in our blocks have not spread, - the fire doors made by our own joinery shop perform well above the 30 minute requirement (independently tested and certified). The concrete box nature of our blocks means that the fires are contained to the flat where the fire originates.
- We have a good working relationship with Avon Fire and Rescue Service who regularly test our blocks fire risers, familiarise themselves with our blocks, and have ready access to information about the layout of the blocks.
- We employ Building Control experts to conduct our Fire Risk Assessments which are up to date for all our blocks. This service is provided by our own Building Control team.
- We are closely monitoring the outcomes and findings from the Grenfell inquiries, and will continually review our policies and approach as they emerge
- The Inquiry Phase One report was published on 31 October 2019, and focuses on the events of the night – particularly the experience of the victims of the fire. We have reviewed the recommendations that are relevant to us as a landlord.

Bristol City Council Fire Safety policy and approach

Get Out / Stay Put

We considered the “Get Out / Stay Put” advice. We continue to advise residents that if there is a fire in their flat, they smell smoke or they feel unsafe, they should get out and call 999. But if there is a fire elsewhere in the block they are generally safer to stay put until, or if, the fire brigade organise an evacuation.

- A controlled evacuation can be organised by AFRS which will include giving assistance to residents that may have particular needs. We have reviewed and improved our own emergency response procedures for any major incident, including running rehearsal events for all key agencies.
- This advice is being supported nationally by the NFCC and by Avon Fire and Rescue (AFRS) locally.
- AFRS have provided BCC with a poster to help communicate this message in a pictorial way and this is displayed within every block.

- We are closely monitoring the official findings and responses from the Inquiry into the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower and would consider making any changes to our policies, in liaison with AFRS.

Cladding

None of the 62 high rise blocks owned and managed by BCC have the same cladding as was used on Grenfell Tower. Nor were any of our blocks subject to the governments cladding testing requirements that were conducted post Grenfell.

Tenants wanted reassurance about the type and safety of their cladding and to know their blocks are safe. We have employed a surveying firm to undertake independent checks on our blocks that were clad many years ago to ascertain the material used and their overall safety (where we don't have records of this). These independent checks have been done, and we have released reports on 10 so far with the rest to be released over the next few months. Some work has been recommended to enhance the existing fire safety of the blocks, including repairs and improvements to the older cladding systems. The next phase in the New Year will inspect the records we have on the blocks more recently clad as an additional assurance.

Fire Risk Assessments

We carry out annual fire risk assessments of every high rise block of flats, and low rise blocks are assessed every two years. Any risks identified are noted and programmes of work developed to ensure continuing improvements to fire safety. We regularly audit our blocks for fire safety risks and check on a daily basis for any hazards. All housing staff are continually reminded to report anything of concern so that it can be acted upon.

Fire Safety Works

- We have been installing fire safety measures in our blocks since 2012 and spending around £2 million per year on this. New fire doors have been installed in our high rise and sheltered schemes. We will complete replacement fire door works to the low rise blocks by 2024.
- We have undertaken compartmentation works to all of our high rise blocks – these works ensure that the concrete box that forms every flat has no gaps and stops any fire from spreading from one flat to another. Low rise blocks will be completed by 2024.
- There have been a number of fires in Bristol since 2017, and on no occasion has any fire spread from one flat to another.

Fire alarms

Bristol City Council follows the government's guidance called, "Fire Safety in purpose built blocks of flats", 2011. That standard says that fire alarm systems are not normally required in blocks of flats. Sheltered Schemes have different standards and so a few of our blocks do have alarms to meet this different standard. (using a zoned alarm system linked to the warden call system)

Sprinklers

We are piloting the installation of sprinklers at one high rise block – and are in the process of consulting with residents about the installation. This will be reviewed before decisions are made to expand to other blocks. We have sprinklers in bin rooms in high rise blocks which are maintained regularly. This prevents any fire starting from discarded rubbish from the chutes.

Smoke Detectors

We provide free smoke detectors for every one of the 27,000 dwellings in our ownership, one for each level of a property. If tenants have missing or damaged smoke detectors we will replace these free of charge. We are looking to improve this to provide more detectors within a home, in line with newly published British Standards.

Gas

We have been working in collaboration with Wales & West gas supplier to ensure every block with gas has identified isolation valves and we are removing gas supplies within high rise blocks where there is little or no usage of gas.

Fire Service

We work very closely with Avon Fire and Rescue Service (AFRS) to consult on fire safety works and policy. We share various information with them, both electronically and physically on site, such as fire risk assessments, floor plans, the layouts of flats within blocks, asbestos surveys, lift information and other general features about a block. Each high rise block has a fire safety tailored plan available on site in emergency boxes agreed with AFRS. AFRS do regular audits of our buildings to familiarise their watch staff with our high rise stock. AFRS provide Home Fire Safety Visits to any residents who are concerned about fire safety within the home, and we publicise this to our tenants in our regular updates.

Safety Team

We are creating a new Safety Team that will take on the new Building Safety Manager role that is likely to come out of the Hackett enquiry and Grenfell findings. This team will ensure all safety requirements for our high rise blocks is collated and managed in one place and that we regularly engage with our residents over their safety.

Phase 1 of the Grenfell inquiry

The outcome of Phase 1 of the Grenfell enquiry was officially published on 31st October 2019. The report largely focusses on the events of the night of 14th June 2016, particularly on the experiences of the victims of the fire. Phase 2 of the inquiry has not yet started and this will look at the building, the cladding and the activities that led to the fire being so devastating. Below are the particular issues that have been mentioned in the Phase 1 report that are applicable to Bristol City Council and its role as landlord.

There are also a large number of recommendations that apply to the Fire Service. Although these would be for Avon Fire and Rescue Service (AFRS) to implement, we will need to liaise closely with them. We have a strong working relationship with AFRS, and have a series of meetings planned to will have already reached out to them and arranged meetings.

Key Grenfell Phase 1 recommendations (with BCC comments)

1. Owner and manager be required to draw up and keep under review evacuation plans, with copies provided to local fire and rescue services and placed in an information box on the premises

Every high rise block has an evacuation plan on display in each foyer and in the information boxes.

2. All high-rise buildings be equipped with facilities to enable the sending of an evacuation signal to the whole or a selected part of the building

This is not provided in any BCC blocks. We are assessing how this could be provided

3. Owners and managers of high rises be required by law to prepare personal evacuation plans for all vulnerable residents

Not currently provided – we are reviewing how we could implement and maintain this.

4. An urgent inspection of fire doors in all buildings containing separate dwellings, whether or not they are high rises

Partially done, we are considering how we could access all flats.

5. A legal requirement on the owner or manager of high and low rise buildings to check doors at least every three months to ensure self-closing devices are working effectively

Not done currently.

6. All high-rise buildings should have floors clearly marked in a prominent place, which should be visible in low light or smoky conditions.

Partially done. Not every block has yet had low level large numbering on each floor

7. That the owner and manager of every high-rise building is required to provide details of external walls and the materials used to the local fire service, and inform them of any changes

We have these details and can provide them to AFRS.

8. That owners and managers of high-rise buildings are required by law to provide paper and electronic versions of building plans of all high rises to local fire services

Done. Coordinating with AFRS to get this information into their vehicles

9. To ensure the building contains a premises information box, including an up-to-date copy of floor plans and information about lifts

Done

10. That the owner and manager of every high-rise building be required by law to carry out regular inspections of any lift required for use by firefighters and the mechanism that allows them to take control of it. Copies of inspections are to be provided at monthly intervals.

Keys supplied to AFRS. Photo of applicable key in each property box. Service inspections not currently provided.

11. The report decided not to issue a recommendation that individual flats be provided with fire extinguishers or fire blankets, noting concerns that this could encourage residents to fight fires rather than escape and call the emergency services. This supports our current policy and approach

Conclusion

Over the last seven years, Bristol City Council have made significant investment in fire safety in our blocks, and this approach sits within a policy framework which means we are confident that our blocks are safe. The outcomes of the independent checks are identifying areas where improvements can be made to make the blocks safer by improving the overall fire safety even further. We are also confident that our blocks and cladding systems perform well in real fire situations.

We did not receive any enquiries from our council residents following the publication of the report.

The government have yet to formally respond to the report, and these recommendations are not legislation. However, we are evaluating how these recommendations changes can be implemented, as well as appraising the cost implications, and how residents will be engaged and involved in the changes.