

Report for Information

Report to Executive
9 December 2009
Report of Head of Housing Property Services
Subject Fire Risk Management for HRA Domestic Flats

11

Purpose

To provide re assurance and make the Executive aware of Norwich City Council's obligations and requirements regarding implementing and maintaining a Fire Risk Management Policy with regards to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) domestic flats and associated communal areas in light of the recent fatalities in the tower block fire in Camberwell, London.

Recommendations

Executive are asked to note the content of this report.

Financial Consequences

The financial consequences of this report are that some remedial work will be required as a result of the risk assessments in order to ensure the council complies with its requirements under the regulations. However, it is felt there is sufficient provision within existing budgets this year for such works. Similar budget provision will be made in future years to ensure all requirements can be met.

Risk Assessment

Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 the Council, as a landlord, has a responsibility to carry out risk assessments to ensure residents' homes are safe in case of fire. Failure to have robust plans, processes and procedures in place for fire risk assessments could leave the council in breach of the legislation.

Strategic Priority and Outcome/Service Priorities

This report helps to meet the strategic priority; "Safe and healthy neighbourhoods – working in partnership with residents to create neighbourhoods where people feel secure, where the streets are clean and well maintained, where there is good quality housing and local amenities and where there are active local communities" and the service plan priority to strive for sufficient, good-quality, affordable housing, providing choice and accessibility and to provide a safe, secure and healthy environment in which residents live

Executive Member: Councillor Arthur - Housing and Adult Services

Ward: University

Contact Officers

Chris Rayner, Head of Housing Property Services
Neil Belson, Senior Project Surveyor

01603 213208
01603 213224

Background Documents

None

Report

Background

1. Until 2007 fire safety was proscriptive and controlled by the Fire Service. The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 took ownership of the risk away from the Fire Service and placed it with the duty holder (responsible person) in charge of buildings and premises. The Fire Service still enforces the order and can issue enforcement or prohibition notices.
2. The order requires fire precautions to be put in place where necessary to the extent that it is reasonable and practicable. Generally, if a particular building used to have a fire certificate issued to it and no significant material alterations have been made to it, then it is unlikely that major improvements will need to be made. However, what does need to be attended to is, the regular reassessment of risks and the remedial actions taken to lessen the risk.
3. The recent fire in the tower block in Camberwell, South London will have made everyone aware that prevention and evacuation procedures need to be re-examined to ensure the risk of similar tragedies is minimised.
4. Fire safety takes into account not just the fire engineering of a building but also its occupants' awareness and abilities, and the robustness of any policies and procedures put in place by the responsible persons.

Compliance

5. To be compliant with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 Norwich City Council must ensure the following is in place:
 - Appoint one or more competent persons to carry out preventative and protective measures (this matter is being addressed with the additional resources being made available under the Housing Improvement Plan, and until then is being covered by a Senior Project Surveyor in Housing Property Services);
 - Provide employees, residents and other interested parties with clear and relevant information regarding fire risk assessments;
 - Consider the presence of any dangerous substance and the risk this may present in the event of a fire;
 - Provide appropriate training and instruction about fire precautions in premises;
 - Ensure premises and equipment provided in connection with fire fighting, fire detection, warning and exits are covered by a suitable system of maintenance and kept in good repair.

Current Position

6. In order to ensure the council complies with the above criteria the following actions have been introduced:
- Fire risk assessments have been carried out by an independent auditor on our managed tower blocks, managed sheltered schemes and area offices. The remedial actions flagged up from these assessments are being attended to.
 - A good formal and informal relationship with Norfolk Fire Service regarding advice and information with regular joint inspections being carried out by the Fire Service and Housing Property Services.
 - The premises and scheme managers have a good awareness of the issues and deal with situations promptly, rectifying problems as they can or passing queries on to Housing Property Services.
 - Fire safety equipment is regularly serviced in accordance with requirements as part of a servicing contract.
 - A 'Fire Risk Assessment' form has been introduced for use by all Council staff who regularly visit council owned homes, such as surveyors, neighbourhood housing officers etc, to enable consistent format of surveys/inspections.
 - Letters have been sent out to all tower block residents reminding them of the procedures in the event of a fire and drawing their attention to the importance of this.
 - We are currently in the process of revisiting all tower blocks to update fire risk assessments (to be done on a yearly basis).
 - Following surveys a programme of work is being organised to ensure all fire doors in tower blocks are fully compliant.
 - A solution is being sought to make the sprinkler systems in the rubbish stores of tower blocks automatic.
 - A process is in place to ensure we are able to respond appropriately to any actions highlighted from a fire risk assessment.

Planned Actions

7. The following actions are to be implemented over the coming weeks in order to further ensure the council is fully complying with their responsibilities:
- Formally appoint the competent person(s) as referred to in paragraph 5.
 - Formalise fire risk management policy.
 - Instigate a programme of formal training in fire risk assessment to all appropriate staff (Fire Service has offered to assist the council with this for both staff and at resident meetings).

- Disseminate policies and guidance to all frontline staff, contractors and residents via staff briefings, resident meetings etc.
- Review current fire risk assessments, including necessity to change/adapt letterboxes on almost every flat in high rise blocks.
- Provide more signage relating to fire procedures to all tower blocks (in lifts, every landing, stairwells etc) above the current level.
- Reassess fire event procedures for sheltered schemes and provide Personal Evacuation & Egress Plans for sheltered residents and reassess fire event procedures for non-managed flats, including signage, escape routes etc.
- Reassess fire event procedures for the rest of the housing stock.
- Write to residents of sheltered schemes and non-managed flats restating procedures in the event of a fire and to reassure them in light of the Camberwell incident.
- Continue joint inspections with the fire service.
- Review procedures annually.

Financial Implications

8. A budget within the HRA has been identified to fund work required as a result of risk assessments. Additional signage or training may require additional resources; however these will be considered when full details are known.

Other Resources

9. The implementation of a Fire Risk Management Plan will need a nominated 'fire risk assessment officer' to co-ordinate and oversee the survey/inspection regime, collate and review information received, and help in regular reviews of Fire Risk Management Plan. This is already included in the Housing Improvement Plan.
10. It is envisaged that the Fire Risk Management Plan for Norwich City Council's domestic flats and housing blocks should dovetail with that of Asset & City Management's plan for the commercial and office buildings under Norwich City Council's control. Further work is needed to ensure this is achieved.
11. Fire risk management is not solely about the physical aspects of a building. It is also about ensuring residents, employees and contractors are aware and able to understand and contribute to fire safety.

Recommendations

Executive are asked to endorse the contents of this report.

