

Scrutiny Review Group - Fire Safety

Minutes - 29 January 2020

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Review Group - Fire Safety

Cllr Simon Bennett
Cllr Greg Brackenridge (Chair)
Cllr Alan Butt
Angela Davies
Bob Deacon
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE

Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Mark Taylor (Deputy Chief Executive – City of Wolverhampton Council)
Will Humphries (Temporary Service Manager – Private Sector Housing)
Jagtar Singh (Programme Manager)
Julia Nock (Head of Assets)
Julie Bell-Barker (Head of Project and Works)
Neal Shore (Building Compliance Safety Manager)

Witnesses

Shaun Aldis (Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes)
Kevin Manning (Assistant Director Property – Wolverhampton Homes)
Simon Bamfield (Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment)
Mia Temple (West Midlands Fire Service)
X 2 Representatives – West Midlands Fire Service

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for Absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Phil Bateman MBE, Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman and Mr Barry Appleby.

- 2 **Declarations of Interest**
There were no declarations of interest.

3 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2019 were approved as a correct record.

There were no matters arising.

4 **Update from the Chair**

The Chair of the Panel remarked that he saw Wolverhampton as one of the leading authorities in England on Fire Safety. In his role as Chair of the West Midlands Fire Authority he had facilitated a regional Fire Safety Conference. Leaders, Cabinet Members and Senior Officers from Council's across the West Midlands had been invited to the meeting. The Chair had shared with the conference attendees some of the work that had been carried out in Wolverhampton. They had also received a presentation from a Professor of Toxicology and presentations from other fire safety experts. He was very pleased how the conference had gone. Kate Martin, the Director of Housing and City Assets had attended on behalf of the Senior Management Team of City of Wolverhampton Council. Most authorities were represented by either their Leader or a Cabinet Member.

The Chair of the Panel stated as a positive outcome from the Conference, there had been many conversations across the region and they were looking to emulate Wolverhampton. Coventry City Council had started to fit sprinklers into their high rise blocks, Birmingham had already committed and Dudley were very keen to do so. He had spoken to the Cabinet Member for Walsall and Sandwell who also seemed very keen. Solihull had the lowest number of high rises in the region. He was speaking regularly to their leading member on the Fire Authority to bring them on board. The work of City of Wolverhampton Council had clearly had a regional impact.

The Chair of the Panel stated that he had recently attended a national Local Government Association Fire Commission - Fire Services Management Committee meeting in London. They had been lobbying intensively on a national level. It seemed like there was some movement by Government, one of the key things was placing restrictions on buildings 11m or above.

5 **Grenfell Tower Inquiry - Phase 1 Report**

The Chair remarked that Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Report had been published and the Executive Summary of the report had been included within the agenda pack. He believed that the inquiry should have first looked at the time before the fire, rather than starting first with investigating the night of the fire. Had the remits of Phases 1 and 2 been reversed, it would have fed into the new legislation which was coming out as a consequence of the Hackitt review. The Fire Safety Scrutiny Review Group needed to see the newly awaited legislation before making its final recommendations to the Council's Cabinet Committee.

The Joint Competent Authority recommended by the Hackitt review would be led by the HSE (Health and Safety Executive). He could assure the Panel that the Fire Service were addressing the issues raised in the Phase 1 Grenfell Tower Inquiry Report. He had been speaking regularly to the West Midlands Fire Service Chief Officer and the Scrutiny Officer to the Panel had also raised a matter directly with them regarding EDBA (Extended Duration Breathing Apparatus).

The Chair raised the issue of Premises Boxes, which was a recommendation from the Phase 1 report. This was a box with accurate up to date information on the building, residents and contingency plans. The report also recommended that the Fire Service should have a hard copy and an electronic copy of the plans of the building. He asked the representatives from Wolverhampton Homes, how they would respond to the Phase 1 report recommendation on Premises Boxes. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment of Wolverhampton Homes responded that they were trying to initiate regional discussions with the Fire Service and Landlords about whether premises boxes were the best way to respond. Experience and reviews of premises boxes in the past had shown they were a challenge. There were issues such as keeping the information up to date and data security issues for residents. There was clearly a willingness and desire to share information with the Fire Service, it was ensuring that the format and structure met the appropriate requirements of the Fire Service.

The representative from the West Midlands Fire Service remarked that in the interim it was important to utilise the site-specific risk inspections. They asked to have a meeting with Wolverhampton Homes to discuss some of the generic information that would be helpful to them and some more of the detailed information about vulnerable residents. The Assistant Director for Property at Wolverhampton Homes responded that he would welcome the dialogue with the West Midlands Fire Service. He thought ongoing electronic access to information relating to fire safety was far more important than a premises box. The Chair commented that this was clearly an issues which needed to be addressed very carefully.

The Chair commented that the Phase 1 Report had highlighted issues with fire doors and door closing mechanisms. He asked for Wolverhampton Homes to comment on this issue in relation to the homes they managed. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment of Wolverhampton Homes responded that all high-rise blocks, door closing mechanisms were checked daily. After the Grenfell tragedy there had been inspections on all the fire doors in the high-rise blocks to check if they were fit for purpose and to replace any that were found to be defective. There was a rolling programme of improvements, which they were part way through, that was replacing fire protection measures.

The Chair commented that the Phase 1 report had highlighted the difficulty in obtaining a Structural Engineer on the evening of the tragedy. The Assistant Director for Property at Wolverhampton Homes stated that Wolverhampton Homes had an SLA (Service Level Agreement) with the Council which allowed 24/7 access to Structural Engineering services. Wolverhampton Homes themselves did not have access to a Structural Engineer.

The Chair asked how Wolverhampton Homes would relay information relating to vulnerable residents to the Fire Service, during an emergency situation in high rise accommodation. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment responded that they held information in their housing management system on the health of residents. The weakness was that this was information which residents had declared and not necessarily an accurate representation of all the residents. The information was on a shared drive and could be brought up on iPads and similar devices for the Wolverhampton Homes staff attending an incident. The Assistant Director for Property commented that the benefit of electronic information was the

ability to update it daily if required, whereas the information in premises box was harder to keep up to date.

A Member of the Panel asked about the arrangements for leaseholders and their tenants. In response, the Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment remarked that it was a valid point. The information was not held mandatory, they were reliant on managing agents or tenants and leaseholders confirming who was living in the properties. Unless, the proposed legislation put a greater emphasis on them providing the overriding landlord with the information, it was a weakness as they could not do a complete audit at any point in time. A representative from the Fire Service commented that they did offer safe and well visits.

A Member of the Panel asked if all leaseholders knew that systems existed containing information on residents. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment commented that there was a lot which needed to be done moving forward to refresh how they communicated with the residents of all high rise buildings and in particular on what happened in the event of an emergency. It was important to ensure that leaseholders were fully informed. The Assistant Director for Property commented that the concern was when leaseholders sub-let, this was where there could be some gaps in the information. He did however think the number was relatively low.

The Chair commented that during the recent regional conference hosted by the West Midlands Fire Service, the idea has arisen that people who had medical waste collected by the Council could be referred for a safe and well visit due to their perceived vulnerability. There was the obvious GDPR to overcome but the concept was sound.

The Chair remarked that one of the recommendations in the Phase 1 report was regarding an evacuation signal in high rise blocks. If there was a need for an immediate evacuation, the intention would be for the fire service to sound the signal. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment commented that people often ignored a sounder. To achieve what Moore-Bick was asking, would require new infrastructure and re-wiring in the high-rise blocks. This would require a significant capital outlay and so they were therefore waiting to see what any new legislation would prescribe. There were potential opportunities down the line, as they were looking at introducing fibre-broadband to certain blocks.

The Chair commented that the risk of a full evacuation in the tower blocks managed by Wolverhampton Homes was low due to the mitigating work Wolverhampton Homes had carried out and were doing in the future. If it was in the legislation, then it was important for the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group to alert the Our Council Scrutiny Panel, who it was intended would scrutinise fire safety in the future.

The Chair remarked that floor numbers on all high-rise blocks should be clearly marked as recommended in the Phase 1 Report. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment stated that this work had been completed in all the high-rise blocks managed by Wolverhampton Homes. The Chair asked the Temporary Service Manager for Private Sector Housing if the floor numbers were clearly visible for all the private high-rise blocks in Wolverhampton. He responded that he would address the issue. A representative from the Fire Service stated that they were hoping to carry out live exercises in the near future and preferably with residents

involved. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment commented that they were happy to assist the Fire Service and would work with them on the specific details. The Assistant Director for Property commented that Wolverhampton Homes had assisted with a Fire Service exercise at Pennwood Court, but this hadn't gone as far as a full evacuation of the residents.

The Panel asked about whether more CCTV should be installed in the high-rise blocks managed by Wolverhampton Homes. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment responded that in the main CCTV was on the ground floor levels, in the lifts and on the entrances to the building. There were not cameras on every single floor, but it seemed sufficient to manage safety at the current time. The CCTV was managed 24 hours a day at the control centre, he extended an invitation to the Fire Service to see the control centre, if they so desired.

A Member of the Panel commented that the cause of the fire in the entrance to the block he lived in, had not been determined due to a blind spot in the CCTV coverage. He asked if the blind spots had been eradicated. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment responded that additional cameras had been mounted to rectify the problem of the blind spot following the incident. As part of the programme of works in the tower blocks, there was a review of camera locations and they were taking the opportunity to update the signals to digital rather than analogue to ensure better quality.

The Chairman asked the Fire Service representatives their overall opinion of communication between the Service, the Council, Wolverhampton Homes and the Tenant Management Organisation's (TMOs). In response, the representatives from the Fire Service commented that the relationships were on the whole positive. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment of Wolverhampton Homes commented that relationships were good. He had provided reassurance to a number of groups associated with tenants since the Grenfell Tower tragedy. There was some more work to be done at grassroots level to ensure a clear path for concerns of tenants.

The Wolverhampton Homes Tenant's Association representative on the Panel, commented that formal communication was very good. Where he had his doubts was the proportion of residents this communication reached. He was aware of the Fire Service's availability to be available at community events, he wondered whether it needed to happen more often and whether clearer targets were required. The Fire Service representatives offered to have a meeting with him so he could fully understand their offer and to consider the strategy of engagement with the community. The Chair commented on the importance of preventative work by the Fire Service and how he saw this as the way forward.

A Panel Member enquired about properties where there was a shop underneath. The Fire Service representatives commented that this was a particular area of focus for them. They carried out, "Safe and Strong" visits to businesses. They had an extensive range of businesses they were planning to visit. The Panel Member commented that she had particular concerns in one area, where she thought some shops were really acting as a factory. The Fire Service representatives offered to provide the Panel Member with the details of their referral inbox. The Assistant Director for Property of Wolverhampton Homes commented that it was a valid point raised by the Councillor. Wolverhampton Homes also had some shops in their

property portfolio, some which had flats above them. It was an area which they were paying particular attention to. The Fire Service commented they were always happy to receive information and asked for the Panel Members help in spreading the message that they were there to help and not to be feared.

6 **Full List of Phase 2 Grenfell Tower Inquiry Issues**

The Panel discussed the full list of Phase 2 Grenfell Tower Inquiry issues. The Head of Stock Investment and Commercial Services at Wolverhampton Homes remarked that one of the biggest challenges for the Phase 2 Inquiry was addressing how flammable materials, namely ACM cladding, came to be attached to the building. He was confident that Wolverhampton Homes did not manage any tower blocks with flammable materials on the outside of buildings. They were working hard to ensure all refurbishment work was correctly installed.

The Assistant Director for Property commented that building control legislation would change and most likely over the coming months. This would give them a better idea of any changes that were required and they would be trying to stay ahead of the legislation.

The Chair commented on the importance of communication with residents which was one of the areas Phase 2 would be addressing.

7 **Private Tower Blocks in Wolverhampton**

The Programme Manager gave a short presentation on the latest information relating to the private tower blocks in Wolverhampton. In May 2018 the MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) had directed Local Authorities to use their Housing Act Powers to address any issues in the area, predominately focusing on ACM cladding, but there were other stipulations relating to addressing other fire safety hazards. The scope of the work related to buildings of 18 metres and above. There were 7 private housing blocks at 18m or above. An additional building had just been identified as coming into scope, which was the Market Square apartments located a short distance from the Civic Centre.

The Programme Manager commented that the Liberty Heights Blocks, the three student accommodation blocks off the Wednesfield Road, had recently changed ownership and had been purchased by a large national organisation called Unite. He had so far had one conversation with them. A fire safety inspection report had been issued in August 2019. The Property Services Team of the Freeholder had carried out a site visit to consider the inspection findings and was awaiting the action plan for carrying out remedial work. Due to the change in ownership the remedial work had not been completed as quickly as he would have liked.

The Programme Manager with reference to the Studios in Birch Street advised that a fire safety inspection report had been issued in April 2019. The Business Manager had been advised that all the remedial work had been carried out. They would be arranging a follow up visit to check all the required work had been completed to a high standard.

The Programme Manager remarked that Hampton View on Woden Road, whilst owned by the Council, was on long-term lease to Sanctuary Housing. They were in the process of carrying out extensive refurbishment works which had included the

replacement of fire doors. The installation of a sprinkler system was planned. A review of the works carried out to date would occur in the Spring.

The Programme Manager with reference to St. Cecelia's in Heath Town remarked that the fire safety report issued in December 2018 had identified a number of issues. The Temporary Service Manager for Private Sector Housing added that St. Cecelia's had been identified as one of the highest risks due to the age of the building, its nature of ownership and problems discovered following inspections by the Fire Service. The Council had been liaising closely with West Midlands Fire Service to plan remedial works, which had included meetings with the managing agent. The Council had also commissioned specialist legal guidance to identify liability for costs for fire safety works between the building freeholder, leaseholders and the Right to Manage Company. The remedial works would commence soon.

The Programme Manager commented that the Fire Service and officials from the Council had visited the Market Square Apartments on the 28 January 2020 to carry out an initial fire safety audit. He was awaiting the publication of the initial inspection report. He concluded the presentation by commenting that the Council needed to be as pro-active as it could be in relation to fire safety matters in preparation for the new legislation being introduced.

The Chair stated that he was very pleased to hear of the continuing good work in relation to fire safety in the private sector.

A representative from the Fire Service commented that there were buildings which they had issues with, and they wanted to familiarise themselves with all of them. They asked if some thought could be given as to how best this could be facilitated working with the Council and the private sector.

8 **Wolverhampton Homes / WV Living Update on Projects**

The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment gave an update on the Wolverhampton Homes projects which related to fire safety. In relation to the Wolverhampton Homes Tower Infrastructure Programme they were now in Phase 2 which involved the replacement of fire doors, replacement of all the incoming services, improving emergency lighting and escape signage, upgrading smoke ventilation and dealing with compartmentalisation issues. In addition to this programme they were also retro fitting sprinkler systems in all the tower blocks they managed, which had been designed in accordance with the British Standard. The sprinklers would cover all the internal areas of the dwellings and the principle communal areas.

The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment commented that prior to the Grenfell tragedy there was only one residential tower block which had sprinklers fitted in England. So as a consequence, there were not many companies which had experience in this area, which made it a challenging experience.

The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment stated that they had completed the tower infrastructure works at Chetton Green and were on site at Boscobel. The works at Lakefields would be starting very shortly, followed by Merry Hill, Graiseley, Heath Town, Vauxhalls and then the rest of the estates. He detailed some of the extensive work that was taking place at Boscobel, which included the installation of a sprinkler system.

A Member of the Group asked if there was a scheduled date to fit sprinklers at Chetton Green. The Head of Commercial Services and Stock Investment responded that there was a scheduled date and he would give the exact details following the meeting.

A Member of the Group asked about water pressure at the Merry Hill Tower Block, as he had received information that the water supplier was turning down the pressure. The Assistant Director for Property responded there were two issues, the pressure for domestic water, which had meant they were having to install different pumps to rectify the issue. As a separate matter there was also the water pressure for the sprinkler system, where additional pumps would be required.

The Chair and Members of the Group thanked Wolverhampton Homes for the works they were undertaking. There was particular praise for the installation of sprinklers to date which were very inconspicuous and the attention to detail in using appropriate safe building materials for refurbishment works.

The Chief Operating Officer gave an update on WV Living projects. Fire suppression systems had been fitted in a range of properties built by WV Living. There were 8 schemes where sprinklers had been applied. There were two very large schemes where they were currently assessing the fire suppression options. These were the former Northcote High School site which would have 196 units and the site of the former Wednesfield High School which would have 266 units. The idea was to fit sprinklers or misting systems to these two housing development projects. The Northcote site was currently going through the planning approval process, whereas the Wednesfield former High School development had just commenced on site. Costs of designing and installing the fire suppression systems was obviously a factor in their decision making.

The Deputy Managing Director stated that the Marches contract had already been let after the decision had been made to install sprinklers, which had added a further complication. As a consequence they were having to go back to the contractor Willmott Dixon. He did however wish to assure the Group that they were doing all they could to find a good solution.

The Chair commented that he hoped the contractor would be reasonable and wish to maintain good relations with the Council. He was aware that Willmott Dixon did have experience in sprinkler installation. He believed safety was the most important factor to consider. The Hackitt review had made it clear that fire safety should be taken seriously and not at the expense of reducing costs.

9

Fire Safety at Schools

The Buildings and Safety Compliance Manager provided the Group with an update on fire safety at schools. The Council commissioned fire risk assessments for all schools, irrespective of whether they commissioned their own. The purpose was to ensure constant and consistent high quality fire risk assessments to enable the Council to identify issues. They provided support to schools when the fire risk assessments were received, which included advising on management arrangements. They did support schools in implementing the range of recommendations arising from the assessments. Representatives from the Fire Service had a current programme, where many schools were being visited.

The Buildings and Safety Compliance Manager commented that schools had been asked to provide proof that they were undertaking the regular fire assessment checks, which were needed to keep schools safe. He was positively surprised by the majority of schools he had visited with their focus on fire safety. They had regular fire evacuation drills and the vast majority of schools in Wolverhampton were safe buildings. The new school buildings were the safest, as they had multiple entrances at ground floor level, in compliance with regulations. They were working closely with schools to achieve 100% compliance of proof of fire assessment checks.

The Buildings and Safety Compliance Manager remarked that following the fire at the Cube in Bolton, a review had been carried out with community schools and academies assessing whether any schools had any HPL (High Pressure Laminate Cladding). They had visited schools to establish its presence and also whether it would impact on the school's fire safety arrangements. Where HPL cladding had been found the school had been given advice on how to adapt their fire safety arrangements to mitigate for the presence of HPL cladding.

The Buildings and Safety Compliance Manager with reference to sprinklers, commented that new schools and major refurbishment works commissioned by the Council were incorporating sprinklers, following the BB100 recommended standard. In addition, where the school was being funded by the Department for Education, even though they could not directly control whether sprinklers were installed, they were making strong recommendations that sprinklers be incorporated. Schools were frequently a focus for arson and he was acutely aware of the immense disruption that a school being burnt down would cause to parents and children.

A Member of the Group asked what the current compliance rate was for schools returning proof of fire safety procedures. The Buildings and Safety Compliance Manager responded that it was about 75% for community schools. They were going to roll out training for the schools that weren't responding. A standard item was also going to be added to the quarterly Head Teachers Conferences. This would enable them to determine how best to deliver the training support package. Face to face training would be delivered to the schools that requested support.

Members of the Group thanked the Officers for the work that they had undertaken to help improve fire safety at schools within Wolverhampton.

10 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

Resolved: That in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the item on the i10 as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information on the grounds shown below]

[By virtue of paragraph 3, information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended].

11 **i10 Update**

There was a confidential discussion about the i10 building.