

Briefing Note

Title: Fire Safety Scrutiny Group

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Date: 10 March 2020

Intended Audience: Internal Partner organisation Public Confidential

Recommendations

It is recommended that, having consulted with the Chair of the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group, the Scrutiny Board approve that:

1. The Fire Safety Scrutiny Group work is drawn to a close after one further meeting once new government legislation or guidance on buildings is issued and to bring any outstanding areas of work together.
2. The Our Council Scrutiny Panel assume ongoing oversight of fire safety.
3. The Our Council Scrutiny Panel oversee the implementation of the approved recommendations arising from the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group.
4. When the Our Council Scrutiny Panel receive updates on fire safety, the Council's lead member on the West Midlands Fire Authority is invited to participate in these meetings and discussions.

Origins of the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group

At the meeting of the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel held on 29 June 2017 a recommendation was made that the Scrutiny Board consider whether a review should be undertaken on fire safety in tower blocks, following the Grenfell tragedy. At the meeting of the Scrutiny Board held on 4 July 2017, the Board considered the recommendation and resolved that a scoping exercise be undertaken to assess how the Council had responded to the issues arising from the Grenfell Tower fire. This meant the remit of the group was considerably larger than just reviewing the tower blocks within the City.

Membership

The current membership of the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group is as follows:

- Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
- Cllr Simon Bennett
- Cllr Alan Butt
- Cllr Greg Brackenridge (Chair)
- Cllr Susan Roberts MBE
- Cllr Paul Singh
- Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
- Board of Wolverhampton Homes (Chair – Angela Davies)
- The Wolverhampton Tenants' Association (Bob Deacon)
- Two representatives from disability groups (Karen Ryder and Barry Appleby)

Officers from the Council have been actively involved in the meetings.

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Meetings of the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group

The group has met eight times. Its first meeting was held on 1 August 2017 and there have been subsequent meetings held on 19 September 2017, 31 October 2017, 17 November 2017, 21 June 2018, 6 February 2019, 17 July 2019 and 29 January 2020.

A report from the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group was received by Cabinet (Resources) Panel on 20 March 2018. This report contained 26 recommendations. The Executive gave a response to these recommendations which was included as an appendix to the scrutiny review report. The vast majority of the recommendations were accepted outright; a few were accepted with certain caveats such as "await outcomes of Hackett and Moore-Bick Inquiries." None of the recommendations were rejected.

At its meeting in November 2017, the Fire Safety Group had resolved only to re-convene when there was a matter of national importance, such as the publication of an inquiry review or when it was felt there was a particular need due to local developments.

A meeting was held in June 2018 due to the publication of the Hackett Review Final Report (essentially a review of current building regulations) and to see how the recommendations of the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group were progressing.

A further meeting was called in February 2019, the Chair called the meeting because he wanted to receive information relating to fire safety in the following areas:

- Wolverhampton Homes
- Feedback from the Chair's presentations to Tenant Management Organisations
- The Safer High Rise Programme
- WV Living
- Regeneration Projects (particularly Civic Halls, i9 and Westside)
- i10 (particular concern about Grenfell style cladding on the building and information in the independent report commissioned on the building)
- School Engagement

The group raised a number of concerns at its meeting in February 2019. Members were particularly concerned that sprinklers were not part of the design for the refurbishment of the Civic Halls. They also recommended that sprinklers should form part of new builds in WV Living projects. WV Living and Wolverhampton Homes have now made a commitment to the installation of sprinklers where viable on new builds; sprinklers were also being considered for the Civic Halls. The group was keen to ensure that fire safety be of paramount importance in regeneration projects and that sprinklers should be the default option, with good reasons given if they are not installed, with the highest rated fire-retardant materials being used in refurbishment and new builds.

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Outcomes and moving forward

The Fire Safety Scrutiny Group has been effective in helping to achieve positive outcomes for the people of Wolverhampton. The Chair of the Group has also advised that Wolverhampton has been praised at a national level for acting as a beacon authority on fire safety, with regional bodies and the national Labour Group taking an interest in its work.

It is unusual for a scrutiny review group to continue beyond the Cabinet consideration of its recommendations. It is the role of the Scrutiny Board, rather than the original review group, to monitor implementation of the recommendations. However, many of the key issues at the heart of the review remain at the forefront of public thinking and debate, whilst the outcomes from the Grenfell Inquiry phase 2 are awaited. There will inevitably be further fire safety issues for the Council to consider over the next couple of years.

It is therefore recommended that the work of the Fire Safety Scrutiny Group is closed down following one final meeting and that revised ongoing governance arrangements are put in place to provide robust fire safety oversight and assurance to the Council and Councillors.

Proposed governance

At an employee level, operational oversight and compliance assurance would be exercised by the existing Fire Safety Compliance Group. This, in turn, reports to the existing Strategic Health Safety and Wellbeing Board, chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive.

At a Councillor level, it is proposed that business as usual oversight of fire safety would transfer to the Our Council Scrutiny Panel for both the residential (managed in the main by Wolverhampton Homes and/or tenant management organisations) and education/commercial/community property portfolios. This will maintain accountability, reflect Regulator of Social Housing/Ombudsman guidance and continue to support the City's response to the National Building Safety Programme. In addition, reporting to Wolverhampton Homes Board further supports oversight and assurance.

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