

19 July 2017

Grenfell Tower

Purpose

For discussion.

Summary

This paper provides information on the work that central and local government have been doing following the tragic Grenfell Tower Fire to ensure that buildings are safe.

Recommendations

That the Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport (EEHT) Board is asked to:

1. Consider and comment on the actions that have been taken nationally and locally to identify and address fire safety issues in buildings over 18 metres following the Grenfell Tower Fire.
2. Consider the role of the EEHT Board in lobbying for an urgent review of the Building Regulations' guidance.
3. Consider how best to use a meeting and potential working group drawn from the Fire Services Management Committee, Safer Stronger Communities Board, EEHT and the National Fire Chiefs Council.

Action

Officers to proceed as directed.

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Background

1. In the early hours of the morning of 14 June a fire broke out at Grenfell Tower in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Although firefighters from London Fire Brigade (LFB) were at the tower block within minutes of the alarm being sounded, the fire rapidly spread throughout the tower block. At the time of writing there are around 80 people presumed dead.

Investigations and Inquiries

2. The cause of the fire and the reason it spread so quickly through the tower block are now the subject of an investigation by LFB and a criminal investigation by the Metropolitan Police. Media reports have focused on the possibility that the external cladding applied to the building caused the fire to spread so rapidly, but there is currently no definitive explanation and will not be until LFB concludes its investigation, which could take a number of weeks given the scale of the damage to the building.
3. On 15 June the Prime Minister announced that there would be a Public Inquiry into the Grenfell Tower Fire. The Inquiry will be chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Bick. A short consultation on the terms of reference for the Inquiry has been launched. However, in general it is expected that the Grenfell Tower Inquiry will examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower, its spread to the whole of the building, and its effect on residents, including: the design, construction and modification of the building; the role of relevant public authorities and contractors; the adequacy and enforcement of relevant regulations; the arrangements in place locally for handling emergencies; and the handling of concerns previously expressed by local residents.

Implications for other buildings with a floor over 18 metres

4. Given public concerns about the safety of other tower blocks, councils have been reviewing fire safety assessments, relevant documentation relating to any refurbishments work, taking the advice of their fire and rescue services, and contacting residents to reassure them.
5. The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has also surveyed councils to identify the number of tower blocks that may be at risk, while the LGA has written to council leaders and chief executives about the steps being taken by the sector to reassure residents and themselves that a similar fire could not occur in their own tower blocks.
6. The possible involvement of cladding in the spread of the fire at Grenfell Tower has led to a series of actions to test the cladding on other buildings with a floor over 18 metres. On the 18 June DCLG wrote to all stock holding councils and registered social landlords outlining the arrangements it has put in place to enable aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding on buildings with a floor over 18 metres to be tested and its type identified. Of those tested to date all have been found to be of type ACM polyethylene

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(PE) and ACM fire retardant polyethylene (FR). Using this information councils have been engaging with their local fire and rescue service to review fire safety in relevant blocks and to seek advice on the requirement for additional fire safety measures.

7. Following representation from the Local Government Association and others and the advice of the Independent Expert Panel on Safety, established by DCLG, further testing will now be conducted to help landlords to ensure the safety of their buildings. These large scale tests aim to establish how different types of Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) panels in combination with different types of insulation behave in a fire.

Housing and planning implications

8. The immediate housing priority has been to ensure that Grenfell Tower residents and other local residents that have lost their home as a result of the fire receive the support they need and are suitably rehoused. This work has been led by the Grenfell Tower Response Team.
9. The evacuation by Camden Council of the residents in four blocks of flats on the Chalcot Estate on the advice of the London Fire Brigade has presented short term, but none the less significant, challenges for residents and the council in obtaining suitable temporary accommodation.
10. The medium term implications remain unclear and will depend on the outcomes of the investigations, the Public Inquiry and further testing of cladding systems. However, in general terms the terrible events at Grenfell Tower have put safety and the quality and maintenance of housing at the top of the agenda. Councils facing remedial work and any tighter requirements will need financial support from Government.
11. At the same time councils must continue to push for reforms that would enable them to contribute to ensuring there is good quality and safe housing to rent and own in their areas. The Housing White Paper, published prior to the recent election evidenced the housing crisis. Councils can play an important role in increasing supply, but to do so they require the Government to: remove of the housing borrowing cap; allow councils to keep 100 per cent of the receipts from Right to Buy sales; reverse the one per cent reduction in social rent and provide rent certainty going forward.
12. The LGA has been concerned for some time about the implications of permitted development rights allowing offices to be converted to residential units without the need for planning permission. From a housing supply perspective the concern has been an increase in housing that did not meet identified housing need and a reduction in the provision of affordable housing. However following the Grenfell Tower Fire, it will be important to understand how fire safety standards are enforced in this system and how councils and the fire and rescue service can gather information on the change in use of a building.

Building regulations and guidance

13. The Public Inquiry will need to determine the implications of the Grenfell Tower Fire for the building regulations and guidance. However, we know from the 2009 Lakanal House fire Inquest, which reported in 2013, that the Coroner considered that Approved

Document B “is a most difficult document to use”. The Coroner recommended that it be reviewed to ensure that it “provides clear guidance in relation to Regulation B4 of the Building Regulations, with particular regard to the spread of fire over the external envelope of the building”.¹ The response by Rt Hon Eric Pickles the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government stated that a review would be complete by 2016/17.² However, to date new guidance has not been published. The Building Regulations’ guidance must now be reviewed urgently.

Additional fire safety measures including fire suppression systems

14. As stated, councils have been working with local fire and rescue services to assess the need for additional fire safety measures in tall blocks. A number of councils have already taken the decision to enhance fire safety measures including:
 - 14.1. **Croydon:** work will start this October on installing fire sprinklers for every resident in the council’s 25 tallest tower blocks. The sprinklers will go into individual flats or communal areas. Sprinklers will also be installed for residents of a sheltered accommodation block in Addiscombe. Councillor Alison Butler, deputy leader and cabinet member for homes, regeneration and planning said that “from setting up our fire safety board to installing sprinklers in 25 tower blocks by next spring, this council is doing all it can to limit future fire risk in Croydon by responding robustly to the Grenfell Tower tragedy.”
 - 14.2. **Brent:** £10 million pounds has been allocated for a range of fire safety improvements, such as sprinklers, smoke detectors and fire alarms, is set to be rolled out in high-rise tower blocks. Muhammed Butt, leader of Brent Council “Grenfell changed everything. When it comes to fire safety, ‘good enough’ is no longer good enough.”
 - 14.3. **Nottingham:** as an added fire measure sprinkler systems are to be installed in the corridor and communal areas of 13 Nottingham City Council-owned tower blocks. Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Heritage, Cllr Jane Urquhart, said: “I have written to Theresa May to explain that as part of an immediate review of our 13 high rise blocks, we will be installing sprinklers and improved intercom systems, and seeking financial support from the Government for this”.
15. The list above is representative rather than exhaustive. However it gives an indication of the scale of the response and the need to ensure that there are sufficient resources available to meet future expectations from residents.

LGA Work

16. The LGA has been working to support councils and fire and rescue authorities in the wake of the fire to ensure that our member councils are equipped with the information they need to act swiftly, including seconding staff in to DCLG to provide direct support to councils as part of the national team dealing with the aftermath of the tragedy.

¹ <https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ec-letter-to-DCLG-pursuant-to-rule43-28March2013.pdf>

² <https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ec-letter-from-rt-hon-eric-pickles-mp-20May2013.pdf>

17. The LGA has provided regular communications with Chief Executives, Chief Fire Officers and council leaders and created a Frequently Asked Questions page on our website (based on questions from councils) with links to relevant guidance, DCLG information and factual information about what we know so far. This is being regularly updated and can be found on the LGA's website: www.local.gov.uk/grenfell-tower-frequently-asked-questions-local-authorities
18. The LGA has also been active in the media, including press releases and Lord Porter, the LGA's Chairman, appearing on a number of media channels. LGA media releases have already generated 66 media stories.

Lobbying priorities

19. In summary, the LGA has identified three key and urgent lobbying priorities for our work going forward. These are that:
- 19.1. National action now needs to focus on what needs to happen to make buildings safe, and move away from testing one tiny part of the system. This should cover all landlords not just the handful of councils with relevant stock and those with Registered Social Landlords (RSL) with Aluminum Composite Material (ACM) cladding in their area. Any future work needs to be well coordinated and prioritise those buildings at highest risk.
 - 19.2. Building regulations must be reviewed urgently to make sure they are much clearer on what can and cannot be used on the outside of buildings, covering whole systems not just the external panels. That review should be independently led and involve local government closely, as well as those involved in practical application of the regulations to make sure they are clear and can be properly implemented.
 - 19.3. Government needs to agree to find the necessary resources for any required changes, both for remedial work and for any new tighter requirements.
20. As further findings emerge from the investigation at Grenfell Tower, the LGA will consider how these can be best taken forward.

Implications for Wales

21. The issues set out in this document are being addressed by the devolved administration and local authorities in Wales.

Next steps

22. Members are asked to:

- 22.1. Consider and comment on the actions that have been taken nationally and locally to identify and address fire safety issues in buildings over 18 metres following the Grenfell Tower Fire.
- 22.2. Consider the role of the EEHT board in lobbying for an urgent review of the Building Regulations' guidance.
- 22.3. At a meeting of the Fire Service Management Committee it was proposed that a meeting between the FSMC, the Safer and Stronger Communities Board, the Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board and the National Fire Chiefs Council should take place to consider a range of issues including looking at fire suppression methods including sprinklers. Arrangements for this meeting are in progress. Members are asked to consider how best to use this meeting and a potential working group drawn from the Fire Services Management Committee, Safer Stronger Communities Board, EEHT and the National Fire Chiefs Council.