

Lakanal House Fire

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report provides information of the 3 July 2009 Lakanal House Fire, which resulted in the tragic death of 6 people. It also sets out the recommendations from the Coroner, Frances Kirkham, at the end of the inquest which began on 14 January 2013 and ended on 28 March 2013.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the issues raised in this report, discuss the wider implications and how FSMC can support the dissemination of best practice.

Action

Officers will take action as directed.

Contact officer: Eamon Lally
Position: Senior Advisor
Phone no: 020 7664 3132
E-mail: eamon.lally@local.gov.uk

Lakanal House Fire

Background

1. Lakanal house is a 14 story residential block, which has 98 maisonette flats, all spread over 2 floors. Lakanal House is in Camberwell, in the London Borough of Southwark.
2. The Lakanal House fire occurred on the afternoon of 3 July 2009. The fire began in a bedroom within flat number 65 on the west side of the 9th floor of the building. The fire spread quickly within flat 65 and then on to other flats in the building. The fire took hold in flat 79, where a young woman, Catherine Hickman, was living. She died from the effects of the fire. The fire also spread to flat 81 where five people died from the effects of the fire: Dayana Francisquini, Thais Francisquini, Felipe Francisquini, Helen Udoaka and Michelle Udoaka.
3. The inquest on the six deaths was declared open on 15 July 2009. The inquest could not be concluded until the Crown Prosecution had completed its review of the case papers which it did in May 2012. The inquest hearing took place between 14 January 2013 and 28 March 2013.
4. At the end of the inquest the Jury brought in narrative verdicts in respect of each of the deceased. Subsequently the Coroner set out recommendations in Rule 43 letters to London Borough of Southwark, London Fire Brigade, and the Department of Communities and Local Government. The Rule 43 letters are contained in **Appendices A to C**.
5. The Rule 43 letters acknowledged that a substantial amount has already been done by the London Fire Brigade and the London Borough of Southwark to address issues that emerged from investigations of the fire and the inquest. Recipients of Rule 43 letters have 56 days in which to respond.

Overview of the Narrative Verdicts

6. The proceedings and evidence at an inquest are directed solely to ascertaining who the deceased was and how, when and where the deceased came by his or her death. Neither the coroner nor the jury can express any opinion on any other matters (Coroners Rules 1984, Rule 36).
7. A narrative verdict was provided for each of the deceased. The issues referred to in the narrative verdicts were:
 - 7.1. Serious failures of compartmentation.
 - 7.2. Missed opportunities to assess the level of fire protection at Lakanal house.
 - 7.3. No fire risk assessment had taken place at Lakanal House.

7.4. A lack of knowledge of the layout and location of the maisonettes by those in attendance.

7.5. The spread of the fire down to lower floors, a unique incident which had not been witnessed before across the fire sector.

The Coroner's recommendations and responses

8. The Coroner set out recommendations in Rule 43 letters to London Borough of Southwark, London Fire Brigade, and the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Recommendations to London Borough of Southwark and London Fire Brigade

9. The recommendations to LFB and the London Borough of Southwark are specific to those bodies, but will be of value to other Fire and Rescue Authorities and other local authorities.
10. The coroner has acknowledged the significant amount of work undertaken by both organisations since the 2009 fire.
11. London Borough of Southwark and London Fire Brigade have responded to the Rule 43 letters with details of the actions that they will be taking. The responses are attached as **Appendices D and E**.
12. There is concern that the current legal framework does not allow for the immediate implementation of some of the recommendations. In particular current law restricts councils to carrying out inspections of tenanted properties, preventing them from accessing leaseholder properties without the owner's permission. This access issue also affects the council's ability to carry out retrofitting of sprinklers in all individual properties. Southwark Council has written to DCLG on this issue.

Recommendations to DCLG

13. The recommendations sent to DCLG covered consolidating national guidance in relation to advice to be given to high rise residents and reviewing guidance for tackling high rise fires in light of the unusual fire and smoke spread. The Coroner has also suggested that DCLG give consideration to requiring responsible persons for premises to provide information on or near to the premises which is tailored to the requirements of the fire and rescue service. Further, the Coroner asked DCLG to encourage providers of housing in high rise residential premises containing multiple domestic premises to consider retrofitting of sprinkler systems.
14. In its response (see **Appendix F**) DCLG has confirmed that it is reviewing Generic Risk Assessment guidance on High Rise Firefighting. DCLG has also stated that the reviewed

Item 2

guidance will “also include advice to Incident Commanders to inform decisions on evacuation should it become clear during an incident that the stay put principle is no longer tenable”.

15. Following the Rule 43 letters, the LGA sought assurance from relevant stakeholders that the guidance produced in 2011 *Fire Safety in Purpose built Blocks of Flats* remains robust. The feedback indicates a high level of confidence in the guidance, which can be found on the LGA and DCLG websites http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/publications/-/journal_content/56/10171/3369777/PUBLICATION-TEMPLATE .
16. DCLG has rejected the notion of legislating to mandate the provision of premises information boxes.
17. Prompted by the comments of the Coroner in the Shirley Towers inquest, Mark Prisk MP the Minister for Housing has written to all social landlords on the issue of sprinklers. However, ministers remain set against mandating the use of sprinklers, beyond the current requirements.

Conclusion and next steps

18. The issue raised by the Lakanal house fire and the inquest verdicts are very important for all Fire and Rescue Authorities and all social landlords.
19. It will be important for FSMC to play its role in supporting the wider sector to understand the key issues and respond appropriately.