

Review of property conditions in the private rented sector

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This paper will outline to members the background and progress of the campaign to introduce a requirement on landlords to install smoke alarms in private rented properties and highlight the publication of a review of private rented properties by the Department for Communities and Local Government which is seeking views on the introduction of such a requirement.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the contents of the paper and to take a decision on submitting a response into the review supporting the introduction of a requirement on landlords to install smoke alarms in private rented residential properties.

Action

Officers to take action as directed.

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Background

1. Currently landlords are not required by law to install and maintain smoke alarms in their properties, with the exception of landlords of Homes of Multiple Occupation (HMOs). Fire and Rescue Services are clear that working smoke alarms are a life-saving piece of equipment, as properties without a smoke alarm are four times more likely to die in a house fire¹.
2. Extensive prevention work undertaken across the country has seen smoke alarm ownership rise to 88% overall². Despite this, those in the 12% of properties that do not own a smoke alarm account for 38% of deaths from fire. Between 2006/07 and 2011/12 across Great Britain there were 658 fire deaths where a smoke alarm was absent³.
3. The economic cost of these fire deaths has been calculated at £2.67 billion. Yet when a 10-year battery smoke alarm retails for around £15.00, the cost of installing smoke alarms in the estimated 690,322 properties in England and Wales currently without one would be between £11m and £13.7m. Over the life of a smoke alarm this equates to between £1.59 and £1.99 per year.
4. It is for these reasons that the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) is campaigning to make it a requirement for all landlords to install smoke alarm in their properties as part of its Home Safety Strategy 2013-16. The strategy can be downloaded from the CFOA website: <http://www.cfoa.org.uk/download/40512>
5. Regulation has often led to a step change in the numbers of fire fatalities as well as smoke alarm ownership, as seen with the Furniture and Furnishing Regulations 1998, amendments to Building Regulations and the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. The introduction of a requirement on landlords to install and maintain smoke alarms in private rented properties can provide the next legislative change to continue driving down deaths from fire.
6. During the passage of the Energy Bill (now Energy Act 2013) in November 2013, an amendment was tabled to the Bill during its third reading in the House Lords which provided the Secretary of State with the power to make a regulation to compel landlords of rented residential properties to install and maintain smoke alarms and/or carbon monoxide detectors in their properties.

¹ DCLG 'Fire Kills'

² 2011 English Housing Survey

³ Fire Statistics Great Britain, 2011 to 2012

7. Speaking in the debate, the Communities and Local Government (CLG) Minister Baroness Stowell stated while the Secretary of State will be afforded the power to introduce the regulation, the Government intended to firstly undertake a review of the private rented sector to determine if bringing forward the requirement was necessary.

Review of property conditions

8. CLG launched a short review of property conditions in the private rented sector on 12 February. The review concludes on 28 March 2014 and seeks views on a range of issues including the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords. The review can be downloaded from the CLG website:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-property-conditions-in-the-private-rented-sector>
9. Section four of the review seeks views on introducing a requirement on private sector to install and maintain smoke alarms in their properties. Views are also sought on a similar requirement in relation to carbon monoxide alarms.
10. The review states that regulation would only be introduced if, as a result of feedback, a clear need for regulation was demonstrated.

Campaign progress

11. Discussion and correspondence was undertaken with key stakeholders prior to the launch of the review, including meetings with Members of Parliament and officials within CLG, to press for the mandatory installation of smoke alarms in rented properties and to determine the scope of the review.
12. Following the launch of the review these individuals and others, including elected members, sector bodies and representative organisations, have been contacted to highlight the launch of the review and to encourage them to submit a response in support of bringing forward this regulation.
13. The University of Manchester has been commissioned jointly by Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Protection Association to undertake a piece of research that will examine links between fire fatalities and tenure. Results from this research will be fed into the review process and it is hoped this will provide an accurate description of how many fire fatalities occur in rented properties in order to support the introduction of regulation.
14. The research organisation YouGov have also undertaken a representative poll to gauge support for making the fitting of smoke alarms mandatory in private rented properties, which showed that 93% of respondents supported this regulation.

Pressing for change

15. The next phase of the campaign is to generate a groundswell of support for introducing the regulation. This will be achieved through raising awareness of the review and encouraging submissions among partners and stakeholders (such as FRAs, CFOA and the wider fire sector) and the public through the use of traditional media and social media networks, for example using the #Alarm4Life hashtag on Twitter. These actions will ensure that it can be demonstrated to government there is a genuine case for change.

Conclusion and next steps

16. Members are asked to note the contents of this paper and take a decision on the submission of a response into the review supporting the introduction of a requirement on landlords to install smoke alarms in private rented properties, by the closing date of 28 March 2014.