Fire Safety Management in Sheltered Housing and General Needs Blocks of Flats

Report to Community Scrutiny, 14th February 2019

Introduction

A significant national focus was placed on social landlords since the Grenfell Tower fire which led to the fatality of 79 residents in June 2017. Much of this focus was on the external cladding used as part of a significant restoration programme which has been proven to have accelerated the spread of the fire.

This led to an extensive verification programme of the national housing stock to confirm the extent of Aluminium Composite Material cladding application, which was further extended to schools and other high-rise properties.

Authorities, Housing Associations and Social Landlords were also encouraged to review their current arrangements for Fire Management effectiveness.

Community Scrutiny Committee requested a report on general fire safety management of the Council's housing stock and this report has been prepared to provide information on general fire safety, incorporating issues raised by Councillors in relation to the installation of sprinklers and tilt and turn windows.

Carmarthenshire County Council's Housing Stock

Carmarthenshire Council has in the region of 8,500 general needs homes. The vast majority of these are one and two storey houses and bungalows.

The Authority does not have any high rise blocks. The maximum height is four storeys, and we have confirmed that *no* over-cladding works have been carried out to these blocks.

The Authority has 9 three-storey blocks (95 homes in total), and 3 four-storey blocks (45 homes in total). These represent a mix of bedsits, flats and maisonettes.

The Authority also has 21 sheltered schemes (approximately 500 flats) of a maximum height of 2 storeys. The Authority has confirmed to WAG that *none* of these properties have had over-cladding or re-rendering works.

The Authority has five 2-storey blocks, and a significant number of individual dwellings, where Exterior Wall Insulation (EWI) has been carried out to improve the energy efficiency of the dwellings. This has no similarity with the over-cladding undertaken at the Grenfell flats in London. The specification is a Parextherm product comprising insulation material mechanically and chemically fixed to the existing masonry walls which is then coated with two coats of render, the final coat incorporating a mineral aggregate. These materials are similar to those already found on the interior and exterior of the dwellings during their construction and represent no additional fire risk.

Our ‘General Needs’ stock has been brought up to the Carmarthenshire Homes Standard. This standard includes the installation of hard-wired heat, smoke and carbon-monoxide detectors, however there are a small number of tenants who have refused these works. We are currently working with tenants to insist on the installation of these detectors. Whilst access is being arranged through the enforcement team, there is a 10 year, battery operated alarm fitted which are checked annually as part of a Property Maintenance service regime.

Specific Fire Management Measures for Sheltered Housing

From January 2013 inspections, meetings and wide-ranging discussions took place around Sheltered Housing, where new technologies, processes and policies were developed to support vulnerable tenants, and ensure the Authorities legal duties were discharged. This has resulted in what the Fire and Rescue Service recognises as a robust fire management system, which seeks to reduce the risks from fire to as low as is reasonably practicable. In summary:

- All schemes have had intrusive surveys with any required remedial works undertaken.
- Two Schemes (Yr Hafan and Waddles Court) have been fitted with Sprinkler Systems as part of their remodelling.
- The numbers of non-ambulant tenants have been significantly reduced.
- A Sheltered Scheme Officer (SSO) Handbook has been prepared outlining the Fire Arrangements adopted within Schemes.
- Risk management systems have been adopted which will take account of tenants’ needs in the event of an outbreak of fire.
- An £800,000 fire alarm and emergency lighting upgrade programme to standardise alarm configuration and monitoring has been completed. This was over and above what was required, and the Fire Service is currently highlighting Carmarthenshire County Council as ‘Best Practice’ in the way the Authority manages sheltered schemes.
- The Fire and Rescue service is invited into schemes on an annual basis to provide assessments for all tenants; fire safety talks; and safety in the home advice.
- Fire Crews have access to updated digital information on the status of tenants and can identify the most vulnerable before they arrive on site.

Independent 3rd Party Risk Assessments on our Schemes have also been undertaken and provided the following comments:

- “The sheltered housing each had officers (SHOs) available during day time hours. It must be said that without fail, these SHOs were very positive in their approach to fire safety within their accommodations, and were very helpful in arranging and carrying out the visits.”
- Staff were knowledgeable in the application of the emergency plan and all had attended training courses in 2018. “It must be said that we feel that there was a lot that was good about the sheltered housing and the number of actions raised within the reports is relatively small, when considering that these are usually quite large and well used buildings”.

- The policy within the SH schemes is a mixture of evacuation and stay put, i.e. evacuate to a place of safety within the premises, usually a lounge. Remain there until advised otherwise. In the event that this area is affected by a fire, evacuation is direct to outside.
- There is a system whereby persons who may not be able to evacuate are identified to the Fire Service at the entry point to the building. There is liaison with Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MWWFRS) which is party to the plan that is in place, and accepts that evacuation may need to be assisted by them. Normally a Fire Service would not agree a plan that at its outset involved them with evacuation, as here.
- Means of escape routes were all looked at, and were available and clear at the time of visits.
- Housekeeping was usually to a very good standard.
- A number of flats were visited within the complexes, many of which were similar in layout, mostly single bedroom, with risk rooms (lounge and bedroom) off a lobby to the front door.
- Flats all have fire alarms in line with BS 5839 Part 6 in place in the kitchen, lounge and bedroom, and the communal BS 5839 Part 1 detection in the hallway and linked to the Tunstall - Warden Call System
- Layouts were as designed and generally acceptable, having regard for the fact that rooms have fire detection installed, and substantial doors will provide a level of protection, if kept closed, to allow escape, provided that the alarms alert the occupants and that they are mobile.
- “Generally, we found the Sheltered Housing to be in good order.”

General Needs Blocks of Flats (Independent Living)

Fire statistics show that a fire in a bungalow is more likely to result in a fatality than a fire in a high-rise block of flats (because of the age demographic of those living in bungalows).

Therefore, as in all dwelling types, the risk to people from fire (i.e. risk of death or injury) in a block of flats is governed primarily by the likelihood of fire occurring and whether smoke alarms are installed, rather than the type of dwelling in which people live, the height of the dwelling above ground or the architectural design of the block.

Key points

- People living in flats experience more fires than people living in houses. However, a fire in a flat is no more dangerous than a fire in a house.
- To keep fire risk to a minimum, it is just as important to prevent fires as to provide measures to protect people when fire occurs.
- The most significant influences on fire risk are social and lifestyle factors and advanced age, not the type of dwelling in which people live.
- All dwellings should have working smoke alarms.
- Very few people die as a result of a fire in a neighbour’s flat or the common parts. Nearly all fire deaths occur in the flat in which fire starts.
- In blocks of flats, each flat is designed to be a fire-resisting ‘box’. It is important to maintain the integrity of this compartment, particularly when building work and alterations take place.

- It is important to ensure that fires cannot start in the common parts or common facilities by making sure these areas remain sterile.

General Principles

(Reference: Local Government Association: Fire Safety in Purpose Built Blocks of Flats)

- While escape within flats is based on similar principles to those for houses, reaching ultimate safety relies on using the common parts.
- Most blocks of flats are designed on the 'stay put' principle. Although this relies on there being effective compartmentation, it is a principle that should be adopted wherever possible.
- Provided there is effective compartmentation and means of escape, 'general needs' blocks of flats will not normally require a communal fire alarm system.
- Communal fire alarm systems should not be installed unless it can be demonstrated that there is no other practicable way of ensuring an adequate level of safety. If such a system is provided, it must be possible to manage it.
- However, it should not automatically be assumed that constructional standards will be inadequate in the absence of evidence to that effect.
- Proposals to upgrade fire protection in an existing block should aim to ensure, or restore, a satisfactory standard of compartmentation in order to maintain the original 'stay put' policy.
- More generally, application of current benchmark standards to an existing block of flats is not normally appropriate.
- Certain developments in fire safety technology and practice (e.g. smoke alarms within flats) should be adopted. However, other developments such as automatic suppression systems (Sprinklers) will only be appropriate if the cost and effort of adopting them is proportionate to the risk.

Specific queries raised by Councillors and CCC's approach

The use of Windows as escape routes

Above first floor level, escape via windows is impossible, and, above the third floor, rescue by fire and rescue service ladders is unlikely to be possible; even high reach appliances have their limits. However, this is taken into account in the design, layout and means of escape in modern blocks of flats. They are designed so that escape or rescue via windows should not be necessary.

Provision of Fire Extinguishers

It is rare for there to be a need for fire-fighting equipment to be used by people present in the common parts of blocks of flats. In Sheltered Housing, equipment is usually provided in plant rooms and other such rooms, for use by staff and contractors .The provision of fire extinguishers and other forms of fire-fighting equipment in common parts for use by residents is problematic. It is not expected that residents should tackle a fire in their flats to make their escape. Indeed, to obtain a fire extinguisher located in the common parts for this purpose would involve the person leaving their flat in the first place. This does not preclude residents from providing their own fire extinguishers and fire blankets. Indeed, it may be appropriate for landlords, and others responsible for the common parts, to encourage this as part of the process of engaging with, and educating residents on, fire safety.

Single Escape Routes

Design of communal means of escape in purpose-built blocks of flats is based on certain assumptions. These include:

- The most likely place of origin of a fire will be in a flat itself
- That there is a high degree of fire separation between flats and the common parts and, therefore, the likelihood of fire and smoke spread beyond the flat of origin is low
- The materials used in the construction of the building or the protection afforded to them are such that fire is unlikely to spread through the fabric of the building
- The use of the common parts, and the nature of any combustible items present, is such that any fire originating in the common parts is unlikely to spread beyond the immediate vicinity.

Sprinkler Systems

- Although more commonly associated with other types of buildings (Commercial Properties, Schools, etc), systems specifically intended for domestic and residential premises have been recently developed, along with appropriate standards to govern their use. Since 2016 guidance under the Welsh Building Regulations requires all new homes to be fitted with sprinkler systems. Sprinklers have been installed in the Hafan and Waddles Court Schemes as part of their remodelling, and will be installed in all new and remodelled Housing schemes.
- Water mist systems are also now available. These too have been developed for domestic and residential applications and these systems are currently utilised when the need is assessed, particularly with vulnerable tenants.
- Whilst historically general consensus considered it unlikely that retrofitting sprinklers systems would be reasonably practicable for existing blocks, this does not preclude their use where there is clear justification and appropriate consideration of the practicalities of their installation and subsequent maintenance, as is currently being considered and possibly recommended (or potentially enforced) following the current Grenfell Enquiry.

The extent to which such developments in technology should be taken into account when assessing existing blocks of flats needs to be considered carefully. It is important that the cost, practicality and benefit gained are all taken into account.

Strategies to address shortcomings in fire safety should be proportionate to the risk and this is a key principle of fire risk assessment, and to this end Property has undertaken a prioritised cyclical programme of Fire Risk Assessments, initially on our 3+ storey blocks of flats. Where required, subsequent recommendations were made to enhance the current provisions and to further reduce risks, particularly where risk profiling data has highlighted arson trends.

These recommendations have included:

- Consideration of the potential to retrospectively install sprinkler systems as part of any future wider repairs programmes;
- A review of fire procedural information disseminated to tenants

- The conducting of periodic inspections of communal areas of flats by officers of the Communities Department together with enforcing Authorities to ensure housekeeping standards are maintained, and anti-social behaviour is tackled.
- The potential introduction of technology such as thermographic imaging linked to CCTV systems. This is currently being evaluated
- A review of the allocations policy to the 'Ty' Blocks, which has subsequently been implemented as part of the wider regeneration scheme of Station Road.

Conclusion

In conclusion, CCC does not have the 'High Rise' Housing stock profile of typical urban Authorities, and our stock has been evaluated as not to have any Aluminium Composite Cladding fitted, which was the significant factor of the Grenfell Tower block fire.

The Authority regularly assesses and monitors the effectiveness of our fire safety strategies, in line with evolving legislation and technological innovations for continued compliance, and ultimately our moral duty as a Housing Landlord.

Recommendations highlighted as part of undertaking fire risk assessments are continually reviewed and implemented accordingly.

We provide our tenants with appropriate fire safety information relevant to their housing type.

The Property Division is currently piloting new fire safety software, which will provide better oversight of the Authority's estate in relation to fire safety. This will involve Premises Responsible Persons (PRPs) undertaking and completing a log of fire safety actions (such as fire alarm testing, evacuation drills and premises checks) to reduce the risk of a fire, or the impact from a fire.

Property Division
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