

HRA Asset Strategy Review – Providing Safe Homes

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Recommendations

To ensure ongoing compliance, and continue to provide safe homes for residents, it is proposed to increase the level of Housing Revenue Account resources managing both the health and safety, and the fire risk in our dwellings and blocks. The specific recommendations are set out in the medium term policy proposals, and delivered principally through the HRA Capital Programme from 2018-19 onwards, and through the normal staff resource reviews.

Extra resources will assist with specific areas that will benefit safety, such as ongoing improvements in fire door and common ways management and enforcement (where required), better communication and information for residents, electrical safety compliance works and ongoing monitoring, and the installation of sprinklers (subject to local consultations).

One potential option is to move forward with a draft 5-year programme of retrospective sprinkler installation across the high-rise blocks, the majority of which do not have sprinklers at present. Detailed and early consultation with residents at each block will be undertaken to ensure community support on a case by case basis. However, there are alternative options that could be further considered, including a more limited programme based on the higher risk blocks (based on the risk matrix developed with East Sussex Fire & Rescue), or to not progress as sprinkler installation programme at all at this time.

The HRA will require additional funding and resources for managing fire risk in order to deliver these recommendations. These will form part of the 2018-19 HRA Capital Investment Programme proposals, along with provisional proposals for 2019-20 and 2020-21.

It is likely that this Asset Management review will need flexibility in its future delivery as further information and knowledge and learning become available following the Grenfell Tower fire. There is also the potential for future additional regulation and improvement being required. Although these cannot all be anticipated at this time, implementing these recommendations will improve the HRA's position in readiness for them.

Context

The current agreed HRA Asset Management Strategy includes as one of its 3 key themes the commitment to 'Invest in homes and neighbourhoods to provide safe, good quality housing'. The delivery of this is supported through the HRA Capital Investment Programmes. This review relates principally to fire risk management, and integrates with wider health and safety compliance.

Strategically, both Capital and other resources to enable effective management of fire risk have been well supported and increased over previous years, with over £300,000 committed for 2017-18. This funding supports our work in achieving and improving compliance, and as a result helps to ensure homes are as safe as possible for our residents. A multi-agency Housing Fire, Health and Safety Board, which includes East Sussex Fire and Rescue, several Council departments, and related agencies, has been in place for several years to ensure effective use of these resources, good governance and a 'joined-up' approach.

Prior to, and since the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we have undertaken a large number of actions, working closely with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service. Since the Grenfell Tower fire, these actions have largely focused on high-rise homes initially, and included undertaking additional precautionary inspections jointly with the fire service to check their safety, over and above the standard fire risk assessment process that is undertaken on all blocks. A brief overview of actions undertaken so far is included in the next section.

In order to ensure that the HRA is in an effective position to continue to improve fire safety for residents, it is crucial that our medium term strategy and investment commitments respond to changing circumstances. This strategy is required to help plan for the future HRA Capital Programmes and staffing levels, to ensure ongoing policy is deliverable, and to allow for full and early involvement and consultation with residents, and other stakeholders, on detailed plans.

To continue to build on community liaison and joint working initiatives, we need to be both proactive and provide leadership, reassurance and excellent communication. This review aims to provide some key steps on that ongoing journey as far as possible at this time.

Initial actions

Following the Grenfell Tower fire the HRA have undertaken a great number of actions to check safety, provide information and reassure residents. These include:

- Existing compliance in terms of Fire Risk Assessments were found to be robust and in place.
- Undertook additional precautionary joint inspections of all the 43 High-Rise blocks with the Fire Service over and above the usual fire risk inspection arrangements, and published the results for each block online. Any works or improvements that were required have been ordered via our partners.
- Produced a fire safety in flats video and extensive Q&A on the City Councils' website at : <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/housing/council-housing/council-owned-high-rise-fire-safety-faqs>
- Staff delivered letters to all high-rise flats in the days following the Grenfell fire giving updates on the inspections being carried out, and their findings.
- Answered several hundred queries from residents and others in a short period of time.
- Housing Fire Health and Safety Board undertook additional extraordinary meetings twice weekly to co-ordinate resources and manage actions through to completion.
- Where required, further independent surveys to look at the performance of fire protection systems is underway.
- Used learning from this initial phase of actions to help inform our medium-term strategy.

The need to redirect internal staff resources towards the speedy inspection and reassurance of residents in the days and weeks following the Grenfell fire has resulted in some delays to the delivery of ongoing programmes and major projects. In addition, there are some major works projects in the design stage that may include potential options for installing non-combustible cladding systems. All major works projects already have a more

enhanced focus on integrating fire safety investment into the project at the design stage. Examples of how this may work in practice may be the integration of improvements to the common way services, or an offer to residents to install sprinklers alongside the major works project.

Medium term policy proposals

Following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, Housing Fire Health and Safety Board requested a review of the current and medium-term plans for ensuring effective fire safety management. The aim of this review is to enable a continuing proactive approach that will allow the HRA to continue to be in a generally positive position regarding its fire risk management arrangements.

Some key themes that have emerged in terms of ensuring continuing and improving risk management, planning future Capital Investment, and resources required, include:

- Communication – working even more closely with residents to improve their access to information on health and safety, fire safety and risk assessments for residents, and keeping it as up to date as possible via the website. Earlier engagement in any fire risk related issues or projects.
- Fire Doors in blocks – build further on the investment already made, which show high levels of compliance already, including a greater focus and additional resources required to achieve improved compliance and ongoing monitoring, including leasehold flat entrance doors.
- Electrical installations – we will make some additional improvements to the arrangements for monitoring and managing electrical inspections and certification to ensure ongoing high levels of compliance and safety. Hard wired smoke detectors will continue to be installed alongside rewires to provide additional safety for residents.
- Major works projects – continue to improve the integration of health and safety, including fire safety considerations and improvement proposals at an early stage of larger projects, and as part of the consultation and design process on the project itself.
- Sprinkler systems – provide additional protection for residents and firefighters in the event of a fire, and a detailed look at options for a retrospective installation of sprinklers in High-Rise blocks, subject to case-by-case consultation and engagement with residents, are set out in the next section.

We are committed to delivering these medium term policy proposals, working and consulting closely with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, residents and other stakeholders. Work on implementing all fire risk related policies will continue to be overseen and governed through the Housing Fire Health and Safety Board.

Sprinkler retrofitting options and proposals

For some time now, the HRA have supported the installation of sprinkler systems due to evidence that they can save lives in the event of a fire, as well as preventing spread outside a single dwelling. The HRA have already installed sprinklers in Somerset Point, and provisionally funded plans are being advanced to proceed at St James's House and Essex Place, in conjunction with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, over the coming months. Therefore the overview estimate of costs does not include sprinkler installation costs for these 3 blocks.

Providing sprinklers for residents in high-rise blocks would be in addition to continuing provision of other fire safety arrangements and inspections. It is important to note that investment in sprinklers would form only one part of the ongoing and long-term investment by the HRA in these blocks, and others, citywide, as reflected in the levels of investment in fire safety made in current and previous years.

In terms of the likely Capital costs, our current estimates are that it would cost the HRA around £6.2m to install sprinklers into the remaining 40 high-rise blocks. It is important to develop an agreed delivery model for leasehold flats over the coming months, based on legal advice and discussed in more detail later in this document.

As with any installation programme that needs to be spread over time to be delivered successfully, an agreed method of prioritisation of blocks is required. Where each block fits in the programme timescale will be developed via an updated risk matrix being developed in partnership with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, overseen and agreed by the Housing Fire Health and Safety Board as a separate piece of work from this review. The risk matrix will follow a similar risk based approach which led to Somerset Point being the first to receive sprinklers.

Additional priority may also be given to blocks where major projects are being planned, on a case-by-case basis, working with the Fire Service, residents and others, depending on the proposed work types.

In terms of delivery options and constraints, our experience from the Somerset Point sprinklers project suggests that we should plan for a high level of early resident engagement, design and ongoing project management is required both prior to and during the installation of sprinklers in blocks and homes. This factor, along with contractor

resources and other logistical issues indicate that a planned programme of investment over a minimum of 5 years (around 8 high-rise blocks per year on average) is likely to be the quickest practically achievable. This would require HRA investment of around £1.25 million per year, and the programme could start in the 2018-19 financial year, subject to the required budget approvals via the overall Capital Investment Programme.

Other options that were considered included a 3-year & 7-year installation programme.

A 3-year programme would require funding of just over £2million per annum, which would put additional pressure on the funding of other capital programme priorities. It would involve installing sprinklers at more than 1 block per month on average, and, overall, our opinion is that such a level of delivery would be unachievable in terms of effective resident consultation, liaison, contractor availability and quality control issues.

Alternatively, some longer programmes could be planned for. A 7-year programme would entail HRA Capital funding of around £900,000 per annum, limiting the potential impact on other programmes. A longer programme does have some deliverability advantages, but in general it is felt to be a long time period for blocks at the end of the programme to wait to be offered and consulted on sprinklers.

In addition, there are alternative options that could be further considered, including a more limited programme based on installing sprinklers only at higher risk high rise blocks (based on the risk matrix developed with East Sussex Fire & Rescue), or to not progress a comprehensive sprinkler installation programme at all at this time.

For any option involving a number of sprinkler system installations, it is likely that the HRA would require a range of additional resident liaison and project management resources to manage the programme and deliver on time and budget.

Resident involvement and consultation

We are committed to a full dialogue with residents and other stakeholders where it comes to fire safety and proposed fire safety works. It is our view that, where possible, fire risk improvement works will only be delivered truly effectively with community support and 'buy-in'.

Where enhancements proposed are over and above current statutory requirements, such as sprinklers, it is acknowledged that additional early and full consultation with those affected will be needed, with a view to working together to gain clear resident support for final proposals. In cases where community support is not forthcoming it is unlikely that sprinkler installation would progress, on a case-by-case basis.

Additionally, it is acknowledged that there is a need for clarity for leaseholders, particularly regarding sprinklers. A separate policy setting out the details of how sprinkler installation will affect leaseholders will be developed and approved over and above the existing statutory consultation process prior to the start of the sprinkler programme.

