

APPENDIX 2 - Additional questions re Housing Service - Scrutiny August 2017

• Implications / actions taken regarding safety of council housing and buildings following Grenfell Tower fire

Actions taken since the Grenfell fire tragedy have been dependant on whether the blocks have cladding and if so, if the cladding contains ACM. Whilst some actions relate to all high rise (11 blocks) other actions have been targeted at high rise blocks with cladding (7 blocks) and in some cases only those high rise blocks with ACM cladding (4 blocks).

On the day of the Grenfell Tower tragedy residents of **all high rise blocks** were hand delivered a letter, reminding them of the advice previously given in addition to offering reassurance of the fire safety measures we have in place.

Residents were reminded of the fire safety measures we have in place and of what to do in the event of a fire within their home or elsewhere in their building. These safety measures are:

- Hard wired smoke detectors in each flat which is tested annually as part of the gas service inspection
- Communal areas subject to full annual risk assessment by Risk Management Surveyor who works closely with the MAWWF service
- Regular inspections to ensure hazards and combustible materials are removed from communal areas

In addition we arranged for the MAWWF service to visit all blocks to undertake the annual fire safety audit earlier than scheduled, we ordered additional checks of all dry risers and advised Housing staff to routinely check all fire doors are properly closing and report any faults as a matter of urgency.

In addition, on those **high rise blocks with cladding** we increased the landlord presence so as to provide additional reassurance. Each block is now visited daily by a member of the District Housing Office team and weekly by the Risk Management Surveyor. This arrangement is to continue for the time being.

On 29th June we hand delivered a second letter to all residents living in high rise flats to update them on additional safety measures we had introduced. All letters advised residents that the Council is looking to procure sprinkler systems to its entire high rise blocks.

Residents living in a block with no ACM cladding (and therefore where there was no requirement to test the cladding) were advised of this.

Residents living in **blocks with ACM cladding** were advised that cladding was to be tested. The letter to residents living in blocks where cladding was to be tested (Clyne Court and Jeffreys Court) were advised that a patrol between 8pm and 8am was to be provided at their block.

Results of the cladding tests were received on Saturday 1st July. On Sunday 2nd July, letters were hand delivered to all residents of these 4 high rise blocks advising of the results of the test whilst reassuring them that we believe the materials meet or exceed building regulations. The letter advised residents that there were no increased concerns.

A further joint door knocking exercise between Housing and MAWWF service was arranged on blocks with ACM cladding, offering Home Fire Safety Checks to anyone who wanted one.

On 7th July, a fourth letter was hand delivered to residents of the 4 blocks with ACM cladding advising that additional tests, on the cladding system, have confirmed that the cladding system is fully compliant with building regulations and the blocks are, by definition, safe to live in.

Each time we have hand delivered a letter we have knocked on residents doors offering them an opportunity to ask questions and / or raise any concerns. Residents have been reminded of who to contact if they have any questions. Officers from Housing, Corporate Property and Building Services and Building Control have worked closely so as to ensure any question can be answered.

Each letter reminded residents of the following fire safety measures:

- Each block has a hard wired smoke detector in each flat which is tested annually as part of the gas service inspection.
- All communal areas are subject to a full annual risk assessment by our Risk Management Surveyor, who works closely with Mid and West Fire and Rescue Service, to make sure that all the blocks are to the highest standard and to ensure that any issues identified are addressed immediately.
- Neighbourhood Officer regularly inspects blocks to ensure any combustible materials and hazards are removed from communal areas.
- All residents have been provided with a leaflet on Fire Safety in high rise flats which contains important advice on what to do if a fire breaks out in their flat or elsewhere in the building. If a fire breaks out in their flat residents are advised to leave immediately. If a fire breaks out elsewhere in the building residents are advised to stay in their flat unless otherwise directed by the Fire Service.
- In addition to individual leaflets, residents have been provided with a poster containing the same advice and these posters are also displayed in communal areas of their blocks.

On Tuesday 12th July there was a Residents Association meeting attended by Senior Managers from Housing and Corporate Building and Property Services and the MAWWF service. This meeting offered residents from 3 of the 4 blocks with ACM cladding the opportunity to ask any questions.

On 13th July, the Welsh Government Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee carried out a one-day inquiry into fire safety in high rise blocks in Wales. This was attended by the Deputy Leader, Councillor Clive Lloyd and Martin Nicholls.

Current situation

We are awaiting a response from Welsh Government in respect of the additional tests undertaken by the British Research Establishment (BRE) which confirmed that the cladding system is fully compliant with building regulations and the blocks are, by definition, safe to live in.

We understand that additional tests ordered by Central Government will use a similar full system approach as our recent tests which passed the safety requirements. In the meantime, additional safety measures will continue pending further guidance/ confirmation from Welsh Government that no further action or testing is required.

- **Progress with the development of Homelessness Strategy**

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 sets out a duty for local authorities to carry out a homelessness review and develop a homelessness strategy and states that the strategy must be based on the results of the review. The Act also says that the local authority must adopt the strategy in 2018 and renew the strategy every four years – an exact date in 2018 has not been specified. Based on the results of the review, the strategy must set out how the authority will achieve the following objectives:

- Prevention of homelessness
- Suitable accommodation is available for people who are or may become homeless
- Support is available for people who are or may become homeless

Progress to date

- Data collection for homelessness review underway
- Consultation on priorities for strategy with support providers through the Supporting People & Homelessness Forum
- Consultation with service users (of homelessness and support services) to develop an understanding of how the homelessness system is perceived and experienced by the people it aims to help and to assist in identifying any gaps in services.
- Survey of the general public to gather views from the wider population by finding out what they would do if they ever found themselves at risk of losing their home and what they believe to be the main causes of homelessness.
- Consultation with Neath & Port Talbot and Bridgend Councils to establish level of regional working that can take place and whilst every Local Authority has to have their own Strategy going forward we will be liaising with neighbouring Authorities to determine if there are any opportunities to work together.

- **Progress on HMOs following Scrutiny Working Group earlier this year**

One additional Environmental Health Officer is now working on HMOs and other private sector housing enforcement matters.

As a result of the concerns expressed by local residents, Ward Members and Scrutiny Working Group, an undertaking was given to carry out a survey in the St Thomas Ward to identify HMOs. This was done in March 2017. Approximately 3,100 residential properties were visited by Officers from the Housing & Public Health Team. Evidence gathered suggests that 94 of those are HMOs and 11 of those are already licensed under the Mandatory HMO licensing regime. No properties were identified which should be licensed, but do not have a licence.

It has been agreed that all the suspected HMOs identified during the recent survey are inspected over a period from September 2017 to June 2018 using existing legislative powers. This is to coincide with the commencement of the new academic year. This will allow proper consideration of health and safety risks and management controls. Enforcement action will be taken as appropriate using existing powers and properties brought up to standard accordingly.

Priority for inspection will be given to three storey properties to allow a detailed assessment of what, if any, further properties require licensing under the Mandatory HMO licensing regime.

Any other new properties granted planning permission for use as a HMO in St Thomas during this period will also be visited as part of this inspection programme.

These inspections will be prioritised and carried out by officers within the Housing and Public Health Division. Authorised officers have legal powers of entry to rented properties and can seek warrants to enter from the Magistrates Court if entry is initially refused by occupiers or owners.

A further report will be drafted following completion of the inspections and a progress report will be provided in January 2018 for discussion with Ward Members who have already been apprised of this planned approach.

Ward Members, residents and Scrutiny Working Group have questioned why additional HMO licensing has not been introduced in St Thomas. The evidence to support the introduction of Additional HMO licensing in St Thomas does not currently exist, however the results of the planned inspection programme will be utilised as part of a review of the need for additional licensing when it is completed.