



What role do tenants and leaseholders play in helping to keep high rise blocks safe from fire?

November 2019

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Acknowledgements

Members of SIFT would like to thank the following people for their help and co-operation in compiling this report.

From Your Homes Newcastle

Mark Gerrard
Emily Potts
Emily Sinclair
Johurun Nessa
Darren Venus
David Snaith
Stephen Studley

From Newcastle City Council

Fiona Dodsworth

From the Fire Safety Team

Paula Brocks

Chloe Johnston

From Engage Associates

Eileen Adams

... and ...

All tenants who participated in contributing their views

Summary

Members of Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants (SIFT) carried out a scrutiny exercise to assess what roles tenants and leaseholders play in helping to keep high rise blocks safe from fire.

SIFT used a number of scrutiny tools to gather evidence for the scrutiny exercise, for example work shadowing and a resident activity, and followed key lines of enquiry.

Findings

The customer engagement findings include:

- Customer engagement opportunities at present are not regular enough
Residents of certain blocks have a good relationship with the Compliance Officer and feel comfortable approaching him with their concerns
- Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service have not held any events in high-rises in the city this year. The TWFRS Prevention and Education team have held some events, but not the Fire Safety team
- Customers have expressed concerns that when reporting fire safety issues, they are made to feel like a 'nuisance'
- Customers themselves have recognised the difficulties to get residents involved in engagement activities.

Additional findings include:

- There are sufficient safety measures in place to prevent a serious fire from originating in the bin chute stores and spreading
- Smoke detectors in the corridors are not linked to the enquiry centre
- The biggest fire safety risks at present are accidental and deliberate fires and mobility scooters are the most significant emerging risk.

Recommendations

SIFT's customer engagement recommendations are:

- The current Customer Engagement structure should be reshaped to increase the frequency of contact with residents of high-rise blocks
- A range of activities including some hands-on tasks such as fire behaviour training should be made available with the aim of boosting the number of customers engaging, to promote awareness and discussion around fire safety
- Placing notices in blocks, Homes and People and on social media to promote customer engagement around fire safety.

Our additional recommendations are:

- Investigations should be made with the relevant contractors so the smoke detectors in corridors are linked to the enquiry centre
- Offer help to residents to replace equipment that could pose a fire risk
- A lettings policy/risk assessment for those moving into high-rise blocks should be created and implemented
- Plans should be looked into and ideally set into motion to remove mobility scooters being stored in locations that could pose a risk to personal and building safety
- Documents used by staff on tenancy sign up should include more questions to risk assess those moving into high-rise blocks
- YHN should look into offering an annual service check on mobility scooters of residents in high-rises

- Investigations into the cost of an annual scheme where residents can dispose of unwanted goods free of charge or at a low cost to help eliminate clutter and possible hoarding.

1. Introduction

This second scrutiny report of the Financial Year 2019-20 was produced by the Tenant-led Scrutiny Pool who are involved in scrutinising the performance and improve services across Newcastle upon Tyne.

The Scrutiny Pool's name is SIFT – Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants – which accurately describes what we do, that is, sifting through information to look for evidence from which to analyse service provision and recommend change.

2. Scope of the Scrutiny Exercise

The scope of the scrutiny exercise is to investigate:

- What activities tenants and leaseholders are asked to undertake in terms of fire safety
- What activities they would like to see take place and get involved in
- The policies and procedures in relation to fire safety that residents are aware of
- How YHN measures customer engagement activity.

Another purpose of this scrutiny exercise is to also recommend changes to policy and practice where required.

This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place during September to November 2019.

3. Methodology

There are a variety of tools which can be used to scrutinise services, performance and governance. The tools selected on this scrutiny exercise included:

- Briefing by service head
- Visits to Blocks
- Work Shadowing
- Briefing by Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service
- Analysis of Resident Activity
- Desktop Review
- Survey.

The Key Lines of Enquiry (KLE) SIFT members pursued included:

- The Regulator of Social Housing's Home Regulatory Standard
- The Decent Homes Standard
- The Housing Health and Safety Rating System
- Fitness for Human Habitation Act
- The Council's Tenancy agreement
- Sign up procedures for occupants of multi storey blocks
- Leases issued for high rise occupants
- Fire alarms and notices in blocks
- The range of fire safety systems in blocks
- High rise blocks allocation policy
- The tenant profile of inhabitants of high rise in Newcastle
- Evacuation or 'stay put' policies
- Formal Complaints and comments about safety in high rise blocks
- Frequency of contact between YHN, Fire Service and residents
- Activities intended to stimulate awareness and discussion around fire safety.

4. The Service Briefing

Mark Gerrard delivered the service briefing to us. We discussed some of the historic fires, especially those that have resulted in changes to regulations.

From the 1st October 2006, The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 came into force. This applies to nearly every type of building and structure. Interestingly, this is the first piece of legislation/regulation change that hasn't come about from a fire occurring.

This regulatory order is being reviewed after the tragedy of Grenfell Tower.

Mark explained what the staff duties around fire safety are and these include:

- Identifying hazards in the workplace
- Ensuring escape routes are available
- Recording and reporting observations
- Taking appropriate action if a fire occurs.

We also looked into Relative/Reasonable and Ultimate/Total safety.

Relative/Reasonable safety is a place within a building or structure where for a limited period of time, will afford protection from the effects of fire. Usually a protected stairway or corridor with a minimum of 30 minutes fire resistance and allow people to escape to a place of total safety plus 30 minutes from inside the property.

Ultimate/Total safety is a place outside of a building or structure that allows a person free egress away from any effects of fire.

We wanted to understand evacuation policies that are in place, especially within high rise blocks in Newcastle. Blocks are not designed to be evacuated; the idea is for flats to compartmentalise a fire should one occur, however the policy is 'If in doubt, get out..

If a fire was to break out on the 5th floor and any persons needed to be evacuated, this would usually be from floors 4, 5 and 6.

The Compliance Officer touched upon the element of human behaviour. Occupier behaviour is a major factor in relation to fires starting. Most accidental fires in dwellings result from occupier carelessness or misuse of equipment or appliances, etc.

As well as being responsible for some fires starting, occupiers' reactions on discovering the fire influence escape and prevention of fire spread.

5. Visits to Blocks

The Compliance Officer took us on visits to two of the high-rise blocks in the city. We wanted to complete this activity to see the range of safety measures in place in regards to fire safety. We visited Molineux Court and The Spinney.

Molineux Court – 14 Floors General Needs Block

There have been a lot of deliberate fires in this block. There were over 14 in a very short space of time. The block has Automatic Release Shutters and sprinklers fitted to the bottom of the bin chutes inside the bin store. When a fire or smoke is detected, the sprinkler system kicks in and the automatic release shutters close.

The Spinney – 14 Floors

This block currently has issues with mobility scooters being stored in the corridors. There have been cases of residents feeding their scooter chargers through their letterboxes. Mark has spoken to the residents and shown videos of the dangers that come with mobility scooters in the past.

The Compliance Officer does make regular visits with a group of residents in the Spinney. The ladies we have spoken to express no concerns around fire safety and do have a good relationship with him. The opinion is that they feel comfortable engaging with him and have no difficulty in approaching him with issues as they arise.

There have been discussions about a plan to build a scooter store on ground level. This will allow a scooter fire to be compartmentalised, should one occur. The plan would mean that residents with mobility scooters will only have to walk from the scooter store to the lift which is a very short distance, then from the lift to their flat.

The Spinney has the use of Mobotix Thermal Imaging Cameras. These detect high temperatures and alert the enquiry centre. The staff can view the cameras remotely, call Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service and they can continue to monitor the fire and update them as and when needed with important updates as they are on route.

These cameras are transferable between blocks, for example, if there was a spate of bin chute fires in Vale House, the camera can be moved over. This will enable YHN to monitor and record their findings and potentially spot trends and patterns in the times of fires, etc.

Again, this block has automatic release shutters, Fireblitz Powder Bomb and sprinklers in the bin store.

There are smoke detectors on each floor of the building (all blocks have these from the 1st floor up). When these detect smoke, the windows at each end of the corridor are automatically opened, allowing some of the smoke to disperse. Sadly, these smoke detectors are not linked to the enquiry centre. Should a fire occur in the corridor, it would not be detected until a resident discovered it, who would then themselves have to contact the fire service.

6. Work Shadowing

A member of SIFT attended a work shadowing session at YHN's enquiry centre to experience the level of calls that come in from residents of high-rise blocks, whether it be to enquire about fire safety or smoke detectors sounding and to speak with staff about how they find the role.

At first glance it, appeared that the staff levels were quite low for the amount of calls coming in. However, after speaking with the staff and witnessing the amount of calls, it became apparent that there is more than enough staff present to handle the call volume.

The process of 'call challenging' is in place when a flats smoke detector sounds. This is where the member of staff contacts the property via the intercom and asks "Is everything ok?". If there was no answer or the resident informs them there is a fire in the property, they would call the fire service and ask them to attend.

If a smoke detector sounded on a number of occasions in a short space of time, this would raise a red flag with YHN. It could mean there is a fault with the system or the resident could be causing the issue.

The enquiry centre has strong relationships with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service (TWFRS), Northumbria Police and the North East Ambulance Service.

On a regular basis, TWFRS and the Police will attend and liaise with staff during investigations. This can be to secure CCTV footage to be used in court, view the CCTV, etc. Staff from the enquiry centre have had to attend court cases to testify that they handed over footage to the relevant authorities.

7. Briefing by Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service

We wanted to speak to the TWFRS and ask them questions around customer engagement and fire safety. A briefing was delivered by Paula and Chloe from the Legislative Fire Safety Team.

How many fires have they attended in tower blocks in Newcastle since 1st April 2019?

Sadly, to be given this information, SIFT would have to put in a Freedom of information request. This was completed through the Compliance Officer.

How many were deliberate and how many were genuine?

The Compliance Officer was able to answer this question alongside the fire service. All of the fires that have been attended, were deliberate.

What is the main cause of fires in high-rises?

The simple answer to this question is arson. Arson can bring a substantial prison sentence. If tried in the magistrate's court, they can impose a maximum sentence of six months and if tried and found guilty in crown court, they can impose a sentence of life imprisonment.

Do you support the 'stay put' policy?

The stay put policy, 'If in doubt, get out' is supported but if residents are in any doubt, they should leave the property. Also, if the fire service advises residents to leave, they should leave.

Have you held any events for people in high-rises this year?

There have been no events held for residents of high-rise blocks this year.

Do you routinely visit high-rise blocks to check on fire safety?

The 'Prevention Education Team' are responsible for visiting the blocks to speak with residents and staff to educate and check on fire safety. The Compliance team will attend each block once a year and complete inspections. They attended every block in the city after Grenfell. There is a meeting set for October 2019 between YHN and TWFRS.

When the building is inspected for fire safety, should there be any serious concerns, they can impose a Section 10 notice which prohibits the buildings use for residents and visitors. The fire service has a higher level of involvement since Grenfell. Legislation, which is currently being consulted on may state that when planning of a new high-rise build is complete, the fire service has the ability to review the plans and have a direct input.

Have you recommended any action on fire safety/prevention in the blocks to either NCC or YHN?

TWFRS complete proactive inspections in all high-rise blocks in the city. They follow up with residents after a fire and offer advice on how to keep themselves safe and put plans in place to address issues. The fire service does offer free home safety checks which includes:

- Detailed and specific safety advice specific to you and your home
- Fitting smoke alarms and issuing protective equipment if necessary
- Offering the opportunity to ask questions.

These take a very short time, normally around 30 to 45 minutes but can vary depending on your personal circumstances.

8. Resident Activity

SIFT held a Resident Activity Focus Group to establish what the customers of high-rise blocks in the city knew what their responsibilities are and what they believe they should be, they were asked:

- What they knew about fire safety
- If they knew what the tenant profile is
- To express what their concerns were
- What activities they would like a chance to participate in to stimulate awareness and discussion around fire safety.

The presentation included slides to promote discussion in the form of small quiz questions. For example, they were shown a video of a Christmas tree and asked "How quickly do you think it takes to engulf the room?" There was a range of answers given then the video was played. As they video was playing, a member of SIFT ran explained that it was a real, dry tree and she explained what the neutral plane is.

At present, the biggest threats in our high-rise blocks as previously mentioned are cases of arson and mobility scooters. A video was shown of a mobility scooter fire and again, they

were talked through the dangers including the high temperatures, the toxic gases that are produced and the implications of scooters being stored in corridors.

Some of the biggest concerns raised by residents were

- YHN don't listen to us
- YHN don't know who lives in their properties
- Social Services are putting people into blocks without thinking whether high-rises are suitable for their needs
- Intercoms never work, when the smoke detector sounds, nobody from the enquiry centre checks in
- The lift intercom button often doesn't work and no one responds when you press it
- There is a long wait period for systems to be repaired which requires us as customers to chase these up ourselves
- There is not one person responsible who you can contact at YHN
- YHN make you feel like a nuisance when reporting issues
- Problems are being reported and re-reported and customers receive no feedback.
- There has been a lot of talk about scooter stores yet there has been no progress in getting them built.

9. Desktop Review

As part of the scoping, we looked at the relevant policies, procedures, comments and complaints.

(a) Regulator of Social Housings Home Regulatory Standard

The Tenancy Standard and Home Standard sadly don't cover fire safety, neither does it cover tenant engagement, which is contained in the Tenant Involvement and Engagement Standard, but which does not touch on fire safety.

(b) Decent Homes Standard

Again, the Decent Homes Standard does not cover fire safety or tenant engagement.

(c) Housing Health and Safety Rating System

The principle of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) is that:
"Any residential premises should provide a safe and healthy environment for any potential occupier or visitor."

To satisfy the above

"A dwelling should be designed, constructed and maintained with non-hazardous material and should be free from both unnecessary and avoidable hazards."

"1.16 – Where the dwelling is part of a large structure, the design, construction and maintenance of that larger structure should provide adequate protection from all potential hazards."

Linking deficiencies and hazards gives an example of how a single deficiency may contribute, to differing degrees, to more than one hazard. The single deficiency of disrepair to a ceiling could allow fire and smoke to spread to other parts of the dwelling.

(d) Fitness for Human Habitation Act

This instructs the landlord to rebuild or reinstate the dwelling in the case of destruction or damage by fire, storm, flood or any other inevitable accident.

As with other policies and procedures this does not cover tenant involvement.

(e) Tenancy Agreement

Fire safety and responsibilities only covers a small element of the tenancy agreement. YHN are responsible for fitting and maintaining smoke and heat detectors and the tenant is responsible for keeping the detectors in a good state of repair, along with agreeing not to store, make or dispose of or allow to accumulate in their homes or surrounds petrol, refuse, liquid petroleum or other combustibles and explosives.

In relation to customer engagement, the tenancy agreement does cover the 'Right to Consultation'. This states that Newcastle City Council "Must consult you before making any changes likely to have a substantial effect on your tenancy".

(f) Sign up procedures for occupants of high-rises

At present there is no specific sign up procedure for those people applying through Tyne and Wear Homes to live in a high-rise block.

(g) Leases issued for high-rise occupants

There is mention in the Eighth Schedule of the Lease that occupiers should "(f) Keep all passages and staircases in the Building clear of obstruction of any kind." In the Ninth Schedule the Lease touches on insurance in the case of fire. There is no other reference to occupiers being aware of their responsibilities in relation to fire safety.

(h) Fire alarms and notices

High-rise blocks across the City have notices displayed on every floor and should be located near the lifts.

What to do if a fire starts in, or close to your flat:

- Alert other people in your flat
- DO NOT tackle the fire yourself unless you are sure it is safe to do so
- Call the fire service by dialling 999. All calls to 999 are free
- Leave the flat immediately closing all doors behind you including the front door to your flat
- If possible, warn your immediate neighbours of the fire
- If you have to leave the building, use the stairs
DO NOT USE THE LIFT.

If there are signs of fire or smoke in the corridor or stairs and you are unable to leave your flat:

- Close your front door
- Close any doors which will help distance you from the fire or smoke
- Call the fire service by dialling 999. Tell them what is happening
- If you have no phone and your flat handset is linked to the enquiry centre, call the enquiry centre from your flat handset, or wave from your window to get the attention of passers by

- Find the window that is furthest away from the fire or smoke. Open it to let the fresh air in.

It also urges residents to “think ahead and know your block” which prompts residents to ask themselves:

- How would you help each other if a fire starts in, or close to your flat?
- Talk now with your family and neighbours – it could save your life.

It tells you that “If in **Doubt** get **Out** – If you **Can’t** phone **999**”.

(i) Range of fire safety systems in blocks

As discussed under ‘Visits to blocks’ section of the report, we looked at the range of fire safety measures that are in place in high-rises across the city.

Currently there are a number of measures in place to help prevent a serious fire breaking out and spreading.

Thermal Imaging Cameras

These have been provided by Mobotix. The device has two directly adjacent lenses, there is also a thermal overlay function with image overlay (thermal and optical) to pinpoint the exact location of hotspots from fires in a visible image.

Cameras are linked to the enquiry centre which when activated, staff can monitor these remotely and convey updates to the fire service as they happen in real time, for example, if there is a sudden temperature change from say 600 degrees to 800, they can inform TWFRS of this.

Automatic Release Shutters and Sprinklers

Automatic Release Shutters and sprinklers have been fitted to all bin chutes located in the bin stores in high-rises. The purpose of these measures is to close off the bin chutes and extinguish a fire should one originate before it becomes too big.

When the smoke detectors in the bin chute stores activate, the automatic release shutters will close off at a very quick speed and the sprinklers, situated above the bins will go off, putting out the fire in that area.

Automatic Opening Vents

Automatic opening vent systems are a ventilation solution that can be integrated into the structure of a building. When these are triggered by smoke detection, the windows automatically open, allowing for the natural ventilation of air and smoke.

These work in part with the fire service using ‘Positive Pressure Ventilation’. This is achieved by forcing air into a building using a fan. This increases the pressure inside relative to atmospheric pressure.

Fire Doors

All properties in high-rise blocks are going through a programme of works to replace all front doors with FD30S fire doors.

FD30S fire doors are solid and secure composite doors that will withstand and hold back a blaze for 30 minutes and are fitted with a smoke seal. The smoke seal is designed to expand

with an elevated heat level stop the toxic smoke from entering the communal areas and into property should a fire occur in the corridor.

These fire doors also have an automatic closing device fitted to the top designed to ensure they close behind you should you need to evacuate in the event of a fire.

(j) High-rise Allocation Policy

Currently there is no allocations policy for those whom have applied to live and moved into a high-rise block.

(k) Evacuation or 'stay put' policy

YHN currently operate a 'stay put' policy. Properties in high-rise blocks are designed to compartmentalise a fire should one occur. Stairwells in high-rise blocks are quite narrow and not built to evacuate on mass. Stairwells can provide however, a place of refuge against fire should the need arise as there will be a door designed to give at least 30 minutes protection.

(l) Complaints and comments about safety in high-rise blocks

Complaints are categorised according to the following:

- Delay in providing service
- Poor quality of service
- Complaint about a member of staff
- Dissatisfaction with policy
- GDPR breach
- Other

If complaints have come through from high-rise blocks, this has not been specifically categorised.

(m) Frequency of contact between YHN, fire service and residents

The frequency of contact between YHN and the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service appears to be quite regular. There is a scheduled meeting for October 2019 between the two organisations; however, the contact frequency between YHN, TWFRS and the residents is not often enough.

(n) Activities intended to stimulate awareness and discussion around fire safety

Again, the rate of activities intended to engage customers in discussion and awareness around fire safety is not often enough.

After Grenfell, as previously stated in this report, there were drop in sessions held for residents to attend and the survey mentioned below. It is reported to us, that there have been no other activities made available.

10. Survey

SIFT wanted to compile a survey and send this out to residents of high-rise blocks across the city. YHN, stemming from work with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) put out a survey in July this year. Over 400 customers responded to that survey, a follow-on survey was sent out with over 350 responses so far and a third will be sent out at a later date. We felt that if customers received too many questions surrounding the same topic, they may lose interest and be reluctant to further participate.

12. Customer Engagement Recommendations – Action Plan

Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
1. The current Customer Engagement structure should be reshaped to increase the frequency of contact with residents of high-rise blocks				
2. A range of activities including some hands-on tasks such as fire behaviour training should be made available with the aim of boosting the number of customers engaging, to promote awareness and discussion around fire safety				
3. Placing notices in blocks, Homes and People and on social media to promote customer engagement around fire safety.				

13. Additional Recommendations – Action Plan

Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
1. Investigations should be made with the relevant contractors so the smoke detectors in corridors are linked to the enquiry centre				
2. Offer help to residents to replace equipment that could pose a fire risk				
3. A lettings policy for those moving into high-rise blocks should be created and implemented				
4. Plans should be looked into and ideally set into motion to remove mobility scooters being stored in locations that could pose a risk to personal and building safety				
5. Documents used by staff on tenancy sign up should include more questions to risk assess those moving into high-rise blocks				

Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
6. YHN should look into offering an annual service check on mobility scooters of residents of high-rises				
7. Investigations into the cost of an annual scheme where residents can dispose of unwanted goods free of charge or at a low cost to help eliminate clutter and possible hoarding.				