

Leaders Cabinet Briefing note – SBC's response following the Grenfell Tower fire

At the last Cabinet Meeting I referred to the shocking and tragic events that had occurred in the Grenfell Tower block fire, which happened on the same day as our Cabinet meeting and I offered condolences on behalf of Cabinet.

As the scale of the disaster has unfolded it has raised national concern about renovation works to high-rise blocks of flats and general fire safety measures in place for all buildings. I thought it would be useful to give a update of the position in Swindon.

We have eight residential high-rise blocks of flats; six of these are 10-storey residential blocks located in the Parks and Penhill, George Hall Court a 7-storey sheltered housing scheme located in Park South and the David Murray John (DMJ) Tower which has residential accommodation to the top half of a 21-storey building located in the town centre. We have current robust Fire Risk Assessments in place for all our blocks, but naturally we have taken the opportunity to update these since the Grenfell Tower fire.

Due to the significant concern and media coverage, it was important to reassure residents about the fire safety measures that we already have in place for our high-rise blocks of flats. We've issued two press releases, written to all tenants and leaseholders, issued a leaflet with frequently asked questions and undertaken fire safety visits to the blocks with Ward Councillors; Cabinet Member for Housing and Community Safety, local MP's and Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service (DWFRS) and myself, to listen to any concerns residents may have about fire safety and answer questions. DWFRS continue to offer Safe & Well home visits to offer advice on keeping homes safe.

It is understood that the external cladding used on the Grenfell Tower created a risk to fire safety. We have notified the Department for Communities and Local Government that none of our high-rise blocks have been refurbished with the same Aluminium Composite Material panels or cladding that may have been a contributory factor for the rapid spread of fire at Grenfell.

Our high-rise blocks of flats are constructed to prevent the spread of flame between compartments (from one flat to another), in the event of a fire. The layout and design of our 10-storey high-rise blocks provides an intermediate lobby with a dry riser for fighting a fire and separate protected shaft with stairs for the means of escape. The DMJ Tower has two protected shafts with stairs and positive pressure fans, whilst George Hall Court has an automatic ventilation system to the stairwell that also operates when the fire alarm is activated to keep these clear from smoke in the event of a fire.

It is not a requirement to install a communal fire alarm to high-rise blocks, but we have put in this extra safety measure along with independent smoke detectors to provide early warning in the event of a fire. Currently, sprinkler systems and internal fire doors are not fitted within our residential high rise blocks and this will be a key consideration for future improvement and refurbishment works.

We have completed a full fire alarm test to the six 10-storey blocks with DWFRS since the Grenfell Tower fire and plan to complete the same exercise to George Hall Court and the DMJ Tower during July 2017.

We have approximately 90 medium-rise blocks of flats, which are generally 3 or 4 storeys high and just over 500 low-rise 2 storey blocks of flats. The medium and low-rise blocks of flats were also constructed with compartments to prevent the spread of flame, in the event of a fire. There are some non-standard doors fitted to leasehold flats, this is where leaseholders have replaced the fire door with their own front door and officers are taking urgent action with leaseholders to get these replaced with fire doors as quickly as possible.

Some tenants and Ward Councillors have raised concern about the External Wall Insulation fitted, as part of our on-going modernisation programme, to our non-traditional low-rise housing stock. We currently have a programme in place to refurbish approximately 220 properties in Pinehurst and Meadowcroft. We are planning joint fire safety visits with Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Rescue Service to meet with residents so that we can listen to their concerns and give advice on keeping homes safe.

To reiterate we have not fitted Aluminium Composite Material panels or cladding on any previous or current refurbishment programmes of work to our housing stock.

There has been some national concern that similar panels may have been used for schools specifically those buildings that are residential or are 4 storeys or more in height. We have notified the Education & Skills Funding Agency that all the council maintained schools have a Fire Risk Assessment, which are currently being reviewed. We have also briefed Head teachers about Aluminium Composite panels so that they can request an inspection if they have any concerns, and can be reassured about their buildings. It is important to note that none of the Council's school are residential and none are 4 or more storeys high.