

Devon County Council fire safety update

Report of the Head of Digital Transformation and Business Support

1. Summary

This report provides an update on the Council's fire safety measures and the actions which DCC took following the Grenfell Tower fire on 14th June 2017, and the fire in the block of flats housing students from the University of Bolton in November 2019.

It sets out DCCs response following these events and confirms DCCs position in relation to cladding on its property estate (including the Local Authority maintained schools estate), highlights the key focus of the government's interim report into the Grenfell tragedy and details DCCs current fire safety processes and procedures.

2. Background

The extent of the fire at Grenfell and significant loss of so many lives is being attributed to three main factors - the 'chimney' effect created by the exterior retrofit cladding, the resultant spread of the fire over the 20 floors combined with the procedures in place for responding to fire.

The incident in Bolton over 2 years later raised similar concerns over the safety of high-rise buildings and blocks of flats, however the cladding used on the building in Bolton (high pressure laminate – HPL) was different from the aluminium composite cladding (ACM) material used on the Grenfell Tower.

The Government's response to the Grenfell fire in 2017 required Local Authorities to provide property asset information for residential buildings with cladding over 30 metres high.

It is important to note that in the context of fire safety DCC do not have 'high risk' buildings in terms of their height, occupancy or material.

Following the Grenfell fire, DCC confirmed to the government that it does not own or manage residential accommodation with cladding over 30 metres high and that DCC are not a housing authority.

3. DCC Actions

A DCC officer group was convened on the 28th June 2017 to agree an appropriate 'fire safety review' action plan for DCCs property estate. The group, led by DCCs Maintenance and Compliance Manager included senior officer representation from Health and Safety, the Built Environments Team, NPS SW Ltd (DCCs property services provider) and Devon Norse (DCCs FM provider).

The group were tasked with reviewing DCCs existing fire safety processes and procedures, overseeing a desk top review of fire safety information, arranging on-site inspections for residential accommodation (currently 3 sites detailed in section 6 of this report) and assessing whether Aluminium Composite Material cladding has been used on DCC buildings.

Whilst DCC are not a housing authority, fire protection surveys were carried out across the entire DCC estate and confirmed that we do not have residential buildings over 18m with ACM cladding (used on the Grenfell building).

Following the Bolton fire in 2019 the group instructed NPS SW Ltd, as DCCs property services provider, to review the estate for the presence of high pressure laminate cladding. NPS SW Ltd have been confirmed that we do not have sites with HPL cladding similar to that found on the student accommodation in Bolton.

4. DCCs fire safety review findings

The review concluded that DCCs approach to Fire Safety was robust and compared well to the approach taken by other comparable organisations. This was evidenced by a survey of other organisations co-ordinated by DCCs Health and Safety Manager.

The DCC review identified the following areas, where, in light of the events at Grenfell, it was considered appropriate to strengthen DCCs approach:

- **Fire door inspections.** DCC now commissions an annual inspection of approximately 1,991 fire doors in 55 premises on the DCC property estate. All inspections, maintenance and replacement of fire doors are undertaken by an accredited contractor. This forms part of a monthly Compliance Monitoring report.

Local Authority Maintained schools are responsible for maintaining fire doors and fire door inspections form part of the condition survey inspection process undertaken by NPS.

- **Condition Surveys.** An addition to the quinquennial surveys to include explicit reference to identifying changes to the structure of the building (including any cladding) and the consideration of fire compartmentalisation (to contain the outbreak of fire).
- **Fire Risk Assessments.** A central record of site Fire Risk Assessments (using DCCs existing Property Management Information System)

5. DCCs Fire Safety and Fire Risk Assessment policies and procedures

Prior to the Grenfell Tower fire, DCC had in place (and continue with) the following procedures and processes:

- 6 monthly routine inspections of fire alarms and emergency lighting across the DCC maintained estate
- Compliance monitoring – monthly reporting by NPS SW Ltd to DCC to ensure the inspection regime is within the agreed tolerance (and subsequent reporting to Digital Transformation and Business Support Leadership Team through Performance Management monitoring).

- A rolling programme of health and safety audits (a site inspection every three years) by DCC Health and Safety Team including a review of Fire Risk Assessments and extinguisher servicing. Since 2017 the full cycle of audits has now been completed.
- Mandatory training for the designated site Premises Manager.
- Relevant and current guidance and health and safety policies and procedures accessible on-line.
- Minimum annual visits to site by NPS Surveyors and/or DCCs Maintenance and Compliance Manager.
- Quinquennial condition surveys.
- Annual servicing of fire extinguishers.

6. DCCs approach to fire

In the event of the fire alarm sounding at a DCC building or school, a full evacuation is invoked with the exception of DCCs 2 Dementia Centres (Woodland Vale and Mapleton) and the Atkinson unit.

For these 3 sites the approach is different because of the nature of the client groups (in the event of a fire occupiers are contained in 'safe' zones depending on where the fire is located).

Sprinkler systems are not routinely included in the design of DCC buildings – the priority is focussed on the safe evacuation of building users. Fire alarm systems and the evacuation process are tested on a regular basis.

7. Commissioned services, leased premises and Academy schools

Where DCC assets are leased to other users (including those as part of a commissioning arrangement such as Library and Youth Services and for Academy schools which are not maintained by DCC) the responsibility for the property is set out in the occupancy agreement, placing the day to day responsibility on the occupier as tenant. Commissioned Services can 'buy-back' into DCCs Service Term contract arrangements for services such as the inspection of fire alarms and emergency lighting.

For the schools estate similar arrangements exist for the servicing of fire safety equipment. The majority of Devon schools pay to use DCCs Service Term Contract arrangements with the remaining schools taking responsibility for commissioning and confirming that appropriate arrangements are in place.

8. Grenfell – Interim Report

An *“Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety”* was announced by government in July 2017 following the Grenfell Tower tragedy and was led by Dame Judith Hackitt. It examined building and fire safety regulations and related compliance and enforcement, with a focus on high rise residential buildings.

An interim report, *“Building a Safer Future” - An Implementation Plan* was published on 18 December 2017 and was the government's initial response to the final recommendations. The final report *“Independent Review of Building and Fire Safety”* being published on 17 May 2018. This final report set out over 50 recommendations for the government on how to deliver a more robust regulatory system for the future.

The reports have set out the far-reaching programme of work that it intends to undertake to improve building safety and ensure that people who live in high-rise residential buildings are safe and feel safe, now and in the future.

In January 2020 a new, national Building Safety Regulator (BSR) was established in shadow form by the Health and Safety Executive.

The BSR's main three functions include;

- overseeing safety and standards of all buildings;
- 'directly' assuring safety of higher risk buildings; and
- improving the competence of those 'responsible for managing and overseeing' works.

The BSR will ensure that high rise buildings and the people who live in them are being kept safe, with new powers to raise and enforce higher standards of safety and performance across all buildings.

Devon County Council have no residential, high rise properties on its estate.

9. Equality Considerations

None – this report is provided for information and updates the Committee in relation to fire safety.

10. Risk Management Considerations

This policy/proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken/included to safeguard the Council's position.

11. Summary

The approach which DCC has taken in light of the events at Grenfell Tower and Bolton has been measured and appropriate to the profile of DCCs property portfolio. DCC are not a housing authority and we do not have high rise residential property, however, as a public authority with an estate (including sizeable office buildings and a limited number of specialist residential units) a review of our Fire Safety procedures and protocols, as well as an assessment of the estate in terms of risk was carried out.

A number of actions and processes have been implemented as a result of the review to further strengthen DCCs approach to managing Fire Safety.

The government's interim report has highlighted a number of key areas of focus, and it is likely there may be a 'tightening' of current legislation in the future.

It is not yet clear whether the government will recommend additional fire safety protection measures for new and existing properties and if so whether this would apply only to residential and/or high-rise properties.

DCC will need to consider the practical and financial implications of any recommendations set out in the final government's report.

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Policy, Corporate, Resources and Asset Management (Leader of the Council): Councillor John Hart

Rob Parkhouse Head of Service

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

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Background Paper	Date	File Reference
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Nil

The above mentioned Reports are published on the Council's Website at:

<http://democracy.devon.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?bcr=1>