

## **HLRA COMMITTEE MEETING 23rd SEPTEMBER 2019**

**COMMITTEE PRESENT:** Grace (Chair), Danny, Josh, Kim, Yvonne, Roger (Secretary)

**CAMDEN OFFICERS PRESENT:** Gavin Haynes (Director of Property Management Supporting Communities), Dominic Johnson (Head of Safer Homes), John Brett (Director Resident Safety), Steve Bouton (Principal Fire Safety Officer), Caroline Bialobrzcka (Team Manager Fire Safety Works)

**RESIDENTS PRESENT:** Grazyna Korbel, Deborah Bourne, Julia James, Mark.

**COUNCILLORS PRESENT:** Anna Wright, Oliver Lewis

**APOLOGIES:** Alison

### **1. PRELIMINARY HLRA STATEMENT**

Grace pointed out that all residents were given an assurance by Cllrs Meric Apac and Oliver Lewis that no fire exits to the roofs would be locked before residents had been consulted and options had been put forward (Cllr Lewis letter of 16 March 2018).

The HLRA regards this meeting as an information meeting, not a consultation, which is yet to take place.

The HLRA would like to note for the record that it is unhappy that the fire exits were removed from three refurbished blocks on Makepeace, (29-39, 57-64, 85-92), without residents or the TRA being informed.

Gavin replied that from 2008 the design strategy for those three blocks was to upgrade fire safety and compartmentalisation so they would comply with a stay-put policy - fire separation between flats and floors, a protected staircase, hard-wired smoke/fire alarms. This negated the need for a fire exit to the roof and the hatches in the ceilings on the top floor were only for access to services. They are not suitable as fire exits. This was the approved plan from the start.

### **2. RESIDENTS' OBSERVATIONS ON THE THREE REFURBISHED BLOCKS**

Grazyna said the initial work on the blocks was done so poorly that another team of contractors (Engie) has been brought in to redo much of it. Residents do not have confidence that the fire safety works have been carried out properly, especially where pipe work runs through the building.

Steve replied that contractors had signed off the work on all cupboards and risers, labelled with their names, and they would not have done so without being certain they were safe. He had inspected the work that has been completed and considered it looked good.

Grazyna said there are gaps at the bottom of her and others fire doors. Steve pointed out that smoke rises so the bottom of the doors is not important. By the time smoke begins to come out of the bottom, the resident would have had plenty of time to exit the flat or be rescued.

Grace pointed out that the under floor work in the three refurbished blocks was so poor that residents had been moved from one flat to another while remedial work was done. How can residents have confidence in the compartmentalisation?

Steve replied that the remedial work would give residents 60 minutes safety in their flats from a fire in another flat and, with a protected staircase, ample time to evacuate downwards.

Grazyna and Grace both pointed out that compartmentalisation only works if residents comply with its demands, such as not cluttering up communal areas with obstructions and combustible

material, not removing door closers and not propping open fire doors (often done because off the excessive heat in the blocks due to inadequate lagging of hot water pipes).

Steve agreed that these are major problems. Dominic said that Camden has a pilot project to educate residents on all these matters and will roll it out to all estates.

Grazyna said there is a hatch in the lobby to her flat which has been open for months in spite of her reporting it to the Caretaker. This must be a fire hazard. Gavin said the old reporting system was cumbersome and they are introducing a new app for Caretakers that should speed it up. The Caretaking system is being thoroughly overhauled.

Grazyna objected strongly to the lack of consultation when the hatch was locked not only because it stopped access to the roof but also access to the services. When the tank in the roof overflowed, Camden said it would take four hours to get someone to repair it; meanwhile water was flooding throughout the building. She managed to stop the flooding herself because she could get into the service area. Gavin said Camden is improving its response and water and electrics should be serviced and repaired by qualified personnel, not residents.

Yvonne asked about fire alarms; could they be routed straight to fire stations. Steve said this would result in too many false alarms for a fire service already overstretched. Grace asked about the battery back-up to hard-wired alarms in the event of a power cut. Steve said the lithium batteries are triple charged and had 72 hours back-up in a power cut - ample time for the FRS to respond. They are also tamper-proof with no danger of people extracting batteries for other uses.

Grazyna asked if there are alarms in the loft with the services. Steve said they would consider this.

Yvonne said she was concerned about the proximity of her alarm to her cooker. Steve assured her that those alarms only went off if there was heat with the smoke, multi-detector alarms. They would not go off if she burnt her toast.

Yvonne wondered whether fire blankets were a good idea in kitchens. Steve said that, like fire extinguishers, they were only good if you had been trained to use them (he had burnt his hands using one incorrectly). Current policy is always in the event of a fire, evacuate to safety and let the fire brigade deal with it.

Grace summarised the situation by saying:

- the initial fire safety work in the three blocks was done so badly that it has needed major remedial work
- the residents have little faith in the work and do not always comply with the demands of compartmentalisation
- a second exit to the roof would still be desirable
- access to the lofts would be desirable for residents to deal with emergencies with the services
- In the meantime residents should be given keys to the hatches.

Gavin offered to give detailed specifications of these blocks to residents so they could see exactly what fire safety work has been done.

### **3. ALL OTHER BLOCKS**

Caroline outlined the fire safety work to be carried out in all the other blocks, as laid out in Suket Patel's letter of 12th September 2019.

Gavin pointed out that any use of roof areas presents Health and Safety issues. Dominic said Camden had carried out feasibility options to make the areas safe for residents by re-organising pavements, railings, re-surfacing, replacing spiral staircases, doors and gantries. The roofs could be turned into amenity spaces but at a cost of around £2.3 million. He said 14 paired blocks had been looked at. Roger pointed out there are 16 such blocks (as well as 5 joined).

If the roofs were used as fire escape routes only, the cost would be similar. Dominic said he would give this report to the HLRA.

Gavin said these would be major works entailing a proportionate charge to leaseholders. Grace questioned this as surely if the work was only to make the roofs safe for a fire exit it would be fire safety work and Camden had a budget for this from the Government. Gavin said this budget was for work such as replacing cladding whereas the roof work would be structural.

Josh said that the roofs had been there as fire exits from the time the estate was built, over 80 years ago. Leaseholders had bought top floor flats in good faith that they could use the roofs in the event of fire. It would be wrong now either to charge them for it or to lock the exits.

Gavin said the options were either to lock the fire exits to the roof or make the roof safe.

Grace asked whether the blocks could be compartmentalised. Gavin said they could not. So Grace asked whether the policy would be stay-put or evacuate. Gavin and Steve both agreed it must be to evacuate. Therefore, Grace argued, there should be a second exit for residents and that should be onto the roof. Steve disagreed. He said the hard-wired fire/smoke alarm systems would give early detection and warning giving residents time to evacuate downwards. With fire doors to all flats, the protected staircase environment would be safe for 60 minutes. However, spiral staircases are not considered safe as some residents could not negotiate them.

John pointed out another objection to using gantries over roofs - smoke rises and so people could be moving upwards into more danger. Steve said the LFB were not in favour of roof top evacuation. What they can do is intervene within 7 to 10 minutes of a call-out.

Grace pointed out that the Local Government Association's 'Fire Safety in Purpose Built Blocks of Flats' gives the roof as an option: "Current benchmark design guidance recognises that escape routes may be by way of the roof of the block" (section 61 - page 91).

Gavin suggested residents should go on a walkabout with consultants and officers to look at the roofs. John Brett will liaise.

Grace asked who will ultimately decide. Gavin said that officers give technical advice and costings to Council but the elected Council makes the final decision. They need to take into account their wider programmes.

Anna spoke of the balance of risks - fire safety against Health and Safety. It would be quite wrong for Camden to say that we will make you safe but you must pay for it. All the options come with 'ifs', but Camden must ultimately listen to residents and trust them. She asked Roger about his experience and he said Camden should respect residents as adults and not try to wrap them in cotton wool. For years, residents have policed activity on the roofs, as he did with teenage drinking. Long-term residents cannot recall any accidents on the roofs.

Josh pointed out that roofs can be used in an anti-social manner but that is a separate issue and he has not met anyone who wants the roofs locked for this reason.

Oliver recalled an earlier meeting he had with Meric when they promised residents a consultation on the fire exits and to look into making the roofs an amenity. There are safety issues and experts recommend evacuating downwards, not upwards. John said this is the LFB's recommendation and any alternative would have to be looked at by them.

Grace said the HLRA is not looking for a general amenity on the roofs, just an escape route. Anna said if the work on the roofs is for fire safety only it might fall into a different category for financing.

Anna wondered whether the fire alarm system could automatically open the fire escapes. John said this is possible. Grace said residents want to keep the manual system - nothing locked.

**ACTION: THE THREE REFURBISHED BLOCKS**

- Details of fire safety work carried out, including additional/remedial work, to be sent to HLRA
- Assurance that the fire-boarding and other safety work in 29-39 Makepeace is adequate and which contractors carried out the work
- Please liaise with Grazyna Korbel about specific issues. Grazyna to be liaison between residents of this block and the TRA.

**OTHER BLOCKS**

- Gavin will liaise with Grace to arrange a walkabout of fire escapes to roofs after which another meeting will be held
- Current fire risk assessments will be sent to the HLRA
- The report on turning the roofs into amenity spaces will be sent to the HLRA, including costings.

The meeting ended at 7.30pm.

Next scheduled meeting AGM Wednesday 16th October at 7pm in the Community Centre.