

BOROUGH SERVICES POLICY AND REVIEW PANEL

Meeting held on Monday, 13th November, 2017 at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

Cllr A.R. Newell (Chairman)
Cllr R.L.G. Dibbs (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr T.D. Bridgeman
Cllr Liz Corps
Cllr A.H. Crawford
Cllr S.J. Masterson
Cllr Marina Munro
Cllr B.A. Thomas

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Cllr M. Staplehurst.

12. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 11th September, 2017 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

13. FIRE SAFETY ISSUES IN RUSHMOOR

The Chairman welcomed guests and Members to the meeting and explained that the meeting had been arranged to examine in more detail the Motion that had been submitted by Cllr J.J. Preece to the Council in July, 2017. The Council had agreed that the Motion should be referred to the Borough Services Policy and Review Panel. The element of the Motion to be considered was as follows:

“Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority to ensure the HFRS is fully funded and resourced to keep the residents of Rushmoor safe, including having all the necessary trained personnel, equipment and procedures in place so that fires at all levels of the tallest residential buildings can be tackled effectively.”

In attendance were:

- Neil Odin – Chief Officer Elect Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority
- Rob Cole – Head of Community Safety Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority
- Gary Jackson – Fire Brigade Union
- Ryan Thurman – Group Commander (North Hampshire Group) Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority
- Robert Mills – Regional Housing Director, Accent Housing
- Neil Cox – Director of Asset Management, Accent Housing
- Hilary Smith – Private Sector Housing Manager, Rushmoor Borough Council

Mr. Odin stated that the fire at Grenfell Tower in London had been unprecedented, and it was thought that a number of elements had contributed to the disaster, including the cladding and internal maintenance controls. It was reported that several fires had occurred in high-rise buildings in the past, but never on the scale of Grenfell.

The Panel noted the fire at Shirley Towers, Southampton where two firefighters had died in 2010. Since the events at Shirley Towers, the Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service (HFRS) had invested heavily in advanced firefighting equipment. This, combined with well-maintained housing stock and well trained fire fighters, ensured the best possible level of protection for residents. HFRS, as the enforcing authority, had the ability to restrict use of any building that was deemed unsafe.

Mr. Cole advised that all high-rise buildings should be built/converted to a certain standard and areas should be compartmentalised to hold fires inside proportioned areas. The responsible person/owner of a building was responsible for ensuring the building was safe and up to standard. The Fire Service audited buildings and had the power to enforce restrictions where necessary. Site specific operational support plans were available for residential buildings above 18 meters and each included risk information. The information was available on all fire vehicles and crews regularly visited the blocks to check water supplies and dry risers and familiarise themselves with the buildings.

The Panel was informed of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Resilience Forum (HIOW LRF), a group consisting of representatives from the emergency services, local authorities and other organisations who potentially may be involved in an emergency. Post Grenfell Tower, a decision had been made by the HIOW LRF to assess each of the 272 high-rise buildings in Hampshire, five of which were located in Rushmoor. All cladding had been tested to determine if it was Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) which had been present at Grenfell Tower. It was noted that the cladding on the cladded buildings in Rushmoor was not ACM.

Public reassurance was also an area of concern after the events at Grenfell Tower. The HFRS had used social media to reach large numbers of people to offer reassurance and advice on fire safety. "Safe and Well" visits had also been organised for concerned individuals. At these visits residents were given advice on fire safety and how to prevent fires occurring. In addition, fire stations in locations near to high-rise blocks were opened to the public. Rushmoor Fire Service had also visited the two main high-rise blocks in the area (Alexander House and Stafford House), to offer reassurance to residents.

It was noted that five buildings in total had been inspected in Rushmoor, and letters of minor deficiencies had been sent to the properties' owners. Alexander House and Stafford House had been inspected twice and all five buildings were now up to the standards required by HFRS.

Mr. Mills of Accent Housing then gave an overview from its perspective as owners of Alexander and Stafford Houses. The Panel noted that Accent owned 22,000 properties across the country, 460 of which were in Rushmoor. Alexander and Stafford Houses were two of the tallest tower buildings in their portfolio.

Since the events at Grenfell, Accent had undertaken to carry out independent surveys of the buildings; these included independent testing of the cladding and insulation, a building survey to determine fire integrity, fire risk assessments and a tenancy audit. These measures had all been taken in addition to the HFRS requirements. Communication with residents in the blocks had also been a priority for Accent to keep everyone informed of the approach being taken. Reassurance visits had also been made to some individuals. The findings from the experts had identified 85 areas of work, which included fire stopping, fire doors, fire alarm panel conflicts and fire evacuation policies. It was estimated that the works had cost in the region of £75,000, all of which would be met by Accent. The fire evacuation policy evaluation had reinforced the “stay put” policy and Accent had ensured that the policy was consistent in both blocks. Signage had been updated and letters had been sent to all residents to advise of the “stay put” policy, copies of which would be shared with Members. It was noted that all safety measures would be reviewed in light of any recommendations from the Grenfell Tower inquiry. With regard to communal areas, it was noted that Accent took a zero tolerance approach to items left in these areas and ensured that all communal areas were clear of clutter and if issues of anti social behaviour within the buildings were reported then action would be taken.

The Panel discussed the presentations and asked a number of questions. It was advised that the “stay put” policy would be considered as part of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, however residential high-rise buildings were designed with the “stay put” policy in mind. It was reported that six fires had occurred since the Grenfell Tower disaster in high-rise buildings and all residents, unless affected by smoke, had stayed in their flats and the fires had stay contained within the compartment in which they had started.

In regard to the fact that Alexander and Stafford Houses were both built as commercial buildings, the Panel was reassured that the conversions met all standards of building control. A discussion was held on the complexities of planning regulations and how the HFRS could be more involved as a statutory consultee on fire safety matters. It was noted that the Fire Service would lobby the Government on this once the inquiry was complete.

In response to a question relating to communication with the large Nepalese community in the Borough, some of which were illiterate in their own language, it was advised that the fire service worked closely with partner agencies on these issues and had produced pictorial information and Nepalese language videos to convey the importance of fire safety. It was noted that a pre-recorded Nepalese message was being trialled by the Police whilst an interpreter was located. It was hoped that this option could be rolled out to all emergency services in due course. It was also advised that a bid had been submitted to the Police and Crime Commissioner for funding for a Nepalese speaking liaison officer. The Fire Service was also keen to work with ward councillors to ensure the messages of fire safety were widely spread across the Borough.

A discussion was held around fire fighting equipment and its capabilities. It was reported that the equipment available to the London Fire Brigade was not as cutting

edge as that used in Hampshire and, as far as high reaching equipment was concerned, it was noted that HFRS had access to the highest reaching equipment as well as aerial appliances. The advice for internal equipment such as fire extinguisher and dry risers was that they should only be operated by trained personnel and smoke detectors should be fitted in each individual flat as well as the communal areas. In regard to sprinkler systems, it was noted that all new builds should be fitted with a system and the Fire Service was lobbying to ensure all existing buildings over 30 metres high were retro fitted with sprinkler systems going forward. In response to a query it was advised that inspections on high-rise (18 metres and above) buildings were carried out every 1-3 years and the schedule for each building was risk based.

The Panel discussed the issues around supporting fire services across the borders and the implications if a major fire were to break out in Rushmoor and the crew had been dispatched across the border. It was advised that the primary assumption was that there would not be two major fires at any one time, however, a skeleton crew would always be available in the Borough with the option to get support from other services across the country to assist if required. In addition, it was advised that, during the Farnborough Airshow, the HFRS ensured that the Rushmoor service was backfilled to allow for enough fire fighters in the event of a major event.

In response to a query regarding commercial buildings, it was advised that these were probably one of the safest elements as people were awake and alert and could raise the alarm at an early stage. In the case of hospitals and airports, it was reported that staff were highly trained to deal with such incidents.

The Panel discussed developers/housing managers locally who may be seen to be “cutting corners” it was felt that the Fire Service should be informed of any such issues.

In conclusion it was agreed that the Panel felt satisfied that the Fire Service within Rushmoor operated at a high level and was well equipped to deal with fire safety matters. Enormous pressure had been put on the Fire Service since the events at Grenfell Tower and it was felt that locally the response had been unprecedented, professional and carried out in a timely manner. Members of the Panel felt reassured by the professional presentations and approaches described.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

14. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Panel noted the current work programme.

A request was made to invite the Stonham Group to attend the meeting on 22nd January, 2018.

The meeting closed at 8.55 pm.

CLLR A.R. NEWELL (CHAIRMAN)