

6 August 2009

Letter to LA Chief Executives
Heads of Housing all Local authorities.

Our Ref:
Your Ref:

UPDATE ON FIRE AT LAKANAL HOUSE, CAMBERWELL, LONDON

I wrote to you on 10 July about the Fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell, London and drew your attention to a feature in the building that could undermine the fire protection of the common escape corridors. The purpose of my letter then was to ask that you consider the emerging fire safety issues in the context of the risk assessments that are in place for these or similar types of building.

As we now know, the cause of the fire in Lakanal House has been identified as a faulty television set. Investigations into the reasons behind the rapid spread of the fire are still on-going, and they may take some time to complete. However, we feel that housing providers may benefit from some further advice on scope of the risk assessments that are necessary to ensure an adequate level of fire protection is in place both in the common parts of the building and in the individual dwellings themselves.

One of the areas likely to be subject to investigation is the integrity of the passive fire protection measures following major refurbishment or alterations. With this in mind, you should clearly specify passive fire protection measures when undertaking major refurbishment or alteration works. It is important to ensure these are understood by both the main contractor of the work as well as those contracted to install or alter the protection.

Attached in Annex A is detailed advice on risk assessments, taking fire safety in the common parts of the building under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. It is taken from a recent letter London Fire Brigade have made available to Chief Fire Officers and reflects their knowledge of the incident and of other fires in blocks of flats. This may be of use to you in understanding risk assessments in your stock.

Finally, you may wish to be aware that Sir Ken Knight's Report into the Camberwell fire has been published today and can be found on the Communities website at

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/fire/resilienceresponse/camberwellfire/>

I have asked the Tenant Service Authority to write separately to Registered Social Landlords.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Terrie Alafat". The signature is written in a dark ink on a light-colored background.

Terrie Alafat
Director
Housing Delivery and Homelessness

Fire safety risk assessments under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005

The following advice is drawn from London Fire Brigade's knowledge of the incident at Lakanal House and of other fires in blocks of flats.

It aims to give those responsible for the safety of such buildings an indication of those areas which are likely to need to be covered to ensure that any fire safety risk assessment carried out to comply with the provisions of the Fire Safety Order is likely to be considered suitable and sufficient.

- Fire risk assessments must consider the structure of the premises including fire resistance and fire stopping between common parts and residential accommodation. Although premises may have been constructed with appropriate compartmentation to prevent fire spread (including that provided by flat doors fitted with effective self-closing devices), fire stopping and fire resistance, the ongoing presence of effective provision needs to be reasonably confirmed and monitored through on-going review. Any defects not identified at the construction stage or arising from wear and tear, vandalism or works during the lifetime of the building (eg, introduction or renewal of services, decoration, repairs and refurbishment - which should be managed to avoid compromising fire safety - and changes made by residents) can then be identified and addressed.
- A fire may occur in a flat, or a resident's flat may be involved or affected by a fire elsewhere in the premises (eg, via external fire spread). The fire resisting construction etc noted above must ensure (so far as is reasonably practicable) that relevant persons (residents and others) can make a safe escape via common internal and/or external escape routes.
- Attention must be given to the potential surface spread of flame and the fire resistance of wall and ceiling linings and structures in the means of escape.
- Effective management controls must be in place to ensure means of escape are not used for storage of combustible materials or items that block or impede use of the means of escape and that the means of escape is sufficiently obvious and illuminated, particularly at night.
- The ability of fire to enter or develop in voids such as ducting, risers and false ceilings must be checked and considered. Where fire or products of combustion enter or develop in such spaces rapid spread both horizontally and vertically may occur if a suitable route is available (eg, appropriate cavity barriers and fire stopping are not present or are damaged).
- Residents in blocks of flats should be made aware of the appropriate action to take in case of fire, as determined by the fire risk assessment, and the means of escape available to them. Fire action notices or other means of passing fire safety information should be provided for residents, maintenance staff and visitors.