

Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service Response



Introduction.

This submission will provide the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service response to the terms of reference provided in continuance of the inquiry that will inform the evidence session on fire safety in the private high rise residential sector.

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service suspended all programmed business fire safety audit work to focus on the high rise residential sector. All high rise residential buildings of 6 floors or above, in both the private and public-sector, were subject to a Business Fire Safety audit. Of the 81 premises audited between 19/06/2018 and the 26/07/2018 a total of 69 are private high rise residential properties.

The committee request that the following terms of reference are considered in the response:

- How has the private sector responded to concerns about fire safety in high rise residential blocks?
- What is the extent of remedial work that needs to be done to meet fire safety standards in Wales and what arrangements are in place to cover the costs?
- How are leaseholders / residents in Wales being informed about fire safety measures in their block? More broadly, to what extent are residents' views about fire safety being listened to and addressed?
- What, if any, additional practical or financial support is needed from the Welsh or UK Governments to help ensure high rise blocks are safe?

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How has the private sector responded to concerns about fire safety in high rise residential blocks?

The majority of high rise residential private sector buildings within the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service area did not present the same risks as those immediately evident at the Grenfell Tower disaster. There are no properties within the height bracket specified that have a clad external façade. Of the 69 premises only two



identified themselves as having deficiencies above those that could be categorised as minor; the remainder were found, when audited, to be displaying a satisfactory level of fire safety compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

The two premises that have given greatest cause for concern appear to have issues regarding compartmentation, predominantly within the interior of the blocks. One of these premises had been receiving the attention of the Fire and Rescue Service for some time prior to June 2017. Both the blocks of interest implemented interim measures in accordance with National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) guidance including a waking watch, an extension to the scope of the existing fire alarm system and following risk assessment applied the principles of simultaneous evacuation.

What is the extent of remedial work that needs to be done to meet fire safety standards in Wales and what arrangements are in place to cover costs?

In the majority of blocks the required works are minor in nature and cost, requiring work to fire doors, signage, improvements to testing regimes and management of escape routes.

The combined remedial works in both blocks of specific interest appear to be related to issues involving the fire resisting compartmentation within the interior, the protection of structural steelwork and the fire-stopping measures in the external façade. In both blocks these issues extend into the residential as well as the common parts of the premises. It should be noted that both blocks do not have the same or same combination of issues. These works can be considered to be a major undertaking to resolve.

This involvement of two distinct areas, common and residential, of these blocks attracts the requirements of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 to be applied to the common parts and those contained within the Housing Act 2014 to be applied to the interior of the apartments and the external façade. In accordance with directions given by both the National Fire Chiefs Council and Welsh Government, the responsibility for regulation of the residential parts and the external façade has been placed with the relevant Local Authority.



In relation to the arrangements to cover the costs of the works required, the Fire and Rescue Service is not privy to any specific definitive information on those incurred to address the minor issues. Where more extensive works are required some information on quoted costs has been seen though in other areas only anecdotal information has been received. For the major remedial works estimates run into the £millions.

How are leaseholders / residents in Wales being informed about fire safety measures in their block? More broadly, to what extent are residents' views about fire safety being listened to and addressed?

The Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service has complemented the information published by both Welsh and UK Governments through the provision of information to residents on the Service's external website and by engagement with residents' groups and individual leaseholders / residents through the offer of free Home Fire Safety Checks.

All Fire and Rescue Service personnel who visited these high rise residential buildings, following 14th June 2017, whether in a community safety or business fire safety capacity, were encouraged to engage with occupants to discuss fire safety matters and provide appropriate advice.

A portal exists on the Service's external website for members of the public to lodge complaints or concerns. An analysis of the complaint register held on our database does not reveal any that may have emanated from the private high rise residential buildings sector.

What, if any, additional practical or financial support is needed from the Welsh or UK Governments to help ensure high rise blocks are safe?

The Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service welcomes the recommendations contained within Dame Judith Hackitt's Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety: Final Report. The Service also looks forward to the outcomes of the Sir Martin Moore-Bick Public Enquiry. The Service is further encouraged by both the Welsh and UK Governments various reviews of Building Regulations and consultations on the use of combustible cladding. A continued dialogue with all parties,



such as this inquiry, is necessary to gain the broadest perspective on the issues, identify solutions and ensure the on-going engagement with all stakeholders.

In relation to the financial aspects of funding remedial works, I am not aware of any that require assistance to address cladding matters. I am however, as previously indicated, aware of building owners / managers / leaseholders who may be required to find monies to address major deficiencies in their respective premises. There may be recourse to the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal system or Building Maintenance Warranty Liability insurance to raise sufficient funds.

The Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service, whilst always seeking to expand the scope of its work within the Prevention, Protection and Response arenas, is mindful of the limited financial assistance available to facilitate this and will continue to provide the current range of services through existing budgets.