

Council 18th October 2018

Notice of Motion

Fire Safety

Southend Borough Council notes that:

Many of our tall buildings are in excess of 10 floors, for example buildings on the Queensway Estate are 17 floors. If there is a fire that blocks the stairwell above level 10, residents have no "plan B" as an escape route, the same circumstance that residents and fire rescue teams encountered at Grenfell. According to Essex Fire & Rescue, of the 55 tall buildings in Southend, 11 are above 10 stories.

Under the STAY PUT POLICY, residents are told that unless smoke or fire is entering their dwelling, they should remain in their homes and await rescue.

The STAY PUT POLICY can fail, and compartmentalisation can be compromised by retrofitting of plumbing, electrical upgrades, installing insulation or adding inferior products. Holes in walls that are not sealed with fireproof sealant, pipe work with fire collars, allow the passage of air, smoke and flames.

It has come to light that the STAY PUT POLICY at Grenfell failed and fire crews were surprised at the pace, the fire spread.

With single-staircase buildings, if the only exit is blocked, there is no plan B to escape. At Grenfell fire crews didn't have the equipment to reach the highest parts of the building. In Southend, the fire brigade has only ladders and platforms to reach level 10, so would need to call in equipment from another part of the county. Cuts to funding for the Fire Service has not only left it short of adequate equipment, but also trained fire-fighters to operate them. Residents awaiting rescue are told their homes are safe from fire for 30 minutes, which isn't a long time. According to Essex Fire & Rescue, 2 tall buildings in Southend have a Plan B for escape. Delays cost lives.

Warden operated fire alarms also result in delays, when automated responses and human error is considered, it adds to the risk factor. According to Essex Fire & Rescue, the number of tall buildings with a monitored alarm is 2.

Fire doors from five different suppliers have now been withdrawn from sale, after being identified by the government, as failing to meet safety standards.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has urged all housing providers to carry out new risk assessments, as has the National Fire Chiefs Council. Doors that under current building regulations, were supposed to withstand smoke and flames for 30 minutes, were barely lasting 15 minutes.

After the Lakamal House fire the Coroner, recommended retrofitting of sprinkler systems in all tall buildings. The big issue with this is cost implications for landlords, but the safety benefits are huge and it lessens the need for the installation of

automated alarms and gives residents piece of mind. Concerns in Southend that landlords of buildings which are earmarked for demolition, may be unwilling to spend large amounts in the short-term, but in the long-term these landlords have a duty of care over their residents and as such need to put the safety of residents first.

After Grenfell, South Essex Homes published a newsletter dated Summer 2017, in which residents were reassured that fire risk assessments had been carried out on all tall buildings.

Council notes that Fire Risk Assessor qualifications can be obtained in a matter of days, without any previous experience in the building or fire safety industry.

Only level 4 risk assessment is carried out by a qualified accredited fire safety engineer, who will open up the walls and check to see if the compartments, people's homes, are not compromised. Without these checks Southend Council cannot be confident it's residents are safe.

Furthermore, although most of the residential buildings in Southend have had risk assessments in the last year, of the tall commercial buildings, of which there are 16 in the borough, only South Essex College has carried out this test.

This council therefore supports a review of fire safety in all of its tall buildings, with a level 4 risk assessment and commits to undertake installation of mandatory automated fire alarms, with its partners South Essex Homes, where gaps in alarm provision are identified, to remove the warden element equation from fire safety risk.

This council believes that the residents of these buildings should also be protected with sprinkler systems and commits to write to the Secretary of State for the Home Department to lobby central government for the fire service to be provided with the resources needed to protect the public, delivered through central or local government. Only then can residents be confident in their fire safety protection.

Councillor Ware-Lane

Councillor Nevin