

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

5 JULY 2017

QUESTION NO. 1 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor Debs Absolom to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Grenfell Tower Fire

After the horrific and tragic fire at Grenfell Tower can the Lead Councillor for Housing confirm that none of Reading Borough Council's blocks have cladding systems comparable to the Grenfell Tower Block? And can you also inform us of what steps have been taken to ensure our fire safety measures are in place to reassure all our tenants?

REPLY by the Vice-Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor Dennis):

I invite Councillor Ennis, the Lead Councillor for Housing to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing (Councillor Ennis):

In the last six months there have been two major fires in high rise blocks of flats in other areas - one in Shepherds Bush and most recently the tragic incident at Grenfell Tower, Kensington. The Grenfell Tower investigation is underway, but it will be some time before we fully understand how the fire started or why it took hold in the way it did.

Reading Borough Council has three 14-storey blocks of flats in Coley and four eight-storey blocks in Granville Road, Southcote, and we are confident they meet high levels of fire safety standards.

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Services has audited 90 per cent of the Council's blocks of flats, including our high rise blocks, with communal areas and have not raised any significant issues. Where fires have broken out inside flats, none of them have spread outside the flat.

Formal fire risk assessments are carried out in our high rise blocks every other year by the Council using a qualified fire risk assessor. A block inspector regularly checks all blocks and housing officers are on site most days to ensure constant monitoring. From this year every flat within the blocks will have their smoke alarm tested every year and tenants are encouraged to check them weekly.

There has been much public concern and comment about potential flaws in the cladding that was on Grenfell Tower. The Council can confirm that none of Reading Borough Council's blocks have cladding systems comparable to those in the blocks where these fires occurred nor are any of the Council's homes clad with the material which was used in the exterior refurbishment of Grenfell Tower.

The Coley high rise flats have very few cavities between any external cladding panels and the main concrete construction but on the limited elevations where they do occur fire breaks are in place to stop the spread of fire. None of the other flatted blocks have cavities.

The Coley high rise flats have fire exits at both ends of the blocks and have a call-point alarm system in communal areas which can be heard throughout the building when activated. The Granville Road flats each have two communal staircases accessed via external balconies. All flats have their own alarms which sound internally. Smoke seals and intumescent strips are fitted on communal doors and the front doors of flats in all of our blocks to protect tenants from fire and reduce the risk of fire inside a flat spreading outside.

Fire risk is taken very seriously and the Council operates a zero-tolerance policy regarding items left in communal areas by tenants, as this poses a fire risk. The Council enforces this policy strictly.

Every block of flats also has a fire notice board with an evacuation plan and factsheet giving advice regarding what to do in the event of a fire. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, the Council wrote to all tenants in our high rise flats to reassure them of the fire safety measures in place and to urge them to regularly check their flat's alarms and provide guidance on how to reduce the risk of a fire occurring and what to do if a fire does occur. If any resident had any health and safety concerns about electrical appliances inside their flat, the Council also offered to visit and carry out testing to check that there were no issues. A fire safety briefing was also provided to all Councillors.

The Council takes fire safety extremely seriously and reviews measures as new information arises or updated guidance is issued. This includes learning from major incidents in other areas, including the findings which will come out of the investigation into the Grenfell Tower fire. Despite Reading Council's blocks differing in design to Grenfell Tower, in order to provide residents with complete confidence and assurance, the Council is appointing an external organisation with specific expertise on fire safety in high rise blocks. The organisation will carry out a review of our practice in the areas of management, fire safety measures and safety advice to tenants.

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QUESTION NO. 2 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Grenfell Tower Fire

Following the shameful tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire, can we have an update on any new measures in the Reading Borough to ensure a similar tragedy could never happen here?

REPLY by the Vice-Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor Dennis):

I invite Councillor Ennis, the Lead Councillor for Housing to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing (Councillor Ennis):

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