

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Trafford Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:
Report for: Decision
Report of: Scrutiny Task and Finish Group – High Rise Tower Block fire Safety

Report Title

Scrutiny Task and finish group Cladding on High Rise Tower Blocks in Trafford

Summary

Following the tragedy at Grenfell in June 2017 THT have identified five tower blocks with cladding that needs to be replaced. The report contains an update from THT officers regarding the fire safety in the five tower blocks, why the replacement had been delayed, the timescale for the replacement programme, and THT's plans regarding the fitting of sprinklers in buildings within Trafford.

Recommendation(s)

1. That the Scrutiny Committee note the work that THT has done since the Grenfell Tragedy.
2. That the Scrutiny Committee notes the reasons given by THT for the delay in replacing the cladding on the five tower blocks within Trafford.
3. That the Committee agree that a letter be written to THT on behalf of the Committee expressing that the Committee would like to receive an update on the replacement programme in March 2020.
4. That the Committee agree that the letter should contain the Committee's support for THT implementing sprinklers in their buildings in Trafford.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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Background Papers: None

1. Background

1.1 Following the tragic events at Grenfell in June 2017 the Trafford Scrutiny Committee received a report in July 2017 stated that there were nine high rise tower blocks (over 18m) in Trafford eight of which were owned by Trafford Housing Trust. Five of the nine tower blocks had external cladding which was of concern and needed to be replaced. The report detailed the fire safety measures that THT were putting in place to ensure the safety of residents in the affected buildings until the cladding could be replaced, which included level four fire risk assessments being conducted for each of the affected tower blocks. The Committee received further updates in September 2017, March 2018, and October 2018 which all detailed the continued efforts of THT to ensure that the tower blocks were safe but none of the updates gave details of when the Committee could expect that the cladding would be replaced.

1.2 The Committee received a report in July 2019 which updated Members on the work that had been done and gave a timeline for the replacement of the cladding on the five tower blocks. The report stated that work was underway and was scheduled to be completed by February 2020. At the meeting Committee Members asked a number of questions as to why it had taken so long to bring this programme. Council Officers in attendance at the meeting informed the Councillors that there had been some issues regarding funding and the hiring of experts. However, the Councillors did not feel that the answers provided were adequate and so they requested that a separate meeting be called with the lead THT officers in order to discuss the matter in detail.

2. Meeting between Chair of Trafford Scrutiny Committee and THT

2.1 Councillor Acton met with officers from THT on the 2nd September 2019. In addition to the Officers from THT the Watch Manager for Salford and Trafford Fire Protection Team also attended the meeting to provide his view on the work that THT had done since Grenfell.

2.2 The THT officers confirmed that Trafford had five buildings with some cladding that needed to be changed and they assured Councillor Acton that clients had been updated continually since Grenfell. THT had received six requests to move and conducted health and safety talks with all of the clients in those buildings. Of the six only one person went on to move to a new building. The other five all removed their requests following conversations with THT. THT had purchased two flats within the five building through the sell back scheme which was offered to all those in affected homes.

2.3 The Officers informed Councillor Acton that following Grenfell THT changed their approach to health and safety. Previously they had focused upon meeting all of the regulations whereas now they tried to demonstrate safety. Since adopting this approach THT had increased their investment in fire safety measures and hired a fire safety lead officer to perform regular assessments on all THT housing stock and provide bespoke training sessions for all the different types of housing that THT had. The Watch Manager for Salford and Trafford Fire Protection Team confirmed that the fire safety lead had done excellent work since being appointed and that GMFRS had regular contact with him.

2.4 THT had hired Devonshire's lawyers along with someone from Thompsons, structural engineers, to ensure that they found a safe and effective replacement for the cladding.

The availability of these experts along with the required materials had led to an unavoidable delay to the start of the programme of replacement. The new cladding had been selected from the pre-approved list that was released by the government following the testing implemented after Grenfell. Work had commenced on the first building in June 2019 and it was projected that it would take 16 – 20 weeks to complete that building. It was hoped that by learning from completing the first block THT would be able to reduce the time the others would take. THT had started with Princess tower block and Empress was scheduled to start soon with the other three being done in the following year. It was expected that all five would be completed by April 2020 but there was a possibility that the project would overrun by 6 – 10 weeks.

2.5 The Hackett report recommended that a building safety manager be appointed for each building and THT had appointed safety managers to all of their buildings. The managers were in their second week of working and it was hoped that by having these officers on site and by taking a proactive approach to health and safety they would be well placed if any additional recommendations were to come from the government.

2.6 Councillor Acton raised the issue of retrofitting sprinkler systems within THT buildings as they were the gold standard in terms of fire safety. The Officers assured Councillor Acton that THT buildings were of a very high standard, especially since they had implemented all their recent changes. THT had updated their building policies in response to the recommendations of the Hackett report and guidance provided by GMFRS.

2.7 THT had invited all residents from high rise tower blocks to workgroup meetings to discuss how they wanted to be communicated with and they had implemented those steps to ensure that people received information in the way that they wanted to. Smoke detection units had been placed into all of the THT Housing stock. The alarms were silent alarms which had a 3 minute response time for someone to go and assess the area. THT had done a large amount of work to make sure that the changes that have been made have been the best that could be done given the circumstances.

2.8 THT were considering implementing sprinklers in a number of their buildings and had held tours for residents to visit high rise buildings that had sprinkler systems so they could see how they looked. The visits also gave residents the opportunity to ask people what the installation was like. The tour had led to some questions from the residents following the tour regarding the ongoing maintenance costs, which were £30 – £60 a year per flat. THT were offering to cover the implementation costs, which were £2000 - £2500 per unit, so residents would only have to pay for the maintenance.

2.9 A proposal on implementing sprinkler systems in THT buildings was due to go to the THT Board. The full report would list the full technical requirements, the expert's point of view, and a list of possible options for roll out across THT. THT had also been looking at the possibility of purchasing some mobile sprinkler systems that could be used for those who are identified as particularly at risk.

3. Recommendations

1. That the Scrutiny Committee note the work that THT has done since the Grenfell Tragedy.
2. That the Scrutiny Committee notes the reasons given by THT for the delay in replacing the cladding on the five tower blocks within Trafford.

3. That the Committee agree that a letter be written to THT on behalf of the Committee expressing that the Committee would like to receive an update on the replacement programme in March 2020.
4. That the Committee agree that the letter should contain the Committee's support for THT implementing sprinklers in their buildings in Trafford.