

To: PS/Jim Fitzpatrick MP

From: Terry Pretious
Fire Legislation, Safety &
People Division

Location: Zone 5/B, Allington Towers

Tel:

Fax:

Ref: (Paper)

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Copies: See attached list

LOWER COST SPRINKLER SYSTEMS: PROPOSED NATIONAL CAMPAIGN BY NICK ROSS AND REQUEST FOR MEETING

Issue

1. Jonathan O'Neill of the Fire Protection Association (FPA) alerted you to a campaign, organised by Nick Ross, around the installation of lower cost sprinkler systems in new and refurbished social housing stock. The campaign also calls for sprinkler systems to be installed in all new and refurbished housing from 2007. You have asked for a meeting with Nick Ross and Jonathan O'Neill to discuss the issue. Nick Ross has also written to David Miliband about the proposed campaign. His office has indicated that he is content for you to respond to both approaches but has asked that the question of ODPM support for making lower-cost sprinklers mandatory be addressed.

Recommendation

2. That you agree to a formal meeting after the preliminary analysis of the responses to the consultation on proposed changes to Part B (Fire safety) of the Building Regulations and the guidance in Approved Document B (AD B) has been completed, and after officials have had an opportunity to consider the final research report on lower cost sprinkler systems undertaken for ODPM by the FPA. A letter in these terms is at Annex A.

Timing

3. The campaign is scheduled to commence on 12th December. However, you have separately agreed to attend a dinner hosted by Tom Carroll, President of CFOA on 8th December to discuss these matters informally. It is understood that Phil Toase, Nick Ross, Peter Holland and Jonathan O'Neil will also be present at the dinner.

Background

4. Sprinklers currently fare ill in most cost benefit analyses, because they are expensive and because of our relatively good fire safety record in terms of domestic fire deaths. ODPM therefore commissioned the FPA to carry out a project studying the design and effectiveness of lower cost sprinkler systems for dwellings. It is partly based on work on lower cost fire suppression systems in other countries, such as New Zealand and the USA, where such systems have proved effective.

5. In his correspondence with David Miliband's office, and with his colleagues, Nick Ross refers to the preliminary findings of the research. We have only received a copy of the final draft report today and we would wish to have an opportunity to consider the findings and next steps, before commenting further on the substance of his proposals, particularly in regard to cost.

6. Nick Ross also refers to plans to launch a FPA/CFOA campaign on lower-cost sprinklers on 12th December. These include a statement from Chief Fire Officers which seeks more commitment from politicians, those involved in drafting regulations and the media in pressing for the routine installation of lower cost domestic sprinkler systems in new social housing and the retro-fitting of sprinklers in all rebuild and refurbishment of the existing social housing stock which would require a commitment from Housing colleagues. The statement recommends that sprinkler systems should be installed in all new and refurbished housing from the beginning of 2007 (which would require changes to the Building Regulations) and that the traditional sprinkler industry should embrace the new low-cost technologies.

Consideration

7. You met with Tom Carroll on 2nd August to discuss the development of lower cost sprinkler systems. At the meeting, some of the broad preliminary research findings were discussed and it was agreed that the pro-sprinkler lobby should be encouraged to contribute their views through the consultation on Part B. The consultation period ended on 18th November and a number of such responses have been received. We anticipate receiving a preliminary analysis of the consultation responses from our contractors early in the New Year and we would expect to be in a position to advise you shortly thereafter.

8. On the back of your meeting with Tom Carroll we have had further informal discussions on possible ways forward. We still need to secure CFOA's agreement but we propose to run a number of Pathfinder trials, in conjunction with CFOA (along with Wales and Scotland), to learn more about the systems and to glean some data on their efficacy. We would also learn more about the installation costs in a real multi-unit environment. We would then be in a position to see where we could focus our attention in relation to their use, in the short, medium and long term and advise Ministers accordingly.

9. The urgency of a formal meeting has been diminished by your separate agreement to attend the dinner hosted by Tom Carroll. Nevertheless, a meeting with the key stakeholders would be useful after the preliminary analysis of the responses to the consultation on proposed changes to Part B (Fire safety) of the Building Regulations and the guidance in AD B has been completed and after we have had an opportunity to consider the FPA report. We will then be in a much stronger position to advise you as to likely costs of such systems and we will have formed a view as to the strength of the case for legislating in this area.

Handling and Presentational Issues

10. Given Nick Ross's passionate commitment to the issue, the likelihood is that this campaign will put us under considerable pressure to be seen to be doing something. Potentially, lower-cost sprinklers could make sense in a wide range of domestic settings. So this debate could, potentially, have a big impact on our housing policy. Jonathan O'Neill therefore suggests that you meet with Nick Ross to divert any adverse publicity regarding a perceived lack of progress with this issue (Nick Ross states that the campaign is not a protest against government). While the

press release drafted by Nick Ross is written on behalf of Chief Fire Officers, we have had no indication yet that CFA have signed up to its contents.

Financial & Legal Consideration

11. There are potentially significant financial implications for Nick Ross' proposals. Any proposals for the mandatory installation of lower-cost sprinklers either in social housing (via some kind of condition of funding) or in all housing (via the Building Regulations) would need to be robust and fully supported by a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) and subject to a public consultation. The proposed further work in a real multi-unit environment would help to inform this process.

12. Under current rules this RIA would also need to take account of the cumulative impact of other regulations in this area such as changes to Parts L and F of the Building Regulations, Lifetime Homes, the Code for Sustainable Buildings etc. It would also need to address the issue of implementation –as there are not enough trained installers to cope with such a large increase in potential demand at this time it may be that the Institute of Plumbers or similar could take this extra work on – the lower-costs systems would, in all likelihood form part of the normal plumbing of a house.

Terry Pretious

TERRY PRETIOUS

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PS/Special Advisers
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