

10 July 2009

The Chief Executive
Heads of Housing
All Local Housing Authorities in England

UPDATE ON FIRE AT LAKANAL HOUSE, CAMBERWELL, LONDON

John Healey, Minister for Housing wrote to all local authority chief executives on 7 July following the fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell last week. Whilst investigations into the cause of the fire will not be completed for some time, LB Southwark have been working with LFEP (London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority) to carry out certain fire safety improvements in Marie Curie House, the block adjacent to Lakanal House.

During this initial work, it has come to our attention that there is a feature in the building that could undermine the fire protection of the common escape corridors. This feature could be repeated in buildings of the same structure/design elsewhere and may not be readily apparent from visual inspections. I thought it appropriate, therefore, to bring it to your attention so you may consider the issues this raises in the context of the fire safety risk assessments that exist for similar premises in your area

Lakanal House was built in 1959 and contains 98 two storey flats over 14 floors. They are arranged in a "scissor block" style, served, at alternate levels, by a longitudinal common corridor that leads to a central stairwell. The flats are accessed on either side of the common corridor and at entrance level contain bedrooms and bathroom accommodation. An internal timber stair adjacent to the corridor gives access to the living room and kitchen on the flat's upper floor, which spans from side to side of the building passing over the common corridor on the lower level.

Where the internal staircase passes over the corridor it cuts through the enclosure to the common corridor presenting a potential breach in the fire resisting construction above the ceiling. This could allow a fire in one of the flats to burn through the timber stair and spread into the ceiling void.

The need to take action in relation to buildings of this type, and the nature of the action, is a matter for your judgement. You will need to consider this both in your capacity as a social landlord, where you will be the 'responsible person' under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, and more generally in relation to your responsibility for the health and safety of housing as a whole. Important facts to take into account are:

- The fire integrity of the private dwelling compartments
- The access in the common areas with regard to keeping them clear of combustible materials and the importance of smoke stopping
- The importance of an up to date fire risk assessment for the premises

Should you require any advice to assist you in making these judgements, you will wish to consider liaising with your local Fire and Rescue Authority who will be aware of the situation in London and have access to the information held by LFEPA.

My colleague, Shona Dunn, is also writing today to Fire and Rescue Authorities to ensure that they are aware of this. I attach copy of this letter for your information.

Finally, I would be grateful if you could let Anne Kirkham in Communities and Local Government's Decent Homes Division (anne.kirkham@communities.gsi.gov.uk) know how many of these types of blocks you have in your ownership. We are asking the TSA to make separate enquiries in relation to RSL stock.

Yours sincerely,



Terrie Alafat