

Dear Elsbeth Grant,

**RE: Fire Safety Guidance in Purpose-Built Blocks of Flats
– Letter 23rd August 2011**

Thank you for your letter of 23rd August with respect to the Fire Safety Guidance in Purpose-Built Blocks of Flats. The LG Group Chairman, Sir Merrick Cockell, has referred this matter to me and requested that I respond to your letter.

I have ensured that careful consideration has been given to the points you have made in your letter. This included;

- seeking clarification from the original drafting team, CS Todd and Associates, appointed as expert consultants in the field of fire safety.
- consulting with members of the Project Group, including key officers from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) who funded the production of the Guidance.

This sector-led Guidance has been developed by, and for, the housing sector and enforcing authorities, to provide specific and practical guidance relating to purpose-built blocks of flats. The lack of existing suitable guidance tailored to the specific circumstances in purpose-built blocks of flats was one of the principal reasons behind its development.

The development of the Guidance was overseen by a stakeholder Reference Group (the composition of which is listed on page nine of the Guidance). A significant breadth of interest and expertise was represented on the Reference Group. The Reference Group signed off the Guidance at its final meeting on 1st July 2011. The process of developing the Guidance involved extensive public consultation through the LG Group website, which was widely publicised. In addition, several road shows were held to canvas views on what should be included in the Guidance and on the proposed content. A Project Group were responsible for managing the consultation responses through the wider Reference Group of major stakeholders.

While the Project Group did not receive your comments at the consultation stage, there was considerable feedback on the issue of fire safety of people with disabilities and the vulnerable living in flats within a purpose-built block and the extent to which the Guidance should and could address this. This was one of a small number of

contentious issues that was specifically highlighted to the wider stakeholder Reference Group and I can reassure you that the particular needs of people with disabilities and vulnerable people have been taken into account throughout the Guidance. There were no practical solutions offered to address the issue of evacuation of people with disabilities from purpose-built blocks of flats.

The basic principle underpinning the Guidance is the 'stay put' policy. The design and additional fire safety features provided in purpose-built blocks of flats, and any consequent fire procedures relating to them, differs from other buildings to which the FSO applies. This is because each flat is designed as a fire resisting compartment capable of containing a fire in a flat and allows residents in other flats to 'stay put'. A fire within a flat will, in the majority of instances stay within the confines of the flat, and not spread to the common parts. This would allow the residents of that flat time to exit into an area of temporary safety in the common parts and allow them to make their own way out of the building using the normal access and egress routes, including the stairs and lifts which would be unaffected by a fire in an individual flat. The adoption of a 'stay put' policy would always be subject to a risk assessment of individual blocks of flats. The decisions on evacuation of any or all other flats is at the discretion of the fire and rescue service dependent on the location and severity of the fire. This is accepted practice and only applies to purpose-built blocks because of the unique nature of the design and construction of flats.

Current Building Regulations guidance also supports a 'stay' put policy without the need for a common fire detection and alarm system.

The relationship with existing guides is as follows;

- it builds on the advice given in the DCLG's 'Fire Safety Risk Assessment: sleeping accommodation' guide, but that guide applies generically to all premises in which people sleep.
- Certain blocks of flats are also included within the scope of the LACoRS guide
- this Guidance covers all purpose-built blocks of flats (both common parts and the flats themselves), including those within the scope of the DCLG and LACoRS guides. This Guidance is, therefore, the more appropriate guide to use for purpose-built blocks of flats.

I hope I have been of assistance in explaining the background to the advice and recommendations contained in the Guidance.

Yours sincerely

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