

Wednesday 06th May 2020

Resident Liaison Group, Submission to Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission

Dear Cllr Patrick,

Subject: **Housing Services Fire Safety Update**

The Resident Liaison Group (RLG), would like to make the following submission, with comments and recommendations in respect of fire safety issues for the upcoming Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission.

Firstly, Hackney Council in reaction to the Grenfell tragedy took some excellent steps to reassure and arrange areas that needed to be checked and the Resident Safety Section being put in place was most welcome. Overall a lot of work has taken place which has been good but of course there is a need for more improvements to ensure the safety of all.

Some of the main issues follow:

The disappointment that gas safety checks had only occurred for tenants has been a bone of contention for many years but we are glad to see that a common sense approach has been put in place and all gas checks are now needed and more importantly, proof must be provided to show that necessary checks have taken place. The big challenge is how the Council is going to ensure that all leasehold and freehold properties provide annual gas certificates. A robust enforcement process needs to be put in place to ensure nothing slips through the net.

RLG Recommendation 1; The RLG would like to be involved in reviewing and scrutinising the fire safety Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on a regular basis and would like to see targets and outcomes published on the website by estate, quarterly.

Leaseholders and Freeholders are now being asked to have an electrical check. The wording implies that at some point the Council might ask for a certificate which is a nod to the fact that there is not a robust system in place and will still put all tenures at risk on a quarterly basis in the interests of transparency. The lack of resources to deal with the issues is just no excuse when safety is paramount.

RLG Recommendation 2; The RLG recommend for Hackney Council's Direct Labour Organisation, to offer a gas and electrical safety check service to Leaseholders and Freeholders with opportunities for Leaseholders and Freeholders to buy into this service if they choose.

Many balconies are being used for storage areas with hazardous material on them. This issue also needs to be addressed in a robust way. Some areas have been reported but the material still remains. Likewise items stored in sheds and garages should also be checked. Especially when garages are located underneath blocks of flats. Residents have also erected wooden structures on their balconies to add further living space to their flats. This is particularly concerning.

RLG Recommendation 3; The RLG recommends for the Council to introduce a strict policy against balconies being used incorrectly.

During the recent past, Hackney Council sent out letters to residents with clear instructions, not to use barbecues on balconies. What have been the outcomes of these actions and have these actions reduced the use of barbecues on balconies and the associated fire risks?

RLG Recommendation 4; The RLG recommends the Council incorporate barbecue checks into estate inspections to ensure balconies are being used correctly. Barbecues are not just taking place on weekends but during weekdays also.

Recently there was a report from a resident that burning had been smelt. The smell was coming from a nearby flat but no smoke alarm was triggered. A regular major campaign is therefore needed to ensure that residents check their smoke alarms.

There was also a near miss with a neighbour who fell asleep whilst cooking was taking place. A neighbour nearby smelt a burning smell coming into her flat and only after constantly knocking on the neighbour's door did the resident wake up. The whole landing was filled with smoke when the neighbour finally opened her front door. The smoke alarm was not working. This neighbour did not have English as her first language and therefore it seems that any campaign on this subject needs to be translated into the various languages spoken across the borough.

One estate was disappointed with incorrectly installed fire doors, incorrect lighting and incorrect signage which turned out to be flammable. These were all identified by the Council's own team. The work needed to be rectified.

RLG Recommendation 5; The RLG recommends the Council introduce a more robust scrutiny to monitor the work of contractors.

There is also concern around the Asset Management Strategy. Whilst we understand the front door programme- that priority for work is on tall blocks, there are still some lower blocks which still have original doors from when the estates were first built. These doors do not meet any fire regulations. Likewise the arrangements for front doors for leasehold properties in the Stamford Hill area have left a lot to be desired and the hope is that when we come out of the current situation proper arrangements will be put in place.

Clearly the lack of communication between the Asset Management team and the Leasehold Services team has been a major factor. We need complete transparency and accountability



from both of these service areas. We must see how teams arrive at their strategies when such programmes take place.

RLG Recommendation 6; The RLG recommends clear communication across different service areas to improve collaborative working within the Council.

The programme of self closers being put in as precautions prior to new doors being installed, was a good idea but hasn't quite taken off as it should.

RLG Recommendation 7; The RLG would like to see information published by estates on the Council's website on a quarterly basis.

RLG Recommendation 8; The RLG would like to be involved in the procurement process for Major Works Contracts and other building/repairs contracts.

Last but not least, the Resident Safety team has been welcomed by all. The team are always approachable. What is clear is the need for more resources to ensure all parts of Resident Safety is maintained and enforced properly so all residents feel safe where they live.

RLG Recommendation 9; The RLG would like to see extra permanent resources in the Resident Safety team.

Kind regards,

Helder Da Costa & Steve Webster
RLG Co-Chairs
On behalf of the RLG