

Carl Sargeant AM
Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children

4 October 2017

Dear Carl

Fire Safety in High-rise Blocks in Wales

Thank you to both Lesley and you for giving oral evidence on 27 September. Following the session, we would like to request some further information and clarity on a number of issues. For completeness, I have also included the areas where you or your officials committed to providing further information.

Fire Safety Advisory Group

We welcome the work being undertaken by the Fire Safety Advisory Group, and noted that the Group will be providing their initial advice to you this week. We welcome your commitment to make some form of statement to Members, either in writing or in an oral statement, very shortly. However, in light of the importance of these issues we will be grateful for any suggestions as to how we may fulfil our scrutiny role with regard to the work of the group, its advice and recommendations together with your response. Publishing the recommendations and response, for example, would aid effective scrutiny and reassure the public regarding decisions made.

We would also appreciate if you could keep the Committee updated with the work of the Group, and any further work you commission the Group to do.



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Private sector

While we acknowledge the work by all partners to engage with the private sector, we are concerned that there are owners / managing agents of 31 high-rise blocks, which you have been unable to contact. We are also concerned that there is no conclusive number on how many high-rise blocks are in private ownership across Wales. We want to ensure that residents in the private sector are given the same level of information and support as those in social housing.

Could you provide more information on how you will ensure that local authorities and the Welsh Government identify all high-rise residential blocks in private ownership? Are you confident that local authorities are using all available powers to ensure that blocks in private ownership are meeting their obligations and engaging with residents?

It has come to our attention, that there are concerns that it may becoming difficult for people to secure mortgages on properties in high rise blocks, even if the block does not have any cladding. Is this an issue that the Welsh Government is aware of? If so, what are your views on addressing this issue?

During the oral evidence session, we explored the issue of funding remedial work within the social housing sector, and you stated that this was a matter for landlords. We are aware that there are also concerns within the private sector that the cost of removing cladding may fall solely on residents, who may not be able to fund such work. What support, if any, would be available to residents who are asked to fund the full costs themselves?

When we first took evidence in July, we heard about concerns that tenants in the private sector did not have sufficient support to engage with, and challenge their landlords when necessary. We would welcome further information on what the Welsh Government is doing to help support tenants in the private rented sector on this issue.



Fire-sprinklers

We explored two issues in relation to sprinklers; the implementation of the Domestic Fire Safety (Wales) Measure 2011 and the retro-fitting of sprinklers in high-rise blocks.

On the first issue, officials agreed to provide more detail on the number of new-builds that are not required to install sprinklers because developers had submitted their plans before the amendments that the Measure made to the Building Regulations came into force.

There was also a commitment to provide clarity on the length of time that developers had to start construction, following submission of plans, before they would be subject to the requirement to install sprinklers.

On the broader issue of retro-fitting sprinklers; this is an issue that we as a committee may revisit in more detail later. In considering this it would be helpful to have an idea of your response to your Fire Safety Advisory Group's initial recommendations, and any further work you task them with.

With regard to costs incurred by RSLs in carrying out necessary fire safety work following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, have you had any discussions with UK Government as to whether they will provide new funding for such work in England with Barnett consequentials for Wales?

Accompanying guidance to the Fire Safety Order

During the evidence session, you committed to providing further details on the timeframe for the review and subsequent publication of the revised guidance 'Fire safety in purpose built blocks of flats' which accompanies the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. This was in reference to evidence we received from Cardiff Council in July 2017:

"Now, as far as I'm aware, the Welsh Government commissioned a Welsh version of this, and I understand that is with the Welsh Government to rubberstamp and seal at the moment. I think it was written by a fire




officer, Richard Davies, and it was circulated for consultation with local authorities. So, I understand there's going to be a Welsh version of this...." ELGC Committee, 13 July, RoP [606]

Role of Fire and Rescue Services in the planning and Building Regulations regimes

During Committee there was some discussion of the role of Fire and Rescue Services being consulted on fire safety in proposed developments, in the context of both planning permission and Building Regulations consent. South Wales Fire and Rescue Service told us that they had a 'limited remit' on what they can be consulted on, which is the means of escape and access for fire services and water supplies. However, we would like clarity on the exact role as set out in legislation for Fire and Rescue Services to provide advice on the fire safety of high-rise residential blocks prior to construction in both the planning and Building Regulations regimes.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, along with our counterpart committees at Westminster and the Scottish Parliament, the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Local Government and Communities Committee (respectively).

Yours sincerely



John Griffiths AM
Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

