

## **SHELTERED HOUSING – SECURITY, HEALTH & SAFETY**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 Members to consider security, health and safety issues as they relate to the Council's twelve sheltered housing schemes.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 Sheltered housing provides accommodation for the active elderly, more of a 'safe haven' as tenants grow older. Tenants have the opportunity to develop a social life through use of the communal facilities. It is not a care home or nursing home as defined in Housing Act 1985.
- 2.2 Tenants have a secure tenancy to their flats, they are independent and can come and go as they please.
- 2.3 As a housing provider, the Council has a duty to ensure security and safety in its sheltered housing and this is provided by a number of measures, outlined below.
- 2.4 As part of an Essex-wide initiative the Essex Housing Officers Group (EHOG) met in 1997/8 to devise a safety management model, taking advice from the Essex Fire and Rescue Service (EFRS). The model came out of a necessity to introduce a 'Stay-Put Policy' so as to avoid a mass evacuation of tenants in the case of fire. The Council authorised works to bring all sheltered housing up to the recommended standards. This included:-
- enclosure of loft spaces to ensure fire integrity
  - improved fire retention standards on all cupboard doors
  - installation of intumescent strips to all doors (these swell when subjected to heat and seal the door preventing smoke penetration)
  - all fire doors upgraded with self-closures
  - all letter boxes changed to meet stringent fire precaution standards.
- 2.5 At that time the Council received written confirmation from EFRS that the 'stay-put' policy could be introduced and that smoke alarms in individual flats were not necessary. EFRS considered all sheltered housing to be 'low risk' and ceased regular inspections in 1999/2000.

### **3 ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS**

- 3.1 Despite meeting the required standards, the Council, with the support of the Tenants Associations, entered into a programme of alarm upgrades throughout 2001/2, 2002/3, 2003/4 and this year to ensure alarm triggers

were installed in all flats. Fire alarms are now zoned into the Tunstall call system relayed to the 24/7 Basildon Careline who would raise the alarm with EFRS should a fire occur. This is above the requirements of the EFRS/EHOG stay-put model but the Council and tenants felt the additional expense worthwhile.

- 3.2 Since the policy was introduced there has been no incidence of fire. The only recollection of a fire was around 1997, which occurred at the Lavers when a tenant left her meal in the oven (set on maximum) and then went to join a social gathering in the communal lounge.
- 3.3 When the alarms sounded there was some panic, and tenants' confusion which led to them entering smoke-filled corridors heading towards the fire. There was also evidence of fire-check doors being propped open "to aid escape". Fortunately, the matter was brought under control by the quick and assertive action of the warden.

#### **4 ROUTINE CHECKS**

- 4.1 In addition to the stay-put policy there are other routine safety checks undertaken.

##### Daily

Visual check of the fire alarm system control box to ensure tell-tale light functioning.

##### Weekly

Check on the functioning of fire exit doors, escape routes, signage and fire extinguishers in place.

##### Annually

Council's contractor checks functioning of fire hoses and recharges fire extinguishers.

- 4.2 Outside this checking routine a contractor undertakes a lift service and safety check on a quarterly basis.
- 4.3 The Council has a 'no smoking' policy in lifts, corridors, laundry and for the lounge and hairdressing salon. The majority of flats are electricity only as this is considered a safer fuel for the elderly. All curtaining and seating meets fire regulation standards.

**5 SECURITY**

- 5.1 As part of an ongoing upgrade to security the Council sought guidance from Essex Police who advised that for additional security palisade fencing with locked, gated entrances be installed. This is now in place at all schemes along with CCTV at entrances.

**6 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

- 6.1 In view of the fact that EFRS have now ceased inspection of sheltered housing, it is proposed that the existing contract with Thameside Fire be extended to include an annual check of schemes to ensure compliance and Members views are sought on this proposal.
- 6.2 Members will appreciate that there are conflicting demands between fire safety and personal security as outlined below in paragraph 6.4 and guidance from Members is sought in this direction.
- 6.3 Obviously, the Council will want to ensure the highest standards of safety and security for sheltered housing tenants whilst bearing in mind that improvements to both will mean an increase in rent because of the “ring-fencing” arrangements of the Housing Revenue Account. A number of Best Practice guides on the management of sheltered housing are available through the professional institutes (such as The Chartered Institute of Housing) and it is suggested that Members regularly review the management of its stock against these benchmarks.
- 6.4 Just recently concern was raised at one scheme particularly surrounding the means of escape from a gated courtyard. A local fire officer was consulted and advice was given to change the locks on the gates to turn handles. The Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) authorised the contractor to change all the locks to turn handles to comply with the fire officer’s recommendation. However, the Council is now starting to get representation and a number of complaints from some tenants that this action has compromised their security and that burglary is a more common occurrence than fire.

**7 CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 Members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider the adequacy of existing arrangements with particular reference to the gate handles/locks scenario.

**7 RECOMMENDATION**

7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS**

- (1) That Members confirm their satisfaction with current management arrangements and the proposed annual site inspection by Thameside Fire.
- (2) That Members receive an annual report on sheltered housing management as it relates to benchmarked Best Practice.
- (3) That Members note that some actions taken in order to ensure the high standards of safety may, in fact, compromise security to the detriment of tenants.

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**Background Papers:**

None

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