

Swindon Borough Council Housing
Resident Engagement Strategy for high-rise buildings
(February 2024)



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Introduction

Swindon Borough Council (SBC) Housing Service is responsible for the management and maintenance of its social housing stock, this includes ensuring the safety of tenants and leaseholders. This strategy focuses on these high-risk buildings¹ and how the Council will apply the new fire safety regulations following the tragic fire in the Grenfell Tower, the investigation which highlighted significant failures and the subsequent legislation; the Building Safety Act 2022. The strategy is in line with the Council's Cabinet shorter term priorities, one of which is to keep residents safe.

In the Council's recently agreed Swindon Plan it sets out how the Council needs to work differently with its residents to provide the best services it can and this includes making our council tenants and leaseholders as safe as possible. It will do this by:

- Being committed to raising standards by supporting what is best for Swindon and challenging what is not
- Encouraging more open discussion and shared decision making
- Treating everyone as an important part of our town's future by promoting openness, fairness and transparency
- Transforming the relationship between the council and the community to one of equality
- Trust and respect
- Expecting our elected representatives to act with integrity and be accountable
- Recognising examples of best practice and promoting positive initiatives, to improve the quality of life for the people of this town

Context

The tragedy at Grenfell Tower in 2017, shook public trust in building safety and revealed significant failings. Critical questions were raised for everyone involved in social housing, including the residents, landlords, developers, local and national government. The subsequent White Paper, 'the Charter for Social Housing Residents' aimed to give residents a voice. Alongside this, the Building Safety Act 2022, reformed building safety, highlighting the need to review fire safety and to ensure that the safety of residents had greater priority. The recommendations made by Dame Judith Hackitt in her report following the Grenfell tragedy set the framework for competency for those managing building safety risks, ensuring that residents know that the buildings in which they live are safe.

Our Social Housing

SBC manages 10,300 properties, this includes eight high-rise blocks, home to 351 residents, (both tenants and leaseholders). The blocks comprise of:

¹ High-risk buildings are those over 18 metres.

- Six general purpose, ten storey blocks each containing 41, two-bedroom flats used to house families and adults of all ages. These blocks are Seagry Court, Upavon Court, Cleverton Court, Milverton Court, Torrington Court and Hatherleigh Court.
- A sheltered housing scheme, George Hall Court, with 33 flats for older tenants.
- A town centre block, the David Murray John Tower (DMJ) comprising of 72 residential flats and some commercial units.

The blocks house tenants of various ethnicities and those with a range of vulnerabilities.

Seven of the high-rise blocks are situated in the Parks and Penhill estates, the DMJ is located in the town shopping centre.

The David Murray John has a caretaker and maintenance team, the sheltered housing block, a dedicated housing officer. The remaining six blocks are managed by the Neighbourhood Housing Warden teams. There is a secure 'fire' box in the lobby of each of the blocks in which information is stored, including details of the evacuation needs of specific tenants.

The general-purpose blocks are cleaned and inspected by the Neighbourhood Warden team seven days per week, who also clean the entrance lobby and lifts. Fire safety checks are done on a daily basis with unwanted items and fly tips removed daily. The bins are emptied weekly and the areas cleaned.

The Neighbourhood Warden teams test the fire alarms weekly, records of the tests are kept; a monthly inspection is completed by a specialist fire alarm contractor.

There are also weekly checks for Legionella, and the passenger lift to ensure that it returns to the ground floor and opens when the fire alarm is activated. These records are also kept on site.

Within the David Murray John Tower the fire alarm and reactive fire systems are tested weekly by the in-house facilities team, with the monthly, quarterly and annual inspections being completed by a specialist fire alarm contractor.

The sheltered housing block, George Hall Court, has a specific policy for storage and charging of mobility scooters, carried out within an approved area. Sheltered Housing staff carry out a range of checks and inspections using the Dorset Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service (DWFRS) Testing, Maintenance and Staff Training log book (V4) and record inspections in the log book.

Additional information from DWFRS is contained within a secure information box adjacent to the fire panel. Information contained includes the details of residents who would require assistance to evacuate as well as location of medical devices that use oxygen. There is also a plan of the building.

There are regular safety meetings between the SBC Fire Safety Team and Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Service to discuss issues in the high-rise blocks.

None of the blocks are clad in ACM² panels or other dangerous materials, all blocks were checked by the Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Service following the Grenfell disaster and supported by the completion of EWS 1³ forms by a specialist contractor, and annual reviews of the Fire Risk Assessments.

Swindon Borough Council high-rise flats were constructed to resist fire. Each flat has fire-restricting walls, floors and ceilings and front entrance doors creating its own compartment to prevent the spread of fire, (compartmentation for up to one-hour, active fire systems). Door closers are in place to ensure that doors shut securely; maintaining the compartmentation of the building. The fire alarm systems installed by the Council will detect fire in the individual's flat and the communal areas to provide early warning and alert the emergency services. Dry or wet risers help the fire service to tackle the spread of fire. CCTV systems in bin stores, lifts and fire panels provide additional fire protection (re-active fire systems).

A specialist contractor has been appointed to carry out fire risk assessments to the high-rise blocks annually to assess fire risks, and record recommendations to ensure that we are meeting fire safety legislation. This includes checking the make-up of the building, its fire doors and fire-stopping to the service ducts.

Alarms are fitted to communal areas; fire action notices are displayed on each floor, advising residents on what to do in the event of a fire.

All fire alarm detectors have a flashing beacon that activates in a fire so that anyone who is hard of hearing is aware that an alarm has sounded. Alarms are linked to Swindon Borough Council's Control Room which is staffed 24/7.

Swindon Borough Council has agreed to install sprinkler systems in the six high-rise blocks, along with additional fire safety works following on from the new regulations. George Hall Court already has a sprinkler system in place and an evacuation chair on each floor.

New tenants to high-rise blocks are given information on high-rise living along with fire safety leaflets (see appendices) specific to their particular high-rise block.

Repairs and maintenance

To report repairs for the home tenants can use My Housing Tenancy, or ring the Contact Centre on 01793 445503. Use this link to create a My Housing Tenancy account (tenants

² Aluminium cladding as used at the Grenfell Tower

³ EWS1 form is a record of the assessment that has been carried out on the external wall construction of a residential building. The assessment is conducted by a qualified and competent professional such as a Chartered Construction Professional as defined in the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) guidance.

will need the 13-digit tenancy reference) they can also use this link to find out how to report repairs to communal areas.

https://www.swindon.gov.uk/info/20056/council_tenants/506/request_a_housing_repair

For emergency repairs please ring 01793 445503 as they cannot be reported online. Emergency repairs are if the repair problem will cause a threat to a tenant's safety or security. To find out more please visit:

https://www.swindon.gov.uk/info/20056/council_tenants/516/request_an_emergency_housing_repair

Purpose of the strategy

SBC Housing will engage with the residents in order to ensure that:

- Residents feel safe in their homes.
- Residents know how to easily report problems in their flats or communal areas that give rise to concerns about safety.
- Residents know what to do in the event of a serious incident in the block where they live.
- Residents are aware of their specific responsibilities with regards to the fire safety of their family, home and neighbours.
- Residents know how to make a complaint.

We will provide residents⁴ with information relating to decisions made about their building. We will let them know:

- When they will be consulted.
- How we will consult with them.
- What information around safety we will provide and what we will consult on.
- How we will use the resident's views.
- How the effectiveness of this strategy will be measured.

The strategy for high-rise building fire safety is comprised of three main objectives, these are to:

- **Communicate** – improve our communications with the residents in the high-rise properties. Ensuring that we listen to their concerns, keep them informed with up-to-date information and act on any recommendations/issues raised.
- **Listen to the tenant voice** - giving tenants a key role in helping to keep their family, neighbours and home safe. We will ensure that residents are aware of their own responsibilities to safety.

⁴ Everyone living in the flat over the age of 16

- **Review** the effectiveness of the strategy by ensuring that engagement is a regular, two-way commitment, this will strengthen our relationship with the residents. The strategy will change as legislation and guidance change/come into force. To respond to new priorities identified through building safety regulation.

How we will meet the commitments of the strategy

As part of this strategy we visited all six general-purpose blocks and the DMJ tower. The tenants in the sheltered housing scheme are regularly visited by their Sheltered Housing Officer, who retains information on tenants' health and evacuation needs.

Where we could not speak with the resident (tenant or leaseholder) we left an initial letter asking them to contact us. We also held four separate evening meetings, basing ourselves outside the six blocks so as to speak with the residents.

Where we have not contacted a resident, we will arrange for further attempts at communicating.

Listening to the residents enabled us to learn the following information:

- Who would need help to evacuate in an emergency.
- Who had flammable items in their homes.
- Where there were repair issues in the homes – such as internal doors not closing.
- Other safety issues raised.

To ensure that resident safety is at the heart of our engagement with the high-rise blocks we make the following commitments:

Communication

- To improve our service by listening to and working with the residents to maintain their homes.
- To prioritise safety.
- To adapt to new legislation as it comes into force and inform residents accordingly.
- To produce a resident engagement plan for all SBC Housing high rise buildings and Person-Centred Fire Risk Assessments for residents who cannot evacuate their building safely without assistance.
- To keep fire safety information in high-rise buildings current and in plain English. We will provide translated copies where needed.
- To maintain our building safety policies and procedures by reviewing them regularly along with best practice from similar organisations. We will provide updates on changes to policy as appropriate.
- To monitor and report findings to residents on compliance relating to: fire, gas, water, electrics, asbestos and lifts.
- To prioritise resident comments and complaints with regards to high rise building safety implications.

- We will ensure that residents are aware of their own responsibilities with regards to safety – this will apply to both their own home and the communal areas.
- As new safety information becomes available we will pass this to residents.

Listening

We want residents to feel confident to report issues where they live; they will be able to report their fire safety concerns to their dedicated Neighbourhood Housing Team or the Customer Services Team. Queries or concerns will then be triaged for the appropriate action. Neighbourhood Housing Officers will be tasked with updating household composition details, this information will be included in the fire box.

We will update residents with regards to works to be carried out to the blocks. We will aim to give adequate notice if we need access to the interior of a flat. If the resident prevents us from gaining access we will take legal action to do so.

When we need to consult with the residents to gain their views on a specific topic we will provide information to them in a timely manner.

Review:

Person Centred Fire Risk Assessments will be reviewed for evacuation information as we become aware of a tenant's change of situation.

We will review the strategy annually, or on a change to legislation or guidance.

We will complete a Person-Centred Fire Risk Assessment for those residents who have identified as posing a higher risk in the event of a fire and review it in line with the assessment.