

## Scottish Resilience

### Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit

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Chief Officers



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Dear Chief Officer

### **Dear Chief Officer (Scotland) Letter 8/2009**

#### **Fire at Camberwell, South London**

1. You will be aware of the fatal fire that occurred at Lakanal House in Camberwell on 3 July 2009. Whilst investigations into the cause of the fire will not be completed for some time, some information on building construction has become available.
2. During work to carry out fire safety improvements in the block adjacent to Lakanal House, it has been discovered that there is a feature in this type of building that could undermine the fire protection of the common escape corridors. This feature could be repeated in buildings of the same structure/design elsewhere in the UK and may not be readily apparent from visual inspections.
3. The building was built in 1959 and contains 98 'two-storey flats' (maisonettes) over 14 floors. It is arranged in a "scissor block" style, served, at alternate levels, by a longitudinal common corridor that leads to a central stairwell. The maisonettes are accessed on either side of the common corridor and at entrance level contain bedrooms and bathroom accommodation. An internal timber stair adjacent to the corridor gives access to the living room and kitchen on the maisonette's upper floor, which spans from side to side of the building passing over the common corridor on the lower level. (Drawings showing this construction type are available on the website of the [Architects Journal](#) ).
4. Where the internal staircase passes over the corridor it cuts through the enclosure to the common corridor presenting a potential breach in the fire resisting construction above the ceiling. This could allow a fire in one of the flats to burn through the timber stair and spread into the ceiling void.

5. It is not known if there is property of this construction type in Scotland. This information is being brought to the attention of local authority and housing association landlords in Scotland to allow them to establish if any of their properties contain this feature. Landlords are being advised that they should contact their local FRS if they identify relevant properties. A copy of the letter is attached as an appendix.
6. Should there be any properties of this type in your area, clearly you will wish to have first hand knowledge of the specific fire safety issues and operational implications which have emerged from the Camberwell incident and London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority will share its working knowledge as far as it is able to. Should you need further information, please contact Assistant Commissioner Steve Turek, Head of Fire Safety Regulation at [steve.turek@london-fire.gov.uk](mailto:steve.turek@london-fire.gov.uk).
7. The Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser for England, Sir Ken Knight, is providing an independent overview of progress with the investigations into the fire, and will draw out any national implications. If during Sir Ken's ongoing work, any urgent issues arise in relation to current national guidance on operational procedures or firefighter safety, these will be communicated to FRSs.
8. Guidance on operational procedures remains extant. Generic Risk Assessment 3.2 version 2 September 2008, contains information on high rise firefighting and includes reference to the need for operational pre-planning.
9. Fire safety advice to residents in high rise blocks remains unaltered.

#### **Errata to Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Circular 18/2008**

10. The following corrections should be made in Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Circular 18/2008 Generic Risk Assessment 3.2 – High Rise Firefighting – Version 2.
  - The two references to '*general risk assessment*' should read '*generic risk assessment*'.
  - The reference to '*FRS circular 43/2008*' should be to '*Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Circular 17/2008*'.
  - The reference to '*FRS circular 32/2006*' should be to '*Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Circular 17/2006*'.
  - The reference to '*FRS circular 71/2006*' should be to '*Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Circular 2/2007*'.

Yours faithfully



**BRIAN FRASER**  
Head of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit

## Appendix to Dear Chief Officer (Scotland) letter 8/2009



Chief Executives and Chief Housing Officers of Local Authority Landlords  
Directors / Chief Executives of Registered Social Landlords  
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities  
Scottish Federation of Housing Associations

17 July 2009

Dear colleague

### **Advice on Health and Safety Issues: Fire, Lifts and Gas**

I am writing to bring to your attention advice on important health and safety matters that are relevant to social landlords in Scotland.

#### **Fire Safety**

I am sure you are aware of the recent tragic fire in Lakanal House in Camberwell, South London, on 3 July.

Work in the block adjacent to Lakanal House has revealed that there is a feature in the building that could undermine the fire protection of the common escape corridors. This feature could be repeated in buildings of the same structure/design elsewhere and may not be readily apparent from visual inspections. I thought it appropriate, therefore, to bring it to your attention so you may consider whether it raises any issues in the context of the fire safety of buildings you own or manage.

Lakanal House was built in 1959 and contains 98 two-storey flats over 14 floors. They are arranged in a “scissor block” style, served, at alternate levels, by a longitudinal common corridor that leads to a central stairwell. The flats are accessed on either side of the common corridor and at entrance level contain bedrooms and bathroom accommodation. An internal timber stair adjacent to the corridor gives access to the living room and kitchen on the flat’s upper floor, which spans from side to side of the building passing over the common corridor on the lower level.

Where the internal staircase passes over the corridor it cuts through the enclosure to the common corridor presenting a potential breach in the fire resisting construction above the ceiling. This could allow a fire in one of the flats to burn through the timber stair and spread into the ceiling void.

If you identify any property with this feature or indeed any other similar breaches to the fire enclosures for common areas you should inform the local Fire and Rescue Service, so that it can update its operational preplanning.

The need to take remedial action in relation to buildings of this type, and the nature of the action, is a matter for your judgement. You will need to consider this in your capacity as a social landlord, both in respect of the maintenance responsibility imposed by Regulation 24 of the Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006, and more generally in relation to your health and safety responsibilities. Important issues to consider are:

- the fire integrity of the private dwelling compartments;
- access to and from common areas and the need to keep such areas clear of combustible materials;
- the integrity of escape routes and the importance of smoke stopping and smoke-stopping doors; and
- the maintenance of facilities to assist firefighting such as risers, lobbies and lifts.

Should you require any advice to assist you in making these judgements, you should consider liaising with your local Fire and Rescue Service. Brian Fraser, Head of the Scottish Fire & Rescue Advisory Unit, is writing separately to all Scottish Fire and Rescue Services to ensure that they are aware of this.

The investigation of the fire at Lakanal House is continuing. The Westminster Government has indicated that it will act upon lessons learned from this. The findings may have implications for you if you manage blocks of this or similar type. In the meantime it may be sensible to reassure your tenants and remind them of the practical measures they can take to protect themselves from fire. This includes having a working smoke alarm and regularly testing it. Guidance on fire safety in high rise flats is available at [http://www.dontgivefireahome.com/fire\\_safety/files/highriseflats.pdf](http://www.dontgivefireahome.com/fire_safety/files/highriseflats.pdf).

### **Risk Assessments - Lifts**

I have been asked by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) to contact all social landlords. We, and the HSE, wish to highlight the importance of completing appropriate risk assessments for any lifts and lift users in your housing stock.

You have a general statutory duty to safeguard, so far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of your tenants, staff and volunteers and anyone potentially exposed to a risk to their health and safety by your business activities. And we would draw your attention to your specific duties under the Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998. The HSE has a useful leaflet which you can find on its website at [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg339.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg339.pdf).

Risk assessments need to be thorough and effective, but at the same time proportionate and targeted at areas of genuine risk. HSE advises that social landlords should consult, as a minimum, the following British & European standards when considering risk assessment for lifts and lift users:

BS EN 81-1:1998 specifies the safety rules for the construction and installation of permanently installed new electric lifts.

BS EN 81-71 provides security and safety guidance to protect against the risk of vandalism. Where landlords determine that lifts are at risk of vandalism, an assessment should be carried out and action taken to mitigate identified risks.

BS EN 81-80:2003 provides guidance for improving the safety of existing lifts to reach an equivalent level of safety to that of a newly installed lift.

Clearly, the nature and scale of your operation, including for instance the age and condition of existing lifts, will determine the approach you, or your sub contractors, need to take to risk assessment and planning. We would emphasise the importance we place on governing bodies, as well as senior managers, being aware of their health and safety responsibilities in this area and the possible impact on your organisation.

You can visit <http://www.bsigroup.co.uk/> for further information on these standards. You can also find out more about HSE and its work at [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk).

### **Gas Safety**

Over the last few years there has been an increasing awareness among Scottish social landlords of the importance of managing gas safety effectively and complying with legal duties. Our inspections have been a catalyst for this. We issued a short paper highlighting findings from our inspections and providing advice and positive practice to help landlords manage gas safety. You can access it from our website, [www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk](http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk).

I hope you find this advice useful.

Yours faithfully



Karen Watt  
Chief Executive, Scottish Housing Regulator