

2 March 2022		ITEM: 7
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Update on Incident at Lionel Oxley House		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director for Housing		
Accountable Assistant Director: Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director for Housing		
Accountable Director: Ian Wake, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report is being presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee as a further update following the item of urgent business requested and briefing note delivered to this committee during the January 2022 meeting. Members are asked to read this report alongside the January briefing note.

Members of the committee requested that this report be brought back in March 2022 to address the following specific elements:

1. Outcome of the UKPN investigation into the cause of the infrastructure failure
2. Planned and preventative maintenance and inspections of infrastructure in other tower blocks in Thurrock
3. Lessons learnt from the officer group
4. Feedback from residents

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to comment on the detail contained within this report relating to the incident.

2. Introduction and background

2.1 On 26 December 2021 an incident took place at Lionel Oxley House whereby electrical infrastructure owned and maintained by UK Power Networks (UKPN) failed causing it to ignite and smoulder.

2.2 The damage caused to the building by the actual incident was relatively minor. The fire detection system allowed the Essex Country Fire and Rescue Service (ECFRS) to be onsite within minutes and the source of ignition and smouldering was extinguished quickly.

2.3 However, the damaged infrastructure meant that power was lost to 14 individual homes within the tower block and therefore, residents could not return to their homes until 28 December 2021.

3. Outcome of the UKPN investigation into the cause of the infrastructure failure

3.1 Since the occurrence of the incident Thurrock Council have been in communication with UKPN to fully investigate and understand the cause of the fault that led to this incident, and to ensure that a similar occurrence in any of our blocks is prevented as far as is reasonably practicable.

3.2 UKPN advised the investigation has been completed by an independent organisation. It has been concluded that the fire probably started as a result of a resistive heating fault on one of the three phase service heads. Specifically, at one of the cut-out fuse assemblies within that service head. However, it has been concluded that the extent of the damage to two of those assemblies is such that the exact physical evidence of the fault has been lost.

3.3 Therefore, based on the remains of the infrastructure after the incident, they are unable to categorically determine what failed within this section of the infrastructure. However, they have confirmed the fault that caused the incident was within the section that caused the ignition and therefore, this was not a wider issue within the building.

3.4 Following the incident this section of infrastructure has been completely replaced by UKPN and none of the defective parts remain in the building.

4. Planned and preventative maintenance and inspections of infrastructure in other tower blocks in Thurrock

4.1 In line with the update delivered in January 2022 to this committee, we remain in conversation with the operational teams within UKPN to discuss the inspections and maintenance of their infrastructure both within Lionel Oxley House and also other high rise buildings in the housing portfolio.

4.2 We can confirm that following the incident at Lionel Oxley House, UKPN have undertaken surveys utilising specialist testing equipment on the incoming mains of all six high rise resident tower blocks in South Grays. These surveys did not identify any defects across any of the six blocks.

4.3 At the time of compiling this report we can advise that we are currently in active communication in regard to continuing this piece of work across other Council owned assets and specifically the remaining high rise resident tower blocks within Thurrock.

- 4.4 Thurrock Council have also raised matters with UKPN regarding the requirement of planned servicing and testing of their infrastructure. UKPN have confirmed that, specifically in respect to Lionel Oxley House, their equipment is designed and maintained to be safe and meets industry regulations and standards. They further stated, these types of incidents are infrequent and relatively isolated across the energy industry, and they are not considered an emerging threat or an increasing trend on electrical infrastructure.
- 4.5 At this stage we are awaiting further communications from UKPN in relation to the planned maintenance approach for their infrastructure both in relation to our high-rise blocks, and more widely, across the Council's housing assets.
- 4.6 Further to this, the Council and UKPN have agreed to jointly review the containment of the main electrical infrastructure within our high-rise blocks. Whilst there is not a specific failing in regard to the infrastructure containment at this point, we recognise the existing arrangement in place can be improved to align to current industry standards to enhance protection against any failures in the future. This will be delivered as part of the Council's planned maintenance programmes over the next 12-18 months and will be completed in all high-rise blocks as applicable.

5. Lessons learnt

- 5.1 Officers from housing involved in the management of the incident on the ground, emergency planning team and colleagues from the communications team held talks and a reflective lessons learnt session. Below are the key agreed takeaways to ensure that future incidents are easier to manage:
- Communications team updated their internal processes to ensure that the Leader, Portfolio Holders and Ward Councillors are to be informed of significant emergency incidents by the Communications Team Out of Hours lead
 - Those dealing with the incident on the ground should focus on the managing the incident first and foremost
 - Emergency Planning rota and Bronze, Silver and Gold processes to be shared with key people in housing to ensure greater visibility and awareness
 - Housing Out of Hours rota to be kept centrally and shared with the Emergency Planning Team
 - Confirmation that meals will be provided when emergency decanting into hotels
 - Company credit cards to be more widely available
 - Civic office available 24/7 for staff in case welfare facilities are required, as well as the possibility of using some of the caretaking facilities across the borough to be explored
 - Processes of Careline and handling of calls by Harty Close office explained

- Keeping a record of contact with residents as well as having calling cards suggested
- Suggestion of emergency “grab bag” to be explored, including a written record of laminated key phone numbers

6. Feedback from residents

- 6.1 We wrote to residents on 4th February inviting them to attend a drop-in event at the Seabrooke Rise Community House on Wednesday 9th February from 1pm to 5pm. The purpose of the drop-in event was to discuss the way that the fire incident was handled, what the council could have done better and to address any other concerns or questions that residents may have wanted to share. Unfortunately, due to an internal miscommunication a housing officer attended the meeting but it was not until much later than the start time advertised on the letter.
- 6.2 This was a significant error on our part, one that we apologised to residents for by taking the following action. We door knocked and telephoned all the residents of Lionel Oxley House on Thursday 10th February 2022 to apologise for our failure and to offer them another opportunity to feedback their experiences and how they thought we had managed the incident.
- 6.3 In addition, we hand delivered a letter to residents offering an apology and giving them the following options to share their views with us; to attend a drop-in event at the Seabrooke Rise Community House on Monday 14th February from 6pm – 8pm, to complete a short online form or to discuss the matter by telephone or in person by appointment.
- 6.4 Up to and including the initial Community House event on Wednesday 9th February we only received one telephone call from a tenant who reported that the incident was acted upon very quickly and that it was well dealt with. She was concerned however there was no audible warning and commented that there should have been an electrical break. We subsequently spoke to this tenant again and have included her in the records below.
- 6.5 The following is a record arising from Thursday 10th February. Of the 36 residents who contacted us from a total of 58 households through each channel – please note that four of the tenants who attended the Community House event and completed the online survey are also included in the face to face and telephone numbers:
- Face to face (door knock) - 14
 - Telephone – 22 (voicemail messages were left with all those that had such a facility)
 - Online survey - 1
 - Attendance at Community House – 4 (one of which was the Resident Association Chair)
 - Home Visit - None
 - No of void properties: 4
 - No. of residents who had no concerns to raise: 20

6.6 The following is a record of the issues which were raised by residents via face to face, telephone or the online survey:

- No. of residents who had no concerns to raise: 20
- No audio alerting to fire: 5
- No of residents staying away from their property due to fear of fires: 3
- Communication: 2
- Smoke in flat: 1
- Pet left in flat: 1

6.7 In attendance at the Seabrooke Rise Community House event were three Lionel Oxley residents along with the Chair of the Residents Association. Also attending were Ewelina Sorbjan (Assistant Director of Housing), Peter Doherty (Strategic Lead – Housing Operations) and officers from tenancy, property services and resident engagement.

6.8 The meeting covered all the issues referenced above and also highlighted a number of issues for the Essex County Fire & Rescue Service which we are to follow up with them:

- Door knocking and reassurance – what is their approach/protocol?
- Access issues – which keys and keypad codes do they require in order to access our buildings/infrastructure? Did they encounter any access issues at the time of the incident?
- Rescue – what's their approach?
- Lifts – why were the lifts still operating for a period after fire fighters had entered the building which resulted in tenants accessing them?
- Smoke screens in the communal areas – how do they create a closed space when running a fire hose through communal doors?

6.9 And similarly for Thurrock Housing we are to confirm:

- Why there are no alarms in the stairwells / communal areas?
- Bin chute fire alarm system – why did it not sense the fire and go into activation? We agreed to consider installing an additional smoke detector placed adjacent to UKPN service heads to pick up any potential fire risk emanating from UKPN's equipment.
- Bin chute door still open – This was damaged to provide access to the fire service at the time of the incident, it is still out of service with yellow and black tape still on. The repair of this roller shutter needs to be pursued.
- Fire Panels – who have the keys?
- Should Thurrock BC have an alert which goes through to them?
- Smoke alarms hard wired but still require batteries. Do we need to re-prioritise replacement response times given some tenants – disabled/elderly may not be able to access and all the time it is beeping?

- Doors
 - Fire doors - need to be checked to ensure properly sealed / closing mechanisms make it difficult for disabled and elderly residents to access
 - Tenant property doors – same as above
 - Drying rooms – keypad and lock – handle is small and difficult to use.
 - Emergency exit doors need to be checked, some of these were reported as being damaged and not closing.

6.10 General Matters

- Expectation around communication – door knock and follow up in writing to say what happened
- Officers to use hi-vis jackets
- Meeting Point – signage missing
- Resident Association – future agenda item

7. Reasons for Recommendation

7.1 The Housing and Overview Scrutiny have requested a further update on the items listed and in line with the discussion of the January 2022 relating to the matter of urgent business.

7.2 This report is providing answers to the discussion points and questions raised.

8. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

8.1 The Council has engaged with the officers internally and with the residents externally to gather feedback, improve its ways of dealing with incidents of this nature going forward and learn lessons.

9. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

9.1 The ongoing maintenance and improvement of the Council's housing assets supports the Council's key priorities through the provision of quality housing and estates people are proud to live on.

10. Implications

10.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**

Strategic Lead – Corporate Finance

Any financial cost arising will initially be contained within the existing HRA budget allocation.

10.2 **Legal**

Implications verified by: **Gina Clarke**

**Corporate Governance Lawyer and Deputy
Monitoring Officer**

No specific legal implications from this update report.

10.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**

**Team Manager - Community Development and
Equalities**

No specific diversity and equality implications from this update report.

11 **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- Briefing Note January 2022

12 **Appendices to the report**

- N/A

Report Author:

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