

SAFER SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 5 JULY 2010

Councillors Present: Jeff Beck, George Chandler, Geoff Findlay (Substitute) (In place of Adrian Edwards), Roger Hunneman (Vice-Chairman), Quentin Webb (Chairman) and Keith Woodhams

Also Present: Councillor Paul Bryant, David Sharp (Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service), Andy Day (Head of Policy and Communication), Sean Tye (Property Development Manager), Ian Priestly (Assurance Manager), Elaine Walker (Principal Policy Officer)

Apologies: Councillor Adrian Edwards

PART I

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings held on 6th April 2010 and 11th May 2010 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Andy Day confirmed that 'Have Your Say' was a police initiative and that the Public Involvement Board, which comprised a number of local public sector organisations, would assist in coordinating this activity to gain most benefit and avoid duplication of activity elsewhere.

5. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

6. Matters Arising

The Committee reviewed the status of activities identified at previous meetings. The Committee were content with progress and requested that in future, this item would contain only current and ongoing activities.

RESOLVED that in future, this item would contain only current and ongoing activities.

7. Installation of Fire Sprinklers Review

The Committee considered a report regarding Fire Sprinklers in Schools and Other Buildings presented to the Committee by Sean Tye (Property Development Manager).

Following questioning from the Committee, Sean Tye clarified that costs for installing fire sprinkler systems would vary according to the type and size of the system required. Available indicative costs suggested that the cost of installing fire sprinkler systems in new buildings could account for between 2.3% and 15% of the total project cost.

The Committee requested information regarding dry sprinkler systems and were informed that dry systems worked by forcing an inert gas into the area thereby expelling all oxygen and extinguishing the fire. They were more suited to use in unpopulated, smaller areas although they could be set up in a number of situations. They have been found to cost

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approximately 35% more than wet systems although there were clear benefits in some settings, for example electrical rooms.

It was explained that the maintenance cost of any system depended on the size of the system and the components that required maintenance or servicing. There was little available information to quantify these costs, but indications were that they could range from £500 to £5000 per annum.

It was further confirmed that the cost of fitting a system retrospectively to a building could not be defined as it would be dependent on a number of factors including size, construction material of the building and whether there was asbestos present, and the components required for the sprinkler system.

The Committee agreed not to consider developing a policy related to retrospective fitting of fire sprinklers.

David Sharp of the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service presented physical examples of two different types of sprinkler head for the Committee's information. He demonstrated one version, considered suitable for residential premises, where the fitting would be flush with the ceiling, descending and becoming visible only on activation. The second version would be visible at all times. Both versions would be suitable to be fitted with a dry system or a wet system.

He further stated that the normal life span of a sprinkler system was between 30 and 50 years and good maintenance would help to prolong this.

Ian Priestley (Assurance Manager) presented information to the Committee regarding insurance costs. He explained that West Berkshire Council currently benefited from low premiums for buildings cover in exchange for a high excess level. This has been determined by reference to the Council's low level of fire risk, with three significant fires since 2003 totalling approximately £200k in repair costs. No claims had been made to the Council's insurers to date as all had been below the Council's excess level. It was recognised that sprinklers would have reduced the refurbishment costs of the fires that had occurred, however the low numbers of fires would not in themselves justify the cost of installation of sprinklers.

The Committee asked whether the insurance company had been approached to request a reduction in premiums. Ian Priestley replied that negotiations were taking place in relation to St Bartholomew's however there was no expectation of major savings.

Councillor Bryant expressed concern at the lack of savings to be made regarding insurance when his previous source of information, Medway Council, had reported significant savings. Ian Priestley responded that the Council's premiums were already low and savings to these were unlikely to be significant.

Councillor Hunneman suggested that, as insurance savings were likely to be insignificant, savings would need to be made in the cost of installation and required components.

Sean Tye informed the Committee of a current project to install fire sprinklers where planning constraints had required the water tank to be placed underground. This had

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resulted in increased costs of around £20k. The Committee discussed the requirement for water storage tanks, and questioned whether systems could be run directly from water mains. Sean Tye replied that where the water authority was unable to guarantee adequate water pressure, then tanks would be required. It was suggested that the water board should be approached to amend its practice of reducing water pressure at certain times of day. Sean Tye went on to explain that where a water tank was required, it was regulated that the tank must be of a size that was able to supply the entire system. It was confirmed that where tanks were installed that did not meet the required size, insurance cover would become void. It was noted that planning constraints might limit options for the location of a water tank at any location and this might be due to the size of the area available for construction. It was also noted that adequate space would be required to access and maintain the tank. It was suggested that consideration be given to improving the appearance of water tanks if this would assist in gaining planning consent.

Councillor Bryant clarified that fire officers no longer approved fire safety systems in buildings. Since the Fire Safety Order 2005 was introduced, building owners or occupiers have been responsible for fire safety. A fire officer would only inspect systems if they had reason to believe that fire regulations were not being met.

Councillor Bryant went on to question the appropriateness of the risk assessment currently in use as some items required a judgement from the assessor which could be made inaccurately. He also questioned the costs presented in the report as his previous source of information, Medway Council, had indicated much lower costs of 2.5%. This concern was shared by Councillor Hunneman. However actual figures after having installed a sprinkler system at St Bartholomew's School showed a cost of 4% of the total project cost.

Councillor Bryant further raised the issue that consideration should be given to what was at risk by fire in different buildings. He stated that school practices meant that pupils would be efficiently evacuated from a building therefore the major risk would be to the building itself. However in a residential care home, there would be more difficulty in evacuating residents, therefore the risk would be to both life and property.

Ian Priestley suggested that, should a policy be developed, it should state its aims clearly. In particular, where sleeping accommodation was present, such as in a care home, then sprinklers should be mandatory. Alternatively where the aim was to protect buildings then they should only be installed if there was a clear financial benefit.

The Committee questioned whether the Kennet Centre had fire sprinklers installed and if so, where the water storage tanks were placed. A request was made to make arrangements to visit the Kennet Centre to understand the layout and working arrangements for the system. A further request was made to visit other appropriate locations, St Bartholomew's and Sainsbury's were suggested. The Committee agreed that these visits would be worthwhile.

Councillor Chandler noted that schools were higher risk buildings because of short occupancy hours and asked whether consideration had been given to greater safeguarding of schools particularly in holiday times to reduce the risk of fire further and avoid the need to install sprinklers. The Committee was reminded that the risk of fire in West Berkshire was very low already.

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David Sharp stated that the fire service's preferred option for fire safety was fire sprinklers as they would extinguish fires and save lives and property. This would be particularly relevant in residential care homes. He went on to provide further information to the Committee regarding fire sprinklers in general and specifically a London Study report into fires in sprinklered buildings which showed that:

- 84% of fires were contained or extinguished by sprinklers;
- Where sprinklers were unsuccessful, this was due to water supply failure, insufficient heat to activate the sprinklers, or fires in unsprinklered areas;
- In five cases, the sprinklers failed to activate.

David Sharp indicated that the low levels of installed sprinklers meant that information was not readily available on a large scale. He further explained that where sprinklers were installed, there was a greater freedom over building design as constraints in relation to exit routes and room size would be relaxed. He finally brought to the attention of the Committee that the number of fires in residential care homes was increasing and was expected to continue to increase due to the greater number of care homes required to cater for the ageing population.

The Committee noted that the report presented had focussed on schools with little mention of residential care homes. It was noted that West Berkshire Council's property portfolio contained very few residential care homes (which would not be fitted retrospectively) and a very large number of schools. Additionally, the majority of capital work involved schools. Councillor Bryant suggested that if West Berkshire Council were to install sprinklers as standard, more pressure could be placed on owners of other buildings in which the Council had an interest to also install sprinklers.

Councillor Woodhams requested information to be obtained regarding a new residential care home in Thatcham specifically around the installation of sprinklers.

Councillor Woodhams expressed the difficulty in consolidating all of the available information into a single policy, and suggested that a suitable risk assessment for all projects might be the appropriate approach.

The Committee agreed in principal to developing a policy in relation to the installation of fire sprinklers in new buildings and those undergoing major refurbishment. It was agreed that the stance of the policy should be an expectation that sprinklers would be installed, although a suitable risk assessment would inform this decision. The Committee requested that the Head of Planning and Trading Standards be asked to develop a draft policy for review at the next meeting.

Resolved that:

- The committee would not recommend fitting fire sprinklers retrospectively to buildings.
- Arrangements would be made for the Committee to visit two or three different sites where fire sprinklers were installed.

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- Sean Tye would investigate how a decision was reached regarding the installation of sprinklers in the new Thatcham residential care home.
- The Head of Planning and Trading Standards be asked to develop a draft policy in relation to the installation of fire sprinklers.

8. Work Programme

The Committee agreed the work programme and proposed to conclude their review into the need for a policy relating to fire sprinklers at the next meeting. It was further agreed that the next item for consideration by the Committee would be crime statistics and that Thames Valley Police would be invited to the next meeting to provide an update.

Resolved that:

- Thames Valley Police would be invited to the next meeting to provide information regarding crime statistics.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.15 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature