

Safety in your building

1 April 2022

Houblon Apartments,
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Whitechapel,
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Dear residents,

A record of yesterday's residents meeting about the recent fire

Thank you to everyone who attended the meeting yesterday, which I chaired, to discuss the recent fire in the Crawford Building, and particularly to everyone who asked questions.

I hope you found the meeting useful as an opportunity to hear directly from the London Fire Brigade, John D Wood and colleagues from Network Homes.

For those of you unable to be there, the London Fire Brigade confirmed that they have carried out extensive investigations following the fire, which they believe to have been accidental and the building performed as they expected it to. The fire brigade will produce a report following the conclusion of their investigations and we will share it with all residents of Houblon Apartments.

I'm also attaching a record of all questions asked and answers provided during the meeting about the fire and your building's safety, so everyone has the same information.

I know some of you raised other questions about the general management of the building which were unrelated to the fire, and our neighbourhood officers were on hand to answer these separately at the end. I have not included these individual questions here as the meeting was specifically about fire safety. If you have any further points to raise on this please do send them through to the email address below.

If you feel there is anything we haven't covered or if you have any additional questions, please get in touch with us on customerservice@networkhomes.org.uk.

Best wishes



Jamie Ratcliff
Executive Director of People & Partnerships

Houblon residents meeting 31 March 2022 – Q&A

This is not a verbatim record of the meeting but contains answers to key questions asked at the event and posed to Network Homes in advance. If anyone wishes to follow up on any issues please email customerservice@networkhomes.org.uk

The meeting was chaired by an Executive Director at Network Homes with answers and updates provided by colleagues from London Fire Brigade, John D Wood (the managing agent) and Network Homes. As well as residents from the Houblon Apartments a number of local councillors and Unmesh Desai, Assembly Member were in attendance.

Can you confirm the cause of the fire?

The London Fire Brigade have carried out extensive investigations into the fire and whilst are not yet able to confirm the precise cause are confident that it was accidental and not as a result of any issue related to the building. In addition London Fire Brigade colleagues confirmed that the building performed as expected and they have no current plans to advise for the fire strategy of the building to change. A report on the causes of the fire will be produced and we will share this with residents.

This is the latest of several fires that have occurred in the building in recent years. Is the building prone to catching fire?

We are only aware of one other fire that has occurred in this building on 6 October 2021. This was the result of a fault with a thermostat in a communal area and this fire was safely contained. The damage caused by this has now been repaired and redecorated by the managing agent for the building. The managing agent has also reviewed the thermostats in the other communal areas in the building.

It's possible that other fires have occurred in other parts of the building we don't manage and if people are concerned about how these were handled, please inform us, along with details of the previous fire, and we'll take this up with the managing agents on your behalf.

Is a stay-put policy appropriate and why didn't any alarms go off?

We know some residents have raised concerns about the stay-put policy and the fact that an alarm didn't go off at the time of the fire. There are no fire alarms in the communal areas.

Responsibility for setting the fire strategy lies with the freeholder of the building and this would have been implemented with independent expert advice. In the meeting the London Fire Brigade confirmed they have no current plans to advise changes to the fire strategy.

Under current fire regulations, fire alarms are not recommended in communal areas of a building with a stay-put strategy. Network Homes is also not in a position to install fire alarms in communal areas which link to areas of the building that we don't manage.

It was also noted in the meeting the downsides of having an alarm, which would be prone to accidental activation and potentially create problems of crowding and delay in the event of simultaneous evacuation.

Stay put doesn't mean you are not allowed to leave the building in the event of a fire and in any case should leave your home, provided it is safe to do so, if fire or smoke is in your home. When leaving your home, you should make sure you close your fire door behind you. If it is not safe for you to leave your home or you are unable to exit the building you should call 999 for emergency assistance from the fire brigade.

Why has the stay put policy never been explained to residents in the past or after the last FRA?

Information on the fire evacuation strategy is included in welcome packs, however, we recognise that this message may be somewhat lost in all the stress of moving and that depending on when you moved in, it might have been a while since you last read this. The aim of the stay-put policy is to ensure that those who are not directly affected by the fire stay can remain safely within their home. However, if you are affected by heat, smoke or fire please ensure you evacuate. Please ensure that you are regularly checking your smoke detectors so that if in the event of a fire you will be alerted.

Why were small notices in small writing put up without notification in non-prominent locations?

It is standard fire safety practice to display fire notices in the building in areas close to lifts, stairwells and entrances/exits. We're expecting the LFB fire safety team to do an audit of fire safety measures in the building following this incident and we will of course respond to any issues raised. If it's determined these notices are too small or in poor locations, we will address this.

Why are your letters only provided on your website?

All letters we have sent out as part of this incident are sent via text message with a link to the website as this is the quickest way to distribute information to our residents. We have also posted paper copies through letterboxes. We ask for phone numbers on sign-up and residents need to inform us that they have changed their phone number to ensure they receive updates.

If there's a stay-put policy in the building, why are there notices telling us to evacuate

The evacuation signs were flagged in the latest Fire Risk Assessment as needing to be changed. These have now been replaced with the correct signage advice for a stay-put policy. We apologise for the fact that signs were displaying incorrect advice on the day of the incident.

Your home sign up pack advises us to plan our escape but has no reference to stay put

Regardless of the fire strategy of a building – stay put or simultaneous evacuation – all households should have a planned escape route. This means knowing not to use the lift in the event of an incident, where the emergency exit is and any alternatives. This also should include talking to all members of the household about what to do in the incident and having a plan for those who may not be able to leave the building without help, e.g. small children or disabled people.

When does stay put end? We've never been told how we'll know or where to go...

A stay-put policy is designed to advise residents who aren't affected by heat, smoke or fire to stay in their homes during an incident. Any guidance on stay put should include information to call 999 for advice and to evacuate if they do become affected. Emergency services will advise residents during the incident if guidance has changed, and they need to evacuate. If necessary, the fire brigade will also begin a building-wide evacuation by attending to all flats in the building.

When residents are told to evacuate by the emergency services, they should make their way out of the building using the escape plan they have been advised to make. The emergency services should advise residents if the incident is affecting an area of the building that would hinder their escape.

If fire notices do not determine a specific 'assembly point' once residents have evacuated, then they should gather with other residents in a safe place. Residents should ensure they aren't at risk from traffic, are away from the building in case of falling debris and aren't hindering the movements of the emergency services.

You can read some further information on stay put from the National Fire Chiefs Council here: <https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/Stay-Put-position>.

Why do you refuse to put a communal alarm in the building? Can't we have something that's centrally controlled by the Fire Service which sounds the "get out" or "all clear".

The fire strategy of the building has been devised by an independent fire engineer and stay put strategies are not designed in conjunction with communal alarms. All alarm systems are prone to a small level of false alarms, whether through misuse, a technical fault or error. It is therefore not prudent to have an 'all clear' alarm as this could falsely tell residents that everything is okay when it may not be. The 'all clear' must be given by the fire brigade. Residents will be advised by emergency services when to get out if they have not already left due to being directly affected by heat, smoke or fire.

The Fire Brigade have different methods of communicating with residents in buildings and would not necessarily be prepared to use systems that we or the managing agent installed. We believe that a system like this could risk confusion. If an independent fire engineer recommends some sort of communal warning system, the managing agent, working with us, would implement it.

What does “directly affected” by a fire mean in terms of a stay-put policy? What do you do as in this case where a resident heard a big boom and saw a massive cloud of black smoke?

The fire evacuation strategy for any building in terms of stay put or evacuation is advice. Even if a resident is told to stay put, they can of course decide they want to evacuate. We know that especially since the Grenfell Tower fire, residents are significantly more likely to want to leave the building in the event of an incident and we respect that. However, we must communicate the fire evacuation strategy that has been recommended by the fire engineer. We do recommend you follow the building’s evacuation strategy and the advice of emergency services.

In terms of someone who hears a loud noise or sees smoke, that is for the resident to determine that they are being directly affected and want to leave the building. In this sort of instance, we would always recommend calling 999 to hear the most up-to-date information and advice.

The advice we give residents when they move in, about determining their escape plan, should take into account all of those scenarios – young children, carers, disabilities. If you are concerned as to how you or a member of your household would evacuate in an emergency, you should get in touch with us or ask the fire service for advice.

The ‘compartmentation’ of a building should mean that a fire a few floors away would take some time to affect your property. The stay-put policy is designed to advise residents who aren’t affected to stay in their homes. Once the fire brigade is on-site, they will attend to floors that are affected to enable residents to evacuate.

I’m disabled or have mobility issues. How should I evacuate if told to do so?

If you have mobility issues that could impact your ability to evacuate the building, then please inform us. In the event of a fire and you need to leave your home but are unable to do so then you should call 999 for emergency assistance.

The fire brigade noted that if there is a fire contained within your home then leaving and shutting the door will offer you additional protection, as would every fire door that you go through (and close behind you), with additional protection in the stair core. Even if you are unable to fully leave the building you should be able to move somewhere safer while you await emergency assistance.

Why did you advise residents to open windows when debris and glass were loose?

We’d like to apologise once again for the mixed messaging you received about the windows. At the time we were trying to address residents’ concerns about the smell of smoke in the building, and allowing fresh air into apartments was one method for getting rid of the lingering smell. As soon as we received further advice from the managing agent that windows should remain closed, we updated residents about this. This is something we can learn from for future incidents.

Why were residents in homes on the south-east corner under the fire, and so very obviously going to get water damage, allowed back in before any checks were made or accompanied home?

During a live incident, control of the scene and the ability to let residents back into their homes is determined by the fire brigade. They will tell residents they can return to their homes when it is safe to do so as the fire has been put out. If a resident returns home and finds water damage, then they need to return to the assembly point or reception area where people are gathered to ask for assistance.

On the night of the fire, why did you find someone to eject the media from the hotel?

We believe the media were asked to leave by representatives of Tower Hamlets Council and we agree with their decision. The role of the media is to report on the incident, not to hinder it.

Why did one of your team on the night, standing alongside the fire safety advisor, comment that stay put is a busted policy but insisted upon by the Fire Service?

We're not sure who it was that said this, but if they were a Network Homes employee I would like to apologise for this comment. This may have been the personal opinion of the operative and does not represent the views of Network Homes. In that instance it was certainly not helpful and is not correct. Stay put is still used up and down the country in lots of buildings.

Why are there no fire extinguishers in communal areas – just on the ground floor?

The fire safety equipment in the building is managed by the freeholder's building manager. However, with respect to fire extinguishers only being available on the ground floor, fire extinguishers are not required in communal areas of apartment buildings under current fire regulations. We would not want to encourage residents to fight fires themselves using extinguishers, instead, it is safer to call the fire brigade.

What does Network Homes do to ensure electrical safety?

Although it is not a statutory requirement Network carries out a five-yearly rolling programme of electrical safety checks in our rented homes. You should have been provided with a copy of this when you moved in but if you are a tenant and would like to have a copy of this then please email customerservice@networkhomes.org.uk

These checks are on fixed appliances and the wiring within your home. Your white goods and other electrical appliances are your responsibility, and we encourage you to use them safely. Including only using genuine items and unplugging and not using items, until they are fixed, that are faulty.

If you are a leaseholder or shared owner, then the electrics within your home are your responsibility and you might wish to have them checked regularly by a qualified electrician. You can find one by using <https://www.checktrade.com/>

If you are a private tenant, please speak to your landlord.

Should we be concerned about electrical safety and the fixed wiring in the building?

The London Fire Brigade confirmed that the fixed wiring in the building is not a cause concern of theirs. They did advise that everyone should register their electric devices so they are able to be easily recalled if the manufacturer finds a fault -

<https://www.registermyappliance.org.uk/>

They also advised to operate caution in relation to charging e-scooters, e-bikes, and mobile-phones, ensuring you don't leave these items plugged in unattended. If you see any sign of damage, make sure to unplug and check the device.

What can I do to make my home as safe as possible?

The London Fire Brigade advised people to use their online home fire safety checker tool which can be accessed here - <https://www.london-fire.gov.uk/safety/the-home/home-fire-safety/home-fire-safety-checker-hfsc/>

All residents should also have been offered a home fire safety visit by the London Fire Brigade and if you would like to book one you can do so here - <https://www.london-fire.gov.uk/safety/the-home/book-a-home-fire-safety-visit/>

The lifts are continually breaking down, what are you going to do about it?

We recognise that there have been ongoing problems with both lifts (as can be seen from the performance figures below) and this has been exacerbated by the length of time to carry out the most recent repair. As advised in the meeting on 31 March 2022 this is an industry wide challenge with delivery of replacement parts for lifts currently taking much longer than is the norm. We are working hard with our contractors and their supply chain to try and improve this.

In order to investigate the issues with the lifts further and improve the lifts we have arranged for a specialist lift consultant to inspect the two lifts and post visit they will provide a condition report, which we will share with all residents. This will contain recommendations for improving performance and also comment on our current maintenance regime/contractor.

Lift 1/LH:

- Number of call outs in the last 12 months – **22**
- Number of call outs in the last 6 months – **14**
- Number of call outs in the last 3 months – **9**
- Time of service (in hours or days) **286 days in service**
- % of time of service **78.35%**

Lift 2:

- Number of call outs in the last 12 months – **13**
- Number of call outs in the last 6 months – **5**
- Number of call outs in the last 3 months – **2**
- Time of service (in hours or days) **335 days in service**
- % of time of service **91.78%**

When are you going to replace the wooden balconies?

John D Wood wrote to us on 31 March 2022 advising of their intention to commission works to replace the wood on the balcony decking and re-clad the plant room on the roof. The freeholder of the building is proposing to cover 40% of the cost – equivalent to the commercial space and the remainder of the cost is proposed to be spread between all homes on a proportional basis. The cost for the balconies is estimated to be £256,026 in total and the re-cladding works £28,000. This is subject to a consultation period running to 17 May 2022. If the works proceed John D Wood estimate that they would start six to eight weeks after construction and would take approximately 12-16 weeks to complete.

John D Wood will also be writing to the developer (Redrow) and their contractor (Sisk) to ask them to cover these costs in full and Network will also be making that case. If the cost are not met in that way, then Network would make the contributions relevant for the rented homes and shared owners and leaseholders would be responsible for their share of the costs.