

Fire Safety in Timber Frame and Timber/UPVC Clad Properties

Briefing note - July 2024

Overview

A house fire occurred in Summer 2023 at Moss Hall Grove, West Finchley in a council owned property. The fire spread rapidly across the terrace of 4 properties due to the way the properties had been constructed. Had the fire occurred at night, there would almost certainly have been casualties. The council has identified nearly 600 homes in Barnet that are similarly at risk, of which nearly 400 are in private ownership. The nature of the risk is such that the council must, under the Housing Act 2004, require property owners to take action.

This note sets out further information on the nature of the properties, the risk and our understanding of the legislative requirements. It highlights the next steps we are taking and includes a number of asks of Government.

Asks of Government

1. Confirmation that Government agrees with the approach we are taking in Barnet in relation to these properties, including our duties under the Housing Act 2004.
2. Explore whether cladding remediation funding could be made available to affected Freeholders and Leaseholders who, through no fault of their own, could face significant costs.

As part of this, it would help if Government would review current policy which excludes homeowners in buildings below 11m from accessing current cladding funding. While the previous Government's answer to a recent parliamentary question stated most low-rise homes are unlikely to need remediation, the evidence emerging from Barnet suggests that these homes do.

3. Explore whether funding may be available to ease the additional pressure caused by this issue on Barnet's Housing Revenue Account, as the money we are using is likely to be required to complete our wider fire safety programme.

Background

Following the fire which rapidly destroyed four homes in the summer of 2023 expert building consultants, Capital, working on behalf of Barnet Homes¹ identified 193 council owned homes, seven leasehold homes and 383 freehold properties which were sold by the council under the Right to Buy Scheme which are believed to be of similar construction to the homes affected by the fire. The houses were built between the 1930's and 1960's. Some of the homes were built by London County Council and then transferred to the

¹ Barnet Homes is the council's Arms Length Management Organisation and is responsible for managing the council's housing stock

Greater London Council (GLC) and subsequently to Barnet. The rest of these type of homes were built by the GLC and then transferred to Barnet. The majority of the affected homes are in Burnt Oak.

Constituency	Ward	Total no. of affected homes	No. of Council owned homes	No. of leasehold homes	No. of freehold homes
Hendon	Burnt Oak	457	144	0	313
Chipping Barnet	Brunswick Park	59	37	7	15
	Totteridge and Woodside	57	9	0	48
Finchley and Golders Green	West Finchley	10	3	0	7
Total		583	193	7	383

There are four different types of construction that all vary; they are all constructed using a solid masonry separating wall between houses which is then supplemented with a front and rear elevation in timber with a cladding material affixed. This cladding generally spans the terrace.

In order to obtain an understanding of the council's obligations in relation to the private stock a sample of inspections were completed by LBB's Housing Regulatory Services under the Housing Act 2004. An assessment was undertaken under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). This is a risk-based evaluation tool to help local authorities identify and protect against potential risks and hazards to health and safety from any deficiencies identified in residential premises. Category 1 hazards are the highest risk where the council has a mandatory duty to take action to reduce the risk and category 2 hazards are a lower risk, where the council may still take action but is not mandated to do so.

Following the inspection, Category 1 hazards were identified for fire due to the timber frame and UPVC cladding plus fire stopping issues. Further sample investigations identified additional timber framed, timber clad properties with Category 1 hazards for fire.

There are a small number of properties that are owned by Housing Associations. The Housing Associations have been notified and the council will work with them in relation to the remediation works. Opendoor Homes, the Registered Provider subsidiary of Barnet Homes, owns similar stock in three other Local Authority areas so we know this issue is wider than just Barnet.

Remediation solutions

The council and Barnet Homes have been working together to explore remediation solutions. The cost of fully replacing the cladding and undertaking firestopping and insulation works could cost in the region of £23,000 per property. Given the concerns from residents regarding the costs of the works, we have been exploring potential alternative remediation solutions with the aim of reducing the cost to residents but still reducing the risks identified in the HHSRS. Due diligence on the alternative solutions is currently underway. The alternative solution, if approved, would be cheaper, but wouldn't provide the added benefit of insulation.

Freehold owners will have the option of organising the works to be undertaken themselves or allow the work to be undertaken by Barnet Homes. The council has identified funding to facilitate the up-front costs of these works, but the costs will ultimately be payable by freeholders. Subject to eligibility, freeholders will be offered the option of a repayment plan to help manage these costs.

In the event that a property owner refuses to undertake the work to their property, appropriate enforcement action will need to be taken to secure completion of the work.

Affected leaseholders (7no.) will be fully consulted by Barnet Homes, to explain the necessity for the works and the calculation of their proportionate share of the remediation costs in accordance with the terms of individual leases and consultation requirements under Section 20 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985. Leaseholders will be able to utilise the existing repayment plans in place to support them during such high value works.

The existing fire safety budget within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) will be used to fund the works to the council-owned properties and is causing a pressure in terms of availability of funding in future years for regulatory compliance.

Programme for remediation

A HHSRS inspection survey of each affected property will be required to determine the level of risk and the remediation works required. These will commence in August. It is likely that individual homes have different levels of risk depending on the nature of investments that homeowners have made in their properties – for example removing internal walls, loft conversions and installation of new cladding will all affect the nature and scale of the risk.

Works to each home will take approximately 4 – 8 weeks to complete, depending on what is required. The majority of the works will be to the exterior of homes. Residents will not need to vacate their homes while the works take place.

It is anticipated that the works delivered by Barnet Homes will be undertaken over a three-year period. The work is set to commence in July 2024 with a programme of pilot properties with the larger programme commencing in November 2024.

Whilst these properties contain a significant hazard there is no imminent risk to occupiers. Fire safety advice has and will continue to be provided and battery powered smoke detectors are being provided to all residents on request. We are also liaising with the London Fire Brigade who are aware of our investigations and the affected properties. Any properties identified as being of a higher priority than others due to construction, mode of occupation, or issues affecting the residents' ability to vacate the property quickly will be prioritised for work completion or individualised household specific mitigation measures as appropriate.

Next steps

- 1.1 Due diligence on the second remediation option to complete in July
- 1.2 Inspection work to commence in August
- 1.3 Meeting with affected freehold owners to update on remediation options and repayment scheme – September

Contacts for affected residents

The council has a dedicated team who can be contacted via the details below. We have had an in person drop-in session with affected residents and send regularly updates by letter and email.

Email – TimberFrameHomes@barnet.gov.uk

Telephone –0208 359 5348

We also have website which is regularly updated with the latest information – <https://www.barnet.gov.uk/fire-safety-timber-framed-homes>