

Fire risk residents demand answers

Shocked residents at an Edinburgh block of flat are demanding answers after it emerged fire risks at the 1950s building are only now being looked at – five years after they were first identified in a council report.

An investigation is now underway into why a detailed report commissioned by the council and dated April 2020, which described dire fire risks in the Westfield Court flat block, was not acted on.

And the council were accused of ‘putting people’s lives at risk’ through inaction.

The report warned the council: “Currently, the risers would allow fire to penetrate numbers of flats with ease. [They] will act as chimneys for a potential fire to spread between flats within the entire affected block.”

It also said that a review of the building’s strategy for fire escape should be reviewed, and provided bullet points on concrete actions that would reduce fire risk – though it did not call them recommendations.

In a briefing to a group of councillors on 30 April, officers said that they were working on a ‘retrospective fire safety strategy’ for the building.

Residents were informed of the issues in a letter dated the same day, informing them that works to address fire safety risks are required to be carried out urgently within the block using emergency powers under the Tenement (Scotland) Act 2004.

And in an emergency motion to the city's Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work committee on Tuesday, independent councillor Ross McKenzie expressed dismay at the city's lack of action on the condition report.

He said: "I find it absolutely terrifying that the council failed to act on those words. I also have no faith in the organisation to respond in an open and transparent way.

"This is why I have asked for a stage 2 complaint response which would allow the residents to go to the Ombudsman if that's what they wish to do."

Westfield Court, in Gorgie, was completed in 1952 as Edinburgh's first multi-storey housing block, and hosts 95 flats.

About two-thirds of them are privately owned, but the council acts as the factor for the property.

Marion Potter and Diane Baxter are two pensioners who live in Baxter Court. Potter moved into the complex in 1955, while Baxter has lived there for nine years.

Both were shocked when they first heard that there were unaddressed fire safety risks in the building.

Mrs Baxter, 71, said: "Why is it that we suddenly have fire officers every day, and we're all at risk, and we've all got to get these new doors? Who's going to pay for it?

"[The council] don't tell us anything. It's like the Secret Service. Why is it suddenly now?"

Residents at Westfield Court have also faced issues with high

prices for maintenance and communal heating, which are provided by the council as the property's factor.

Miss Potter, 70, has seen her bills from the council go up from under £1,200 per year to almost £3,500 over the past three years.

Both Miss Potter and Mrs Baxter said that the rise in bills had added financial strain to their lives, with Ms Potter returning to work and Ms Baxter being forced to sell her car.

Miss Potter, who was a schoolteacher in the council, added: "We did a deputation on Tuesday. That's the third time we've been up at the council and seeing if we can get some answers.

"The councillors are very sympathetic, but sympathy doesn't pay your bills."

Cllr McKenzie said that, due to the non-standard construction methods used in building the block, occupants can't get mortgages for properties there.

The condition report stated that some mitigations could include providing smoke seals to all doors in the building, and adding fire stoppages to any penetrations in the building's floors.

Councillor Danny Aston, the SNP's housing spokesperson, said: "It's very troubling to learn of serious fire safety concerns in this manner, which had initially been identified so long ago.

"Serious questions have to be asked – why wasn't this shared with councillors immediately, and why wasn't action taken much sooner?"

An amended version of Cllr McKenzie's motion was passed by the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee.

It instructed officers to return to the committee in June with

an update on planned fire safety works, to inform residents about the proposed works and costs, and to avoid sending any invoices on fire safety remediations in the interim period.

It also agreed that the 'failure to implement fire safety recommendations' would be referred to the council's internal audit team.

Further, it said that the committee believes that the costs of whatever remediations are needed to address the situation should not be borne by residents.

Lezley Marion Cameron, a Labour councillor and convener of the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work committee said: "This is a hugely important issue, which is why I agreed to accept this motion."

Eilidh Keay, chair of tenants' union Living Rent's Edinburgh branch, said: "Edinburgh Council has utterly failed its duties and potentially put people's lives at risk.

"No one should live in a home that is a fire risk. Has our council forgotten about Grenfell and countless other block fires?

"It is beyond belief that they have sat on the recommendations of a fire risk report for the last five years. These recommendations should have been implemented years ago.

"These tenants were already fighting against an outdated energy system in the building that was leaving them with annual £3,500 energy bills. Now residents live with the fear of knowing their building could go up in flames at any moment."

Edinburgh Council has been contacted for comment.

By Joseph Sullivan Local Democracy Reporter