

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

COMMUNITY FIRE SAFETY WORKING GROUP – FIRST REPORT

Purpose

1. To consider and approve the Community Fire Safety Working Group First Report (annex 1) aimed at reducing the numbers of fire deaths and injuries, and protecting domestic and public property in Wales.

Summary/recommendations

2. Under the terms of Standing Order 9.7, each subject committee has the responsibility to contribute to the development of the Assembly's policies within the fields for which the relevant Assembly Secretary is accountable and to keep under review the expenditure and administration connected with policy implementation.

Background

3. The Community Fire Safety Working Group was set up following Ministerial discussion with representatives of the three Welsh Fire Services and the mutual concern, to ensure the Government, public sector organisations and private sector bodies work jointly to reduce the numbers of deaths and fire related injuries, and to protect domestic and public property in Wales. The full remit of the Group, along with its membership, can be found at section 1 of the Report.

4. This is the First Report and deals with hard wired smoke alarms and domestic sprinkler systems. The issues surrounding arson in Wales will be the subject of the second report, to be brought forward in the New Year.

5. Following lengthy consideration of the issues, the Group has recommended a number of proposals contained in part 2 of the Final Report. In adopting these, the Group believe that the National Assembly will strategically improve community fire safety in Wales, while recognising that the Assembly has limited financial resources. It proposes that certain groups are more vulnerable than others, and recommends that the Assembly adopts the use of domestic sprinklers for these, while other less vulnerable groups are catered for through the provision of hard wired smoke alarms. The remaining, non-risk population, comprising more affluent and

fire aware householders, should be targeted via publicity campaigns and encouraged to upgrade and regularly check their equipment where necessary.

6. The Report represents the views of the entire Group's membership with the exception of the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations (WFHA). WFHA have technical concerns over the appropriateness of sprinkler systems to control the incidence of fires in domestic properties. This is a technical issue, which if the Group's report is adopted, would need to be addressed by Housing Directorate Officials.

Consideration

7. In undertaking their research, the Group considered, among others, the incidence of domestic fires in Wales (section 4 of the Report); current initiatives in this field (section 6); priority action groups (section 3); and the Assembly's powers to effect change in domestic properties (section 7).

8. The Report highlights that, in 2000, there were 3,344 reported dwelling fires in Wales, 1,490 of the dwellings had fire detection, 918 of the dwellings with fire detection operated effectively and raised the alarm, 155 of the dwellings had operating fire detection but did not raise the alarm and 417 dwellings had fire detection that did not operate (68 where there was no battery). These statistics exemplify the concerns that fire professionals have over the disparity between smoke detector ownership and functioning smoke detector ownership, which is significantly less.

9. Further, the Report show that losses from fires in buildings protected by sprinklers in Europe over a 10 year period are estimated to be 10% of those in unprotected buildings. In buildings fully protected by sprinklers in the same period, sprinklers alone controlled 90% of fires, 60% of fires were controlled by no more than 4 sprinkler heads.

10. Though fire strikes indiscriminately and everyone is at risk, analysis of fire statistics show that certain groups suffer higher than average casualty rates. Priority Groups include the young and old, the physically and mentally disadvantaged and those under the influence of drugs and alcohol. In the event of a fire, these people may not be able to escape or may not understand the danger – or both.

11. There is also a significant section of the community that does not respond to community fire safety campaigns. This group, referred to as the 'hard to influence' is unlikely to respond to further attempts at education. These two groups are estimated to represent in the region of 25 – 30% of the UK population but current fire policies make no specific provision for their protection.

12. The Report notes that Government and a number of other agencies have examined the issues of domestic fire safety over recent years. The DTLR have issued a guidance note to encourage further the installation of smoke alarms in local authority housing (appendix D of the Report). The Government has also established the National Community Fire Safety Centre whose aim is to drive forward the recommendations of the 'Safe as Houses' report, which itself aimed to develop a co-ordinated and sustained national strategy for delivering fire safety awareness and education. In addition, the Residential Sprinkler Association (RSA) was set up to persuade Government to make the installation of residential fire sprinklers mandatory in HMO's and to prevent needless fire casualties and fatalities. While the Ministerial Smoke Alarm Initiative has launched an effective campaign that should increase the amount of households that have a functioning smoke detector.

13. In adopting the recommendations contained in part 2 of the report the Community Fire Safety Working Group recommends the National Assembly adopt a strategic approach towards improving community fire safety in Wales based on the moral standpoint that preserving life overrides financial considerations.

Financial Implications

14. The Report recognises that the National Assembly has limited financial resources and to install domestic sprinkler systems in all the 250,000 social houses in Wales would cost in excess of £300,000,000. Based on the recommendations the report proposes a tiered approach, in which the Assembly recognises that certain groups are more vulnerable than others, and adopts the use of domestic sprinklers for these, while other, less vulnerable, groups are catered for through the provision of hard wired smoke alarms. The remaining, non-risk population, comprising more affluent and fire aware householders, should be targeted via publicity campaigns and encouraged to upgrade and regularly check their equipment where necessary.

15. The financial implications are outlined in part 9 of the Report. The Group welcomes the Assembly draft budget of £3 million in 2002/03 and acknowledge that this will have an impact on the desire to install hard wired smoke detectors in social housing in Wales and domestic sprinkler systems in vulnerable housing. Though if the Groups full recommendations are to be met, this level of funding will need to be maintained and increased in future years.

Compliance

16. In developing a community fire safety programme, the Assembly would be exercising powers under the S.40 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 – the power to do anything which facilitates, is conducive or incidental to, the exercise of any of its functions. As far as requirements for social housing providers arising out of the Report, these would be exercised

under S. 18(2) of the Housing Act 1996 - powers of the Assembly to determine procedures to be followed in relation to applications for grant.

Action for Subject Committee

17. The Committee is asked to note and comment on the Community Fire Safety Working Group First Report.

Construction and Domestic Energy Branch – Housing Directorate