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Tower blaze safety fears

11 April 2013 | By Max Thompson

Install sprinklers in council flats says coroner probing Southwark fire deaths.

A damning report into Britain's worst tower block fire has tabled a raft of recommendations including the retrofit of sprinkler systems in similar local authority owned buildings.

The report, published last week, follows a 10 week inquest into the devastating fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell, south London, on 3 July 2009, which killed six people including three young children.

The Lakanal House block is a 14 storey building constructed in the 1950s. Those killed were on the 11th floor. The blaze swept up the building after a television caught fire in a ninth floor flat.

In a letter to communities secretary Eric Pickles, coroner Frances Kirkham set out a number of other key demands including clarification of Part B of the Building Regulations, which covers fire precautions. The letter says Part B should be made "intelligible to a wide range of people and bodies engaged in construction...not just to professionals". She also called for better fire assessments and new guidance for residents and the fire brigade about what to do in the event of a fire.

Referring to the absence of sprinklers in the high rise building, Kirkham's letter urges the Department for Communities and Local Government to "encourage providers of housing in high rise residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises to consider the retrofit of sprinkler systems".

But independent fire consultant Mosen managing director Fathi Tarada warned that a wide scale retrofit scheme could face opposition from cashstrapped councils. "There is a lot of resistance to sprinklers, a lot of misunderstanding," Tarada said.

"The government advised five years ago that new schools should have sprinklers unless they had a strong reason not to. Since then, in my experience three quarters of schools have found a good reason [not to], and they do not have them. It comes down to cost," added Tarada.

The damning report concluded that the London Borough of Southwark's in-house Southwark Building Design Services (SBDS), its contractors and subcontractors were guilty of a "serious failure" because they had not ensured that class O fire resistant panels were installed beneath the bedroom windows.

During the inquest the gruesome death in flat 79 of fashion designer Catherine Hickman, 31, was described. Jurors heard how the fire spread through the panels and heat distorted aluminium window frames, allowing smoke, heat and then flames into her two storey maisonette flat.

The removal of a staircase wall in Hickman's flat had also "facilitated the spread of smoke up the internal staircase".

Failure to consider the impact of such changes to the building's ability to contain a fire, known as compartmentation (see box), led to Kirkham's call for the simplification of Part B of the Building Regulations.

Tarada said that he had seen other buildings with one hour fire walls that had so many penetrations for pipes and conduits that "they looked more like Swiss cheese".

In her narrative verdict on deaths, the coroner said that numerous opportunities to improve the building's fire integrity were missed, starting with an overhaul of the heating system in the 1980s. "This would have been an opportunity to ensure that the fires stopping around pipe leading into flats, and segmentation within the ceiling itself, offered adequate protection from fire."

More recently following major refurbishments at the flats, which included the removal of asbestos panels, SBDS was advised to carry out a fire safety check, which it failed to do.

Pickles has 56 days to supply Kirkham with a written response to the inquest's findings.

How the fire spread

Compartmentation failure led to several deaths, including that of Felipe Francisquini Cervi in Flat 81 on the 11th floor.

During the fire, the front door of flat 79, which was on fire, collapsed. This allowed smoke and fire to spread along the corridor because:

- "Boxing in" under communal stairs failed to provide the required 60 minutes of fire resistance
- There were no fire seals on the front door of Flat 81
- There was a lack of firestopping on internal pipework from previous renovations
- The panel above the door of Flat 81 failed to provide adequate fire resistance

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