

Extract from the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee on 13 November 2015

4. Report of the Fire Suppression Measures Task Group

The Chair introduced Jason Homan, Assistant Director of Property (Building Design & Construction) to the meeting who delivered the Task Group's report. It was explained that the Task Group was convened following a request from the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People to consider the installation of further fire suppression measures in all new schools in Lancashire. It was elucidated that the Task Group used a report to the All-Parliamentary Discussion Group presented in 2013, and that this report had been provided as an appendix. The issues analysed by the Task Group were outlined to be; financial aspects, community impacts, technical issues and the thoughts of the Fire and Rescue Service. The aforementioned were considered in the formulation of recommendations.

Jason Homan stated that Government developed a risk assessment tool for fire safety within schools, and the County Council had built upon this by incorporating further assessments to analyse specific issues within Lancashire.

It was emphasised to the Committee that fire suppression focussed upon mitigating psychological impacts of fires within schools, rather than specifically saving lives as other measures sought to ensure pupil safety.

The Committee were informed that the Task Group had given consideration to existing schools within the county as the proportion of new schools to be built was anticipated to be low in number in the coming years, with schools more likely to have building extensions within their existing grounds. Therefore, the Task

Group suggested that particular criteria be developed to determine thresholds for size expansions that triggered the requirement to install sprinkler systems.

Regarding schools within Lancashire that the county council did not control, it was stressed to be of importance that measures the county council considered appropriate for their own schools should be encouraged in schools not under the county council's control.

Members noted that the Task Group analysed alternative forms of fire suppression, for example misting systems. It was explained that fire safety was determined by various factors, for example; the layout of a school, direct access to outside from classrooms, the fire properties of building materials, limiting roof voids and the space above ceilings. Therefore, it was conveyed that the installation of a sprinkler system was not the only measure that could be implemented to suppress fire.

The Task Group, it was conveyed, also considered schools that currently had sprinkler systems installed and, specifically, the extent the systems were examined, inspected and maintained as there had been issues with sprinkler systems deploying, however it was highlighted this was due to poor maintenance rather than system failure. Furthermore, the issue of unanticipated sprinkler system triggering was discussed with the Task Group, and it was explained that sprinklers only triggered in the area of a fire/heat source which was contrary to common misconceptions.

Discussions within the Task Group had taken place around who was responsible for sprinkler systems, e.g. with the county council or with individual schools.

Finally, in the instances that it was not felt appropriate for sprinkler systems to be installed, discussions taken place regarding mitigating fire damage and therefore prevent psychological impacts.

Jason Homan elucidated that as a result of the discussions outlined above, the following five recommendations had been formulated;

- 1) All brand new schools developed by LCC shall have a sprinkler system installed as part of their fire safety strategy. With regard to the extension of an existing school, where the capacity of a school is to increase by 50% or more, based on pupil numbers, then a sprinkler system shall be installed into the resultant new facility (both the new and existing elements). Once installed the responsibility to correctly inspect, service and maintain the sprinkler system shall rest with the governing body of that school.
- 2) All schools that currently have a fire suppression system installed shall have an initial assessment carried out by LCC to establish the condition of the system. Any remedial work required to ensure the correct operation of the system shall be carried out by the individual school within 6 months of them being notified of these requirements. Upon completion of the initial assessments and resultant remedial works where necessary, the responsibility for the future inspection, servicing and maintenance of the system shall rest with the governing body of that school.
- 3) All schools under the control of LCC and which do not have a fire suppression system installed shall seek to provide a fire retardant storage facility suitable for their needs as assessed by themselves.
- 4) All other organisations that are responsible for the provision of school premises within Lancashire shall be encouraged to adopt the same recommendations as will apply to those schools under the direct control of LCC.
- 5) In order to ensure this policy remains consistent with future changes in building legislation it is to be reviewed every 5 years. Members were invited to ask questions and to raise any comments in relation to the report, a summary of which is provided below: The Committee sought clarification on recommendation 4, stating that the lexical choice suggested there was a storage facility for fire retardant materials. It was clarified that the recommendation was for schools to create a fire retardant space within a school and consequently, it was agreed that the lexis would be changed to aid understanding.

CC G Wilkins expressed surprise at the emphasis upon mitigating the impact on pupil's work rather than lives. It was explained that many schools had direct access to outside from classrooms and were therefore safe, and that many fires occurred at night.

CC G Wilkins requested that, as many County Councillors were school governors, the report be distributed to all Members. It was agreed that the report would be sent to all Members following the remainder of the Task Group process and following amendments to the recommendations as requested above.

CC C Henig noted that within the Task Group report reference was made to painted sprinklers, and that it was the school's responsibility to maintain sprinkler systems. Jason Homan explained that the policy did not differ from other systems within a school building, and therefore it did not add any new responsibility and that painted sprinklers should be picked up via the annual inspections. It was emphasised that it had been incorporated in the recommendation to state clearly who held the responsibility.

CC Chris Henig enquired whether the installation of a sprinkler system impacted insurance costs for a school. Jason Homan stated that the installation of sprinkler systems in a small number of schools would not significantly impact on insurance costs as the county council were insured for the entire portfolio of its schools as one entity. However, for schools in Lancashire that were outside of the county council's remit who insured themselves, this would have an impact on their insurance costs, and therefore would be attractive to them.

CC C Henig expressed that there was possibly scope for savings for schools insuring themselves individually. The Chair expressed that discussions around this could take place at a later date.

CC V Taylor queried whether sprinkler systems that were painted over would impact insurance claims. Jason Homan explained that the recommendations sought to address this issue. It was noted that, going forward, it was going to be a more prominent issue that they are maintained and inspected correctly.

CC V Taylor expressed concern that it may take time to determine the condition of sprinkler systems. Therefore, it was suggested that the county council contact Head Teachers and/or governing bodies of schools to seek assurance that their sprinkler systems were fully operational. Jason Homan explained that the county council sought assurance via the annual statement of compliance, which referred to whether the systems within a school were fully functioning. The Chair requested that schools be contacted requiring that sprinkler systems are checked.

CC J Shedwick asked who replaced faulty sprinkler heads within schools. Jason Homan explained that the school would remedy issues via the arrangements they had in place, which were either through the county council's property services or external contractors.

CC L Oades expressed that when she was a chair of governors at a school she had been informed it would be prohibitive for the county council to insure each 5 individual school, rather than the current arrangement of generic insurance for all schools it was responsible for. Therefore, caution was urged with this approach. The Chair stated that clarity was required regarding insurance for schools and a report could be required to be presented to the Committee. Jason Homan explained that he would speak to insurance officers to take the request forward.

CC Carl Crompton explained that most schools had a health and safety committee who inspected fire suppression measures, and therefore it was an automatic responsibility for the school to report any issues.

CC G Wilkins asked what the thoughts of Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service were regarding a sprinkler system and also the thoughts of Head Teachers.

Jason Homan explained that the thoughts of Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service were that all school buildings should have sprinkler systems installed and that this position was consistent nationwide. Regarding Head Teachers, it was explained that when fire risk assessments resulted in suggestions for the installation of a sprinkler system Head Teachers did not have an issue.

CC D O'Toole stated that if any of the recommendations were implemented it should be done in collaboration with Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service. It was explained that their knowledge could help to reduce the cost of sprinkler system installations, as premium sprinkler systems may not be necessary.

Resolved;

- I. That the Committee accept the Task Group's recommendations following the suggested amendments outlined above.
- II. That schools be contacted requiring that sprinkler systems are checked