

Julie James AM

Minister for Housing and Local Government

20 December 2019

Dear Minister,

Further information following the meeting on 5 December

Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee on 5 December, the Committee appreciated your honesty and frankness about the complexity of the issues surrounding fire safety.

As previously stated, there is nothing more important than being safe in your own home. We appreciate that the Welsh Government is committed to tackling the complex issues surrounding fire safety and we accept that a considered and phased approach is needed.

While accepting the complexities, we remain keen to see the issue of fire safety pursued with more pace and vigour. We are frustrated that two years after the Grenfell tragedy, the pace and implementation on some of the issues is still not quick enough. This is exemplified by the issue of combustible cladding. Whilst we acknowledge that progress has been made, a ban has been in place on combustible cladding in England since December 2018. We would like to know why it has taken so long to ban the use of combustible cladding in Wales as compared to England? We note the calls from the Fire Brigades Union that the ban on the use of combustible cladding should apply to all residential buildings, and

not just those over 18 metres high. How do you respond to these calls, and can you explain why the ban does not extend to all residential buildings?

We are also eager to follow up on numerous other issues. As you are aware, we previously recommended that replacement legislation for the Fire Safety Order should be introduced in the current Assembly. During the meeting, your official stated that discussions had taken place with UK Government officials to identify which parts of UK legislation could be applied to Wales. Can you provide details of the specific areas of the UK Government's plans that you would like to see applied in Wales and, given the recent UK general election, when this legislation may be introduced?

We would like more information on how the Government is engaging with residents on the Building Safety Programme and the design of new legislation. We welcome the commitment to involve residents and appreciate that the Government has already engaged with stakeholders in the social housing sector. However, we are keen to know how the Welsh Government intends to engage with the broadest range of stakeholders, including those from the private sector.

Whilst appreciating your honesty, we were concerned to hear your admission on guidance issued by the Welsh Government, especially relating to fire doors. During the meeting you stated that the guidance is "not very effective". The Committee would therefore like to know when the system will be in place to make the guidance statutory and what steps you can take in the meantime to make it more effective.

As you are aware, issues surrounding fire doors are one of the main concerns for the Committee. Your official acknowledged in the meeting that glass reinforced plastic (GRP) composite fire doors failed the tests. However, your official also told us that some Welsh manufacturers have subsequently had their doors retested and have confirmed the doors have passed those new tests. However, we remain concerned about the remediation for existing doors that have failed tests. Consequently, we are keen that you continue to push the UK Government in order to get details on the remediation plans that will be put in place by the UK Government at the earliest opportunity.



Regarding level four fire risk assessments, we welcome your commitment to explore if a duty could be put on the responsible person to undertake level four assessments. We would like to clarify that our view is that level four assessments would only need to be undertaken once and only when the property is vacant for a period of time.

We welcome your exploration of a loan to fund the retro-fitting of sprinklers. However, we would like to know specific details about how the loan might work in practice, what stage of development it is in and when might the scheme be operational?

During the meeting, you noted that it is not within competence for the Welsh Government to effectively ensure that developers meet their legal obligations to leaseholders. We are sympathetic to this but would like to know what the Welsh Government is currently doing with the levers within devolved competence. We would like to know whether you intend to use the Help to Buy Scheme in the future to ensure that developers who are in receipt of Welsh Government money act in a moral and ethical way towards leaseholders.

We look forward to your written statement in response to the Leasehold Reform Task and Finish Group. We also appreciate that you are awaiting a report from the Law Commission and that this area of the devolution settlement is complex. As you'll be aware, over a year ago the Committee recommended that the Welsh Government "establishes regulation of agents who manage high-rise residential buildings". However, as the timeframe for action is still vague, we would like more information on when the Government plans to introduce the proposed voluntary accreditation scheme for managing agents.

Finally, we would like to bring to your attention to correspondence from the Celestia Action Group that was sent to us following the meeting, attached as an annex. The Committee appreciates that you are unable to comment whilst the appeal is ongoing. However, we would appreciate it if you could update us as soon as you are able to comment.

During the meeting, you also agreed to the following points listed below:



- You offered for the Deputy Minister to update the Committee about the discussions had with Chief Fire Officers regarding the actions to be taken in Wales following the publication of the Phase 1 Grenfell Tower Inquiry report.
- You agreed to provide a breakdown of the Welsh Government's position on each of recommendations made in the Phase 1 Grenfell Tower Inquiry report as they relate to Wales
- Agreed to share with the Committee the correspondence sent by the Minister for Education to higher education institutions in Wales stating their obligations around fire safety and the collation of accurate data.
- Agreed to share with the Committee documentation sent out to managing agents demonstrating how the Government disseminates information with stakeholders.

I look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely,



John Griffiths

Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

