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3.4 The Connétable of St. Helier of the Minister for Housing regarding the fire prevention and other safety measures and procedures in place in social housing, especially in high-rise buildings: [1(369)]

Is the Minister satisfied that fire prevention and other safety measures and procedures are maintained at the highest levels possible in social housing, especially in high-rise buildings?

Deputy A.E. Pryke of Trinity (The Minister for Housing):

Firstly, if I may, may I extend our sincere sympathy and heartfelt thoughts to all the families and friends involved in the horrific tragedy at Grenfell Towers in London last week? I would also like to pay tribute to all the emergency services and voluntary groups and especially their response. Immediately following these tragic events last week, I checked that officers from Andium Homes and Jersey Fire and Rescue visited all 11 of the high rise buildings to provide reassurance and reiterating advice about what to do in the event of a fire. Subsequently, I sought assurance from all of the social housing providers that they have adopted and maintained the necessary fire prevention and safety measures within their properties as required under the building bylaws. I have received that reassurance from all the providers. Safety of all tenants is paramount and we need to reassure tenants that they are safe. It is too early to say what caused the fire in London but a criminal investigation and public inquiry in the U.K. (United Kingdom) will seek to understand this. In advance of these U.K. investigations a cross-departmental working group has been set up and met between officers from the Strategic Housing Units, Andium, the Fire Service and Building Control. They met yesterday and they will continue to meet to monitor the situation as it unfolds in order to ensure that fire prevention and other safety measures and procedures are maintained at the highest levels possibility in all social housing.

3.4.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I thank the Minister for her answer and her expression of sympathy. Could the Minister confirm that as part of their very successful refurbishment programme of our social housing Andium are meeting the best standards specifically around cladding, which we know was a problem in the Grenfell Tower, and the provision of sprinklers? Is she confident that our building regulations are adequate and will provide that high level of protection that we expect?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Yes, I am. I know that Andium Homes looked back to see what the cladding is and can reassure that none of the insulation has been used that was used at Grenfell Tower. All the plans have been passed through the building bylaws, as you would expect, and the building bylaws, as I understand, meet U.K. safety standards, and they will continue to monitor it. If any recommendations do come out, Andium have said that they will implement those recommendations.

3.4.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

I recall questioning the Minister several months ago about fire alarms and I believe she disclosed that there was no legal requirement for landlords to install fire alarms in their properties. Can I ask the Minister whether she has looked into this in recent months, whether this has changed? If it has not changed does she still believe that our fire laws and fire regulations are sufficient to protect the public?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Within all the social housing, especially with Andium, which as I said has got the most high-rise flats, there are smoke alarms in each flat, which are wire maintained and by battery too. They are checked regularly, and under the tenancy agreement tenants are also provided to make sure that they check their smoke alarm regularly too. When the fire officers, who did an amazing job with the Andium staff going round early that morning, they saw every ... well, the ones that were in, they saw all the tenants and also tested the fire alarms there at the same time.

3.4.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Does the Minister not agree that those in private rental accommodation are also entitled to the assurance that there will be a fire alarm installed in their properties and that this should be put into the law?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Yes, that is worth considering whether that falls under minimum standards in the Dwelling Law, which sits in the Environment Department, but that is something I can take away and follow through. As I said, that officer group is meeting and it will continue to meet, so that is one of the things that they can look at.

3.4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

Can the Minister guarantee to Members that any cladding used on Andium buildings and in the private sector has been inspected not just to see if it meets current building standards but to show that it is constructed of non-flammable materials?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Yes, as I said, Andium checked, as all the other social housing providers; obviously very concerned because safety of all their tenants, as I said, is paramount and is vital and they went to check back, and they have checked back with the manufacturers that they all meet the highest fire safety standards.

3.4.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What consideration has she and Andium Homes given to recommendations about sprinklers being fitted in high rise accommodation in the U.K.?

The Deputy of Trinity:

As I understand it, the new bylaws, every high rise flat above 18 metres have to have a sprinkler system in place and I am pleased the Westmount Flats obviously meet that standard. There is not a law with high rise in the old or refurbished flats, but that is something that the officer group will look. I can say there are arguments for and against retrofitting sprinklers because each flat is included as a single unit of accommodation, so that is why it was not done at the time. But if the recommendations do show that retrofitting sprinklers in high rise is one of the recommendations then I am sure that the social housing providers, especially Andium, will put them in place.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister ...

The Bailiff:

Thank you, Deputy, you have already had 2.

3.4.6 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

Both the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Housing have confirmed that they will take on board any recommendations that come out of the inquiry that will take place in the U.K. around this dreadful tragedy. That could be several years though before those recommendations come forward. Would the Minister consider taking this away and conducting a similar type of exercise so that we can be sure that those individuals who live in high rise tower blocks have got the highest standard of safety?

The Deputy of Trinity:

That is a very important question and that is what Andium and the social housing providers went back to all the manufacturers just to check that what they have put up around their flats met highest fire safety and I am pleased to confirm that they do. This internal group will continue to meet and monitor it accordingly. If they feel it is necessary to do a review ... they are reviewing all the time. They are making sure they put up more information about what to do in a fire, making sure again about the smoke alarms, how to use them properly and testing them, making sure that there is nothing on lift wells, in corridors, so they are constantly checking. But if it works out the next couple of weeks we can have a look at ... I am very happy for that officer group to look back and review and making sure that we are as safe as we can possibly be.

3.4.7 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

It is a known fact that some individuals disconnect their smoke alarms because they go off every time they start cooking, so my concern is that if that is happening in high rise blocks that surely the best way to counteract this is by having a fire alarm system actually in a block of flats, does the Minister not agree?

The Deputy of Trinity:

As I understand it the smoke alarms are not only battery operated too but they also are mains ring-wired. So even if they take out the battery I expect the smoke alarm still to work. The risk is ... because all gas appliances and those have been removed from all the high rise flats and residents are also forbidden to use any gas appliances in any of their flats. Andium do monitor that.

The Bailiff:

Can I say to Members: I have got 3 Members wanting to ask questions? We have spent 10 minutes on this issue already and there are 17 questions but I cannot, if we are going to get through all the questions, allow these questions to go on indefinitely. There will be no more supplementary questions in relation to these questions and we are going to have Deputy Wickenden, Deputy Tadier, Senator Ferguson and a final supplementary and then we are moving on.

3.4.8 Deputy S.M. Wickenden of St. Helier:

Would the Minister please let us know how often the fire checks are done? Is there a rota and who sees the reports on the back of them please?

The Deputy of Trinity:

I understand that the fire checks are done by the Fire Service annually. I will check on that. The last Fire Service check with all the Andium flats was in quarter 3 2016. I presume that the fire survey inspection goes to Andium but I am sure that is something that the review group will look back at, as they are reviewing and monitoring, all those fire reports are part of that review group too.

3.4.9 Deputy M. Tadier:

When will the Minister be in a position to make a decision about retrofitting of sprinklers over here and when would she bring that report back to the Assembly?

The Deputy of Trinity:

It is not me that makes that decision. It is based on advice and it has got to be based on good evidence from the building bylaws. That will come, if necessary, but we have to wait to hear ... because there is evidence, I understand, both for and against retrofitting. But I would also like to say that Andium and the Fire Service have been very proactive in putting out information. On Andium's website there is a whole list of questions and answers to try and reassure as many tenants and their families as possible.

3.4.10 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Preliminary reports appear to indicate that the cladding was incorrect. Will the Minister publish the results of the flammability tests on the existing cladding and ensure that future cladding is also subject to flammability tests?

The Deputy of Trinity:

As I said, building bylaws check, it is independently reviewed. It is reviewed by the officers from Building Control. As I said, it is independently reviewed that all materials meet the highest safety. Safety is paramount and Andium and the other social housing providers take that extremely seriously. As for publishing, that is something that I have to ask Andium and the other social housing providers.

[10:15]

3.4.11 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I am grateful to Deputy Doublet for spreading the concern to the private rental sector and I hope that everything the Minister said there about social housing and Andium will also be applied to the private sector landlords. Is the Minister aware, finally, that no one in the U.K. has ever died as a result of a fire in a building fitted with a working sprinkler system? Can she not prioritise the report to the States on this matter as soon as possible?

The Deputy of Trinity:

I can understand people's concerns. But I will wait until the review and a review from that officers group, and also with talking to the Minister for the Environment and also ... because it does come under, as I understand it, building bylaws.