

Appendix 2:

Item No 1B	Open	Date 8 th March 2004	Committee Housing Sub-Scrutiny Committee
Report Title		Riseholme House Fire Incident	
Ward(s) or groups Affected		East Dulwich and South Camberwell Wards and East Dulwich Estate Tenants and Residents Association	
From:		Strategic Director of Housing	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Housing Sub-Scrutiny notes the report.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. A fire occurred shortly after 4pm on 14th January 2004 within the electrical intake cupboard serving 13-38 Riseholme House on East Dulwich Estate, SE22. As a result, the electrical supply was interrupted for about twenty-four hours to 26 dwellings (of which one dwelling was void).
3. A report from the London Fire Brigade investigators indicates the source of ignition was the fixed electricity main cable (before meter) owned by the electricity board, EDF (formerly London Electricity Board). They consider the incident was accidental and resulted in an arc from faulty electrical contact. Please see Appendix 1 for a copy of the report.
4. The Council has made contact with EDF (electricity Supply Company and have requested a report. They have promised to advise us when they have concluded investigation of the incident.
5. **A Brief Chronology (Sequence of Events)**
 - 1) 4.45pm- **Crown House Neighbourhood Office was advised** about the fire incident and the Fire Brigade was already on site
 - 2) 5pm- **an officer from Crown House Neighbourhood Housing Office arrived on site** to gauge extent of the problem and to assess what emergency action should be undertaken. On arrival the intake cupboard

was still smoldering. The Fire Brigade advised that a team of engineers from the electricity board who initially came to assess the situation needed another gang to isolate the incoming electrical cable that remained “live”. The Fire brigade believed that whilst the cable remained “live” there was a risk to the residents and therefore undertook an evacuation of the building. The Neighbourhood Officer who was on site telephoned Crown House NHO to advise that residents were being evacuated and that we needed to invoke our local emergency procedure.

- 3) 5.30pm- **Repairs Team manager arrived on site** with keys to the community centre. The community center was opened and residents that were being evacuated or attempting to enter the building were directed to this facility. **A register of residents arriving at the centre was opened. Email and telephone calls** were made to inform local elected members, senior managers, Southwark Housing emergency service and contractors.
- 4) 5.30-6.30pm- **arrival of emergency supplies on site**; these included portable torchlight, blankets, heating equipment, etc. **An officer from Southwark Housing temporary accommodation unit also arrived** on site to assist with identifying and facilitating temporary accommodation should it be needed.
- 5) 6.30-7.30pm- although there was no structural damage to the building nor to other services apart from the electrical supplies **the Fire Brigade were concerned** about the condition of the incoming “live” cupboard and were **unwilling to allow the block to be re-occupied until the electrical power had been isolated**. This could only be undertaken by EDF services. At the same time the incoming electrical supply had to be renewed by EDF, which we were advised at that stage they would do as soon as appropriate gang arrived. Even though we were being assured by the electricity board that it was still possible to effect repair on the night, as it was getting late, it was decided to secure temporary accommodation for those who needed it.
- 6) 7.45-8.30pm- **arrival of hot food and refreshments** for residents evacuated to the community centre.
- 7) 9.30-10.30pm- **electricity board engineers arrived on site**, isolated “live” main cable and were waiting for another gang to effect repair. The **building declared safe by the Fire Brigade** and some residents returned to their homes.
- 8) 12.30-1am (15 Jan 04) - **two security guards arrived on site** and neighbourhood manager departed site.

- 9) 9-10.30am (15 Jan 04) - **telephone calls to residents who attended the community centre** the previous night and left their contact details. They were advised that supply would be restored by 4pm and that it was safe to return to their home.
- 10) 3.30-4pm- (15 Jan 04) - **supply restored.**

Local Emergency/Contingency Plan

6. The Council has emergency plans in place to respond to unplanned events that impact on residents and services within its boundaries. The Borough-wide emergency plan involves major incidents such as terrorist incidents, a breakdown of services across large parts of the borough etc.
7. This incident related to part of a single residential block of dwellings owned by the Council and was therefore treated as a local emergency incident. In the event of emergencies such as this, the Council relies on local housing staff to provide a response. In such situations neighbourhood housing staff are called out to manage the incident. The Council does not employ a dedicated workforce specifically for this type of event. In this case the neighbourhood manager successfully organised staff to attend the site to provide an initial assessment of the incident and the resources required. This feedback defined the extent of the problem including the conclusion that the evacuation would extend into the late evening period. This assessment was also used to develop a response to the incident. This response included:
 - 1) Securing the availability of the local community centre for use by those evacuated. This allowed an immediate albeit short-term solution to the evacuation and provision of a safe and warm refuge for residents.
 - 2) Informing local ward Councillors of the incident.
 - 3) Organising the purchase of a range of food, hot and cold, for residents and provision of refreshments for those using the Community Centre.
 - 4) Arranging with the out of hours service for the provision of supplies of blankets, portable torchlights and other equipment to be brought to the estate. These facilities are retained in stores for emergency use.
 - 5) Setting up a forward command position on site to allow for continuous liaison directly with the London Fire Brigade and EDF about the work required.
 - 6) Identifying and facilitating the potential for securing temporary accommodation for residents on the basis that households would be unable to return to their homes that night. This became necessary by mid evening and an officer was dispatched to the site to organise temporary

accommodation based on the needs of the residents. Past experience however has shown that most residents prefer to make their own arrangements to stay with friends or relatives. In the case of this incident 16 placements were ordered out of 25 dwellings of which only eight were used. The remaining 17 families made their own arrangements either stayed with relatives or returned to their home when it was declared safe. Transportation in such instances is not normally provided because residents are content to make their own arrangements. In the event that individual tenants were unable, because of special needs, to travel to the temporary accommodation transport would have been arranged.

- 7) Organising security to protect the block. It was recognised that there was a security risk to the dwellings if the evacuation remained in place after the emergency services departed. The Neighbourhood Manager initially thought of using the existing services available at nearby Goldwell House, but eventually arranged for two additional security guards for the block. The manager also decided to seek the co-operation of the local police. Councillor Ward volunteered to speak to the police on his behalf.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

8. The cause of the incident could not have been predicted. It has been confirmed by various engineers that it is very rare for the main electricity supply cable to ignite as it did on this occasion. It should be noted that the local Neighbourhood Office's assistant contract officers, as part of monthly health and safety checks, conduct visual check of intake cupboards.
9. The evacuation process was dictated by the existence of the "live" incoming electrical supply which needed to be isolated and disconnected in order that:
 - it became safe for residents to return to their homes; and
 - work could begin to excavate and renew the electrical supply into the block.

This phase of the remedial work was not completed until about 10-10.30pm.

10. Neighbourhood staff remained on site to await the start of the renewal of the electrical supply by the electricity board, EDF. Officers remained until approximately 1am. Work commenced to renew the main supply very quickly and was completed by lunchtime on the following day. At the same time the Councils contractor commenced work to rebuild the landlord services. This took most of the afternoon of the 15th January 2004 and the electrical service was finally restored by approximately 4pm. Throughout this period the neighbourhood kept individual tenants informed of progress by pre-agreed telephone contacts.
11. The management of emergency events is not a straightforward or predictable process. Although the local emergency plan was invoked, such events cannot

be pre-planned to the point where inconvenience is eliminated and all uncertainty removed. A review of the sequence of events confirms that almost without exception all key tasks were identified and undertaken by officers, without the need to prompt.

- Southwark Housing staff were on site within 15 minutes of the local neighbourhood office being notified;
 - The Albrighton community centre was opened within 45 minutes;
 - Temporary accommodation was secured for those who wanted it within 90 minutes;
 - Food and refreshment (including hot curry goat and rice, curry chicken and rice, chips and chicken, a range of sandwiches, crisps, chocolate bars, etc) was provided as soon as was practically possible;
 - Electricity was restored within 24-hours;
 - Local Councillors, when notified, provided practical support during the incident and this was appreciated;
 - Local residents also provided assistance in running of the Community facility although this co-operation is normally provided in such situations to allow housing staff to concentrate on dealing with repair/reinstatement works.
12. From the moment the local neighbourhood housing office was notified, senior managers were kept informed of developments and consulted by the housing manager at regular intervals. Senior managers were satisfied with the housing manager's response and steps taken to deal with the incident.
13. Although we have been advised it is very rare for the main electrical cable to ignite as it did on this occasion, an inspection of all electrical intake cupboards on the estate has been undertaken.
14. The electricity board, EDF have advised that they are liable to pay compensation (minimum £50) to residents as their supply was interrupted for more than 18 hours. Crown House Neighbourhood office has written to the affected residents to inform them of EDF's liability and the address to send their claim.

Response to Councillor Ward's Submission

15. Councillor Ward's Comment: Many families including those with young children and also elderly people had nowhere to go and it was a cold evening. Residents and Chair of T&RA said they had to press the Housing Office to open the Albrighton Hall, the Community Centre.

Response: Southwark Housing does not accept that officers had to be pressed before the Albrighton Community Centre was opened. Southwark Housing maintains a register of community facilities on all its estates and contact details of key holders in case they are needed for use as a reception centre in the event of an emergency.

Residents or the Chair of the T&RA might have suggested to the officer who first arrived on site to open the community centre, the officer does not accept that he did not know what to do or that pressure was put to bear on him. As soon as the Fire Brigade advised the officer that the building was unsafe and was being evacuated, he telephoned Crown House Neighbourhood to inform senior officers that the local emergency plan was to be invoked.

The repairs team manager was dispatched to the scene with the keys to the community centre and the hall was opened as a reception centre within 30 minutes of arrival on site of the first officer.

16. Councillor Ward's Comment: The Chair of the T&RA and Councillor McInerney said they had to press the Housing Office to provide food for the families involved. Councillor McInerney, the housing manager and a tenant went to Sainsbury's.

Response: In an emergency the Council's immediate priority is the safety of residents and reinstatement of facilities as soon as possible to minimise disruption to residents. It is not unusual for Tenants and Residents Associations to organise tea and coffee as soon as residents arrive at the community centre; on this occasion the East Dulwich Tenants and Residents Association did not.

Southwark Housing's standard response to an emergency is to provide refreshments at the reception centre as soon as possible. By the time Councillor McInerney and Colin Hunt telephoned the housing manager at about 6.30pm as to when food would be provided, the housing manager was already procuring supplies of food at Sainsbury's. Both Cllr McInerney and Colin Hunt later joined the housing manager to assist with the delivery of the supplies.

Councillor Ward's Comment: That a van appeared with blankets as part of an emergency response- but the only one.

Response: Two vans from Southwark Housing out of hour response team were on site early with essential supplies of torch lights, blankets, heating equipment, bottled water, etc to compliment the effort of the local neighbourhood housing staff.

17. Councillor Ward's Comment: Residents said that the Housing Office had to be pressed to provide alternative accommodation for the residents for that night, as they could not return to their flats. There was no transport to the accommodation, some of which was quite far away. By this time it was after 10 at night. Some residents reported that the accommodation was very poor and one resident I received a report about could not stay in the conditions she and her child were offered and walked home early in the morning to sleep in her flat.

Response: Southwark Housing feels the above criticisms are not justified. In an emergency of this nature, the immediate concern is for the safety of residents and an assessment of when supply is likely to be restored. Throughout the night until about 12 o'clock midnight, the electricity board, EDF was giving assurances that repairs would be effected on the night. In anticipation, the Council's engineers were put on standby to restore the landlord supply and were only stood down after midnight.

The community centre was warm, blankets were available and the hall was adequate for residents to remain in given assurances that the supply would be restored imminently. Notwithstanding this, as soon as the Albrighton Community centre was opened, officers opened a register for residents to identify residents that were evacuated to the centre, establish their accommodation requirements, assess whether temporary accommodation was needed and as far as practicable account for all residents.

From around 6.30pm a temporary accommodation officer was on site to identify and facilitate temporary accommodation for those who might need it. This does not suggest an ad-hoc arrangement but a well-coordinated response to the incident.

Transportation is not provided as a matter of course but available on request for those who need it. It should be acknowledged that many people own a vehicle these days.

Temporary accommodation was secured in bed and breakfast units and hostels suitable for people to stay in overnight. Residents who were provided with temporary accommodation agreed that they would be contactable on their mobile telephone or they in turn would telephone the housing office for updates as required.

Residents were clearly advised that they would be required to vacate the temporary accommodation by 10am the following morning unless advised otherwise as the Council was working on the

assumption that power supply would be restored during the night or at the latest the following day. Comments about the standard and quality of some of the units have been noted and will be taken on board.

- 18.** Councillor Ward's Comment: I asked about security of empty flats, which was not immediately available except by phoning the police and alerting a guard at Goldwell House

Response: Provision of security for evacuated flats has always been part of Southwark Council's response to an emergency and it is unfair to suggest that the Council would have left the building unguarded.

At the time of Councillor Ward's enquiry on site at about 10pm on the night, the housing manager was still on site, the electricity board EDF engineers were also on site and hoping to effect repair. Also the Council had two security guards in a nearby block that could be deployed in minutes.

Before Councillor Ward left the site at about 10.30-11pm, at the suggestion of the housing manager, she kindly agreed to telephone the local police station to patrol the estate. At about 12 midnight when it became apparent that EDF would not be able to effect repair, the housing manager arranged for two additional security guards for the block.

ISSUES ARISING FROM AN EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE INCIDENT

- 19.** Officers responding to emergency incidents to be issued bright yellow jackets to make them visible and easily identifiable for enquiries.
- 20** Southwark Housing would consider fire warden's training for officers.
- 21.** A review of provision of food is necessary. Consideration is to be given for the provision of survival food packs or limiting food and refreshments to tea, coffee, biscuits, chocolate bars, crisps, sweets, etc. Whilst in this instance hot food was provided from local take-away outlets, and appreciated by residents, Southwark Housing would not want to be responsible for any health risks associated with purchasing food via this method.
- 22.** The roles of Councillors and Tenants and Residents Associations require clarification. It would appear that the East Dulwich Residents and Tenants

Association were confused about their role. The Housing Department welcomes any views.

23. What role should other services play when their equipment fails? It should be noted that the electricity board, EDF did not send to site customer service officers and /or managers to assist those residents affected despite the incident being caused by failure of their equipment: The matter was left entirely to the Council and residents to resolve.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Copy of existing policies and procedures for housing management services	Southwark Housing, Larcom Street Offices Walworth Road SE17	H.R.Marshall
Copy of Southwark Housing Contingency Plan	Southwark Housing, Larcom Street Offices Walworth Road SE17	
Copy of Crown House Neighbourhood Office Contingency Plan	41-43 East Dulwich Road, SE22	Tunde Akinyooye

REPORT AUTHOR

Tunde Akinyooye
Crown House Neighbourhood Manager