Government publishes the Report of the Fire Safety Task Force

The government has published the Report of the Fire Safety Task Force, which was commissioned to review and make recommendations on fire safety in Ireland.

The Report primarily focused on two areas: high-rise buildings and multi-storey, multi-unit social housing, but the findings also contain recommendations in relation to a broader review of existing fire safety arrangements in Ireland.

The Report concluded that action to improve fire safety was needed in a number of buildings and it recommended that national oversight is maintained and an oversight report be provided to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government.

Positives

Crucially the Report signalled that the combination of contributory factors leading to extreme fire safety risks arising from issues with cladding “do not appear to be present in buildings in Ireland”. It also concluded that Ireland has had a downward trajectory of fire deaths with the rate currently at 6.9 deaths per million, almost half what it was 15 years ago. The Minister on announcing the Report stated that incidence of and response to, actual fires “gives confidence that current fire safety strategies are appropriate and effective in protecting persons living in medium to high rise buildings”.

These conclusions starkly contrast the Hackitt Report on Building Regulations and Fire Safety in England, which concluded that “the roles and responsibilities of those procuring, designing, constructing and maintaining buildings is unclear; the processes that drive compliance with building safety requirements are weak, and complex and competence across the system is patchy”.

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High Rise Buildings & Multi-Unit Social Housing

The Report identified 842 buildings which fell into the category of medium to high rise buildings, which are buildings of more than six storeys or 18m in height. 291 of these buildings were identified as having external cladding systems “of interest”, with owners of 226 required to undertake fire safety assessments in line with provisions of the Fire Services Acts.

Local Authorities were requested to examine and ensure systems were in place in Multi-Unit Social Housing for fire detection and alarm systems, emergency lighting systems, common escape routes and emergency exits. A survey of arrangements in more than 16,000 residential units revealed that communal alarm systems were confirmed in 94% of buildings and emergency lighting systems were confirmed in 93% of buildings. The report confirmed that proper escape routes were available in those buildings, with remedial work being carried out where deficiencies had been encountered.

Improvement works so far

The Report states that improvement works are underway in approximately 10% of those where assessments were required, with safety assessment and improvement works remaining to be completed in some of the identified buildings. The proposed national oversight and accompanying report to the Minister aims to ensure that any emergent issues will be dealt with. It is noteworthy that the Report claims the survey and follow-up actions thus far have reduced the probability of a disastrous fire, it having identified and dealt with potential contributory issues.

Key Recommendations

+ National oversight should be maintained of the fire safety assessment process and improvement works underway in 226 medium to high rise buildings in the months ahead;
+ A number of amendments are proposed to s.18 of the Fire Services Acts in relation to statutory responsibilities of the “persons having control” of premises, including a revised focus on enforcement;
+ “Persons having control” review their fire safety facilities and evacuation arrangements and ensure that these are checked and maintained routinely;
A new mechanism be introduced in which the fire safety arrangements in place in premises and sleeping accommodation are brought to the attention of the public, including a new requirement for a “Public Notice of Fire Safety” in every building to which section 18(2) of the Fire Services Acts applies;

Periodic reviews/overview reports of fire safety in local authority provided social housing be undertaken and reported every five years;

Fire services offer training to Directors of Apartment Management Companies on key life safety issues.

Conclusions

Many of the findings of the Report are positive such as a downward trajectory of fire deaths, the issues of extreme fire risks with cladding not appearing in buildings here, and the Minister communicating confidence in our current fire safety strategies. These findings can be contrasted with the almost 300 tower blocks reported to have unsafe cladding installed in England and the Hackitt Report concluding that wide ranging systemic problems exist and radical reform of building regulations is needed there.

Overall the Report must be welcomed for identifying buildings where upgrade works are needed, for recommending key statutory and regulatory changes, for increasing fire safety awareness and for its broader review of existing fire safety arrangements in Ireland.

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