



Health & Safety Committee

Emergency Evacuations Report

Date: 14 November 2023

Key decision: No

Class: Part 1

Ward(s) affected: All.

Contributors: Rich Clarke, Head of Assurance

Outline and recommendations

Summarising for the Committee the results of work analysing the 24 May 2023 unplanned evacuation of Laurence House and developments in practice and procedure since.

We ask Members to note the report.

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

Earlier versions of this report have been presented to officer groups at the Corporate Health and Safety Board (17 July and 19 October) and the Corporate Assurance Board (13 July and 29 September).

1. Summary

- 1.1. The previous Health & Safety Committee took place immediately subsequent to an unplanned emergency evacuation of Laurence House in response to a fire in the building car park. The Committee requested a report to its next meeting both on the specifics of that incident and evacuation procedures more generally. Similar reporting was requested by senior officers on behalf of both the Corporate Health and Safety Board and the Corporate Assurance Board.

- 1.2. This report extracts information from reports presented in both forums on the 24 May evacuation of Laurence House those since. The initial reporting in June identified a number of improvements needed to procedures, primarily to ensure the procedures remained fit for a workplace now used for hybrid working as much as a permanent base.
- 1.3. These improvements were made across the summer, involving revisiting and revising procedures and working to increase awareness among staff and building users. We had opportunity to test these revised arrangements in two evacuations a week apart in September: one planned, one unplanned. Both those evacuations were effective and reflected positive progress. We will continue monitoring evacuation exercises and providing feedback reports to the Corporate Health and Safety Board.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. We ask Members to note this report.

3. Policy Context

- 3.1. This report aligns with Lewisham's Corporate Priorities, as set out in the Council's [Corporate Strategy \(2022-2026\)](#):

- Cleaner and Greener
- A Strong Local Economy
- Quality Housing
- Children and Young People
- Safer Communities
- Open Lewisham
- Health and Wellbeing

- 3.2. The Council has various legal, regulatory and ethical responsibilities in ensuring the continuing health and safety of all those to whom it owes a duty of care. The work of this Committee in general helps to ensure the Council meets its responsibilities, especially to non-domestic service users. This report contributes to the Committee's understanding of health and safety governance at the Council and so aids in the effective completion of its responsibilities.

4. Background

- 4.1. Laurence House in Catford is Lewisham Council's principal office accommodation. A five-storey tower built around 1970, it provides a workplace for typically 500 or more people during the working day. It also contains a reception area serving members of the public. For general office accommodation, standard practice is to conduct fire drills twice per year.

5. Unplanned evacuation 24 May 2023

- 5.1. The evacuation was instructed at 16:35 following a fire starting in the bin area at the back of the building, outside the central staircase fire exit. The London Fire Brigade (LFB) arrived on site 4 minutes after the start of the evacuation and extinguished the fire to prevent its spread. In total 646 staff and other building users were evacuated in around 7 minutes. There were no injuries reported. The cause of fire was established as a carelessly discarded cigarette some minutes earlier that developed into the fire.
- 5.2. Once the fire was discovered, security first requested through the building's address system to move vehicles parked nearby while they made attempts to tackle the fire with extinguishers. However, as the fire started rising, the fire alarm was activated, triggering a full building evacuation. At the time there were four security officers present in Laurence House who deployed to assist the east and west staircases, front door main entrance and evacuation lift. There were also three trained evacuation marshals present on site who help in evacuating their floors.
- 5.3. Subsequent investigation of the incident reported various failures in evacuation process. These included non-compliance from staff on in the instruction to evacuate, including delaying by packing belongings, visiting toilets or completing washing up. On exiting, staff were seen taking footage of the fire, not fully assembling at muster point and entering vehicles to leave the car park. This disrupted the evacuation and hindered LFB access. Also many building users, in the absence of direction otherwise, evacuated using the central staircase fire exit which led them near to the source of the fire through smoke. A building user was also able to access the basement during evacuation as no marshal or security officer was deployed at the basement door. Lack of evacuation management was observed, in part because no building controllers happened to be present at the time.

6. Planned Evacuation 1 June 2023

- 6.1. A planned evacuation for Laurence House on 1 June 2023 had been scheduled for weeks but acquired greater salience after 24 May. We intended to observe and review response to a controlled event, and also took the opportunity to practice an evacuation where the central staircase was unavailable at ground level. Staff were instead directed to the west end of the building. Evacuation of 348 building users took 7 minutes; not materially different to 24 May.
- 6.2. There were six security officers and four Corporate Health and Safety Team members present plus the building controller. No trained evacuation marshals were present, but one employee acted on their own initiative to step in as an evacuation marshal having previously held the role.

- 6.3. This planned evacuation highlighted many recurring issues from 24 May, including those around prompt staff compliance. However, it also identified the lack of evacuation marshals on site. This meant a separate building sweep was needed by security, extending time outside to near 20 minutes.

7. Initial Investigations and Reporting – June/July 2023

- 7.1. The Corporate Assurance Board (CAB) and Corporate Health and Safety Board (CHSB) both requested investigation reports following each evacuation. The reports were presented on 13 and 17 July respectively, following an initial briefing to senior management in early June. The report presented a 'gap analysis' in contrasting planned procedure with practical observations. Key gaps in procedure versus practice included:

- Staff not responding to alarm in good time, including packing belongings.
- Drivers attempting to leave the car park during the evacuation.
- Staff failing to gather at the appointed assembly point.
- Lack of clarity on presence and availability of fire marshals and security staff.

- 7.2. The report included a number of recommendations for improvement. Both CAB and CHSB endorsed the recommendations, which all fell due for implementation over the summer (i.e. before the next planned evacuation). Key recommendations included:

- Refresh and roll out fire awareness safety training to all staff, accompanied by publicity through Chief Executive messages.
- Specific additional training to senior management to greatly broaden the pool of potential evacuation marshals and reduce reliance on individual people who may not be present on the day.
- Full review of current evacuation marshal list.
- Revise evacuation drill procedure with the aim of ensuring each employee experiences at least one per year, e.g. by scheduling on different weekdays.
- Clarify governance by reporting outcomes of each exercise to CHSB.

8. Planned Evacuation 7 September 2023

- 8.1. On the day there were six security officers, five Corporate Health and Safety team members plus the building controller present. Evacuation marshals were present on all floors. All 509 building users evacuated in a little under 6 minutes.
- 8.2. We performed an additional check, a building sweep by two facilities management engineers to survey doors, which added some time to the exercise. However, overall time outdoor was less than ten minutes.

- 8.3. We noted Managers and Evacuation Marshals consistently reporting floor clearances to the building controller, as per procedure. The majority of staff assembled appropriately, some who initially mustered near the bike racks were requested to move and complied swiftly. One vehicle attempted to leave the car park but was advised to remain and complied. Two staff members with mobility impairments were present onsite, both of whom were successfully evacuated using the methods set out in their Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs).
- 8.4. The facilities management sweep identified two defects to doors; one that initially released and then closed and another that seemed unusually heavy to push open. Both defects were reported to facilities management to remedy.

9. Unplanned Evacuation 14 September 2023

- 9.1. A week later, Laurence House underwent an unplanned evacuation after a member of the public activated the fire alarm at 6:15pm. As this was out of normal hours there were no listed evacuation marshals present and a security officer acted as building controller. However, all 124 people present in the building evacuated in a controlled and prompt manner with people on each floor stepping successfully into the role of Evacuation Marshal. Occupants were allowed to re-enter the building at 6:30pm after final checks were completed.

10. Updated Investigations and Reporting – October 2023

- 10.1. General consensus on review of both September evacuations was that the revised procedures, publicity and training had the desired effect. In particular, staff compliance was much improved, evacuations both planned and unplanned were more controlled and the larger pool of possible marshals ensured even out of hours with minimal staff we successfully and promptly cleared the building.
- 10.2. We intend to retain post-event reporting to CHSB to ensure even relatively minor improvement areas receive appropriate focus. We also intend to consolidate the initial expansion of training by inclusion among a standard 'mandatory' set of annual training topics currently being developed in consultation with the Learning and Development Team. Also we are aware the focus here has been on Laurence House. We are currently reviewing procedures and approaches across the corporate estate for inclusion in a revised Premises Handbook for distribution to all relevant officers.

11. Financial implications

- 11.1. The report is to note. There are no financial implications arising.

12. Legal implications

12.1. The report is to note. There are no legal implications arising.

13. Risk Implications

13.1 The risk of non-compliance with Health and Safety requirements is recognised in the Council's corporate risk register, along with service-specific related risks within Directorate registers. Operating effective oversight and governance of the Council's arrangements and their performance is a key mitigation in reducing the level of risk

14. Equalities implications

14.1. The report is to note. There are no equalities implications arising.

15. Climate change and environmental implications

15.1. The report is to note. There are no climate change and environmental implications arising.

16. Crime and disorder implications

16.1. The report is to note. There are no crime and disorder implications arising.

17. Health and wellbeing implications

17.1. The report is to note. There are no health and wellbeing implications arising.

18. Background papers

18.1. No background papers.

19. Report author and contact

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