

UKAA response to consultation on staircases in residential buildings

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The UKAA has responded to questions asked in a consultation for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities relating to sprinklers in care homes, removal of national classes, and staircases in residential buildings.

The UKAA has responded to the questions that had relevance to Build to Rent development only.

Question 19 – Do you agree that Approved Document B should include a maximum threshold for the provision of a single staircase in residential buildings?

Agree.

Question 20 – Do you agree with our proposed threshold of 30 metres+?

Agree.

Question 21 – If you disagree with the proposed threshold, at what height do you think the threshold should be set?

While we do not disagree with the proposals, we can perceive potential problems with some inner-city constrained sites which may no longer be viable. Due to the area which might be taken up by the extra staircase. That said, the likely outcome is that the types of development sites will change to ensure that developments remain viable.

Question 22 – What evidence do you have to support this threshold? [Free text]

- Not applicable – no alternative threshold is proposed

Question 23 – Do you agree that additional measures should be provided to ensure sufficient separation between staircases?

- Agree

Question 24 – What additional measures should be provided to ensure the appropriate separation between staircases? Please provide any additional evidence to support your view.

- For the reasons set out in our response to Q2(c) below, UKAA members operating in the Build to Rent (BTR) sector advocate the use of the most up-to-date fire protection measures. Additionally, our members seek to employ the prevailing best practice in terms of alarm systems, fire separation and compartmentation arrangements, robust smoke separation including ventilation as appropriate, signage and wayfinding, emergency lighting, etc. Our members also seek to ensure proper coordination those of physical systems with best practice safety management procedures. In turn, our members actively maintain and update those systems as necessary over time.
- As set out in our response to Q2(c) below our members have inherent incentives to ensure that best practice measures are incorporated into new buildings and these frequently go beyond the strict regulation compliance observed by ‘for sale’ and other developers. For example our members commonly install sprinkler systems throughout their buildings, regardless of height.

Question 25 – Do you have a view on how long the transitional [provisions] should be, and what evidence do you have to support your proposed transition?

- Many BTR schemes in design or planning phases might be affected, often significantly. However, other than the effects on viability from enhanced re-design, the planning implications and potential amendments to accommodation mix, as well as increased build costs, BTR developers and investors will continue to want the best quality buildings for their residents to make their home, and in which to feel safe into the future. Our members, therefore, do not believe that a long (i.e. of more than 12 months or so) transitional period is necessary.
- As mentioned above, BTR developers and investors always want to do the right thing with a long-term view, so only sites on extremely constrained site footprints are likely to have really difficult problems to overcome. These problems are likely to challenge scheme viability in many cases. As acknowledged in para. 65 of the consultation guidance, this could have an effect on the amount of affordable housing that can be provided in such cases, although this is only one of several mitigation strategies that could be necessary.

Question 28 – Please provide any additional evidence on costs, risks and benefits which should be considered in an assessment of impacts in the following areas.

a) Sprinklers in Care Homes and in housing for vulnerable people, regardless of building height

b) removing the national classification (BS 476 series) from Approved Document B

c) Residential Buildings above 30m in height being recommended to include 2 staircases

To be clear, we agree very strongly with the principle. The UKAA is the main membership body for everyone involved in build-to-rent (BTR) in the UK, from developers and investors, to operators, owners, funders and suppliers (together with all the associated professionals). BTR developments are founded on a principle of single-ownership and therefore a single point of responsibility for safety and management issues, and there is an inherent incentive to incorporate best practice across BTR communities.

Investors in, and owners of, BTR developments are interested in generating stable and secure income with the return generally being in the region of 3-4% pa. The returns, therefore, are patient and long-term, rather than immediate, and so owners and operators of BTR developments are incentivised to take the concerns and wishes of their customers (the residential tenants) very seriously. To a certain extent, they must try to gauge what their customers' requirements will be not just in the next 5 or 10 years, but in the decades beyond.

On that basis, it is worth noting the following (these points highlighting the difference between the mindset of our members as against housebuilders and "for sale" developers):

- None of our members want to find themselves in a position where avoidable harm is caused to their residents. Many of the investors/owners in the BTR sector are large reputable institutions. Their reputation is of paramount importance to them and it is therefore imperative that they not only comply with prevailing standards and recommendations, but exceed them where this brings long-term benefits to residents. This must be done to avoid BTR buildings from being perceived as being obsolete before the end of their anticipated lifetime.
- Most investors and owners develop these buildings with a view to holding their developments for the long-term. Our members, therefore, are constantly seeking to understand the likely requirements which their customers may have in the future. It is clear to our members that their customers will continue to demand exacting safety-standards. As such, it is critical to our members that those future safety considerations are "baked in" to the developments being constructed at this point in time.
- The BTR sector, and purpose-built rental accommodation more widely, depend upon their residents actively choosing where to live. As the chief executive of Build UK was recently quoted (Building, 6 Feb 2023): "If you had the choice, would you choose to live at the top of a 30m block with just one staircase?". Although there will be impacts on design, build costs and viability in many cases, the BTR sector is happy to

accommodate additional safety measures, particularly when these are also required of other types of development, in the interests of long-term resident safety and wellbeing.

- Bearing in mind that BTR developments often contain 200+ apartments (and therefore comprise substantial buildings), the number and locations of the fire escapes is a key consideration in both selecting the development site and in the building's design.
- Fire-safety, post-Grenfell, is now viewed very differently by our customers and is a major consideration when tenants are deciding on where they wish to live. If our customers are not satisfied with the perceived inherent safety-systems within a building, the building will not be able to command the same levels of rent and the returns (which are not immediate and often already quite slim) could be eroded irreparably.
- We agree with the proposed threshold. We recognise that a benchmark needs to be set out and we agree that 30m is a sensible threshold to adopt. It is possible that our members may take an even more conservative approach in some cases and opt for using two more staircases in buildings less tall, depending upon context. It is also worth noting that the GLA is already applying the 30 m threshold in London (since February 2023).