

Preparing for new fire safety rules in rural Scotland

What do the changes in legislation mean for remote social landlords? We speak to Aico's Gregor Morrison, who works across the Highlands

The housing sector has seen a new era of safety legislation and accountability following recommendations made in the Hackitt Review. There has been a lot of discussion about increasing safety procedures in densely populated high-rise blocks, but how does this translate to more rural areas? And how does this fit in with a drive towards zero carbon?

Can you describe the area where you work and what sort of social housing exists?

I work in west Scotland and the Highlands, including 13 islands in Shetland. The Highland Council serves a third of the land area in Scotland, which is 27,000 sq km, and includes the most remote and sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom. It is 10 times larger than Luxembourg, 20% larger than Wales and remarkably almost the same size as Belgium.

Despite having a population of 235,540, which is the seventh-largest population of Scotland's 32 local authorities, the population density is the lowest with just eight people per square kilometre, while 70% of the area I work in is rural.

The council currently has a housing stock of 14,000 properties across this land, with the most dense area within Inverness of around 4,000 properties. Most of the properties are traditional family homes, flats in four-storey builds, there are no high rises and many of the homes were purpose-built in the past 20 years.

When I go out to meet with safety teams, my working day usually includes a few hours of travel, however when I go out to the islands I can be travelling – including ferry journeys – for about five hours, or if I'm going to the Shetland Islands, up to 15 hours. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, in the past year I've been mainly working at home. Construction and planned works open up and start again on 26 April in Scotland.

Since the Grenfell tragedy in 2017, there have been reforms to building safety legislation. How have you seen landlords prepare to increase safety standards? In February 2019, the Scottish government made

a significant step to create safer communities by introducing an updated Tolerable Standard and making it law, intended to ensure that all homes in Scotland, not just social housing or new builds, are habitable, and have a minimum level of fire protection and carbon monoxide detectors by February 2021. As a result of the pandemic, this has been delayed until February 2022, giving social landlords, private landlords and homeowners more time to comply.

Social landlords have been utilising a number of programmes to implement the changes. Most of the upgrades are being completed through a specifically assigned planned works programme, designated purely for upgrading the alarms. However, some are using the EICR [Electrical Installation Condition Report], refurbishment carried out when homes are empty and gas safety checks as avenues to upgrade properties.

It's important for residents to understand their role in the safety of their home. How have you seen landlords communicate this and be approachable?

Education and tenant engagement is fundamental to our role in the sector and I've seen significant change in the past six to 12 months.

When I first joined Aico, I attended East Ayrshire Council's Tenants' and Residents' Conference. On the day, we were giving talks on the importance of home safety and the recent changes in Scottish legislation to help tenants to understand why their properties were being kitted out with more fire protection systems along with other systems that will help with their health and well-being.

It's important for tenants to have more personal communication with their landlords and this can be aided by understanding their home and having accountability – and in turn, this can reduce complaints.

What impact do you think the new safety bills will have on the well-being of tenants?

I believe organisations should take a holistic approach to safety issues. This can be tackled through various



Gregor Morrison, regional specification manager for Scotland West at Aico, started in his first role in specification at Siemens in 2017, before joining Aico in 2019. In his current role he works with landlords, consultants and electrical contractors, helping manage specification towards creating safer communities.



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different avenues; always working to the relevant British Standard to not only achieve compliance but by working to best practice. Embracing change and the innovation of new technologies I believe is key for all social housing providers in enhancing not only the safety of their communities, but also their health and well-being.

In 2014, the Scottish government introduced the Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing and this is the other big focus for Scottish landlords this year and going forward. The purpose of this is to improve a resident's life, make the building safe, and help remove poor energy efficiency as a driver for fuel poverty. Air quality is a key factor in people's health, their homes and energy efficiency.

Improvements to energy efficiency can lead to improvements in health outcomes, particularly in older people, young children and anyone with chronic or respiratory health conditions.

To support this, by 2025 landlords are encouraged to start collecting the air-quality impact data for energy efficiency measures. This means before and after installation data on carbon dioxide, temperature and humidity. You might not think that CO₂ can do that much damage in terms of respiratory health, but it can.

The new standard states that you have to have a carbon dioxide monitor in the main bedroom of a property so that you can see when it has reached a certain level and to open the windows.

In order to take a more holistic approach to property management and safety, landlords are harnessing the newest technology. What advances have you seen and imagine you might see to future-proof a building?

The introduction of innovative technologies means homes can potentially be very efficient and safer, and there is a need to embrace change, which is a challenge in some of the more remote areas.

Being proactive, and not just seeking to meet the minimum legislative standards, is important – not just for fire safety, but also working towards zero carbon homes and reducing carbon emissions from transport when doing repairs.

In Scotland – mainly due to our weather – condensation, damp, mould and fuel poverty are prevalent within social housing properties, especially within the Highlands and Islands. New technologies that monitor this and provide real-time updates can help a resident to be accountable and create behavioural change by making them think more about turning on ventilation or opening windows. Effective monitoring and evaluation is crucial when measuring the effectiveness of digital sensor equipment.

Having tenant engagement and stressing the importance of their role – and empowerment in the management of their own home as the tenant can see the information as well – is a vital part of the process.

These lifestyle changes aren't just about the property but will also improve residents' health and well-being, and that's what a home is about. ●

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14k
Highland Council's housing stock

8
People per square kilometre in Highland Council