

Important information for leaseholders buying, selling, re-mortgaging or staircasing: fire safety information required by your lender

Following the fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017, the Government has provided guidance about building safety for landlords and freeholders. The guidance is issued as an Advice Note. There's been a focus on Advice Note 14 (AN14) which relates to external wall systems for buildings over 18 meters high. Mortgage lenders and valuers have been asking for certification that properties meet this guidance. This impacts all Triathlon Homes' blocks.

Triathlon Homes and East Village Management Ltd (EVML) are working closely to meet lenders' queries. Delivering the information quickly has been a challenge and, in several cases, it has prevented leaseholders from re-mortgaging, staircasing or selling their homes. This is a nationwide issue which is affecting thousands of leaseholders.

We know this is a difficult and worrying time for many and we're sorry for the frustration and upset this is causing. We're doing all we can to resolve this issue.

The following 15 questions will give you information about this situation and our response:

1. What is an Advice Note 14 compliant report?

To satisfy the requirements of AN14 an intrusive inspection of the external walls needs to be carried out by a qualified engineer. The inspection is to verify the cladding and insulation materials, and the quality of their installation. The inspection focuses on combustible materials and the structural installations to prevent fire spreading.

The inspector needs to look at three areas of each side of the building. To achieve this, cladding needs to be removed to ensure the inspector has full access to see the fire spread prevention measures.

2. What's Triathlon Homes doing to get these reports?

We want to do everything we can to support leaseholders whose mortgage application, staircasing or sale has been disrupted as a result of the approach that lenders are taking. EVML, as the freeholder, has responded by commissioning professionals to produce the AN14 reports, and appointed a contractor to arrange access for the inspections. Triathlon Homes is working closely with EVML to implement and monitor a programme of inspections.

The inspections are being undertaken by a qualified cladding engineer and are quality assured by qualified fire safety engineers.

3. Why is it taking so long?

The work itself is challenging. However, external factors must also be taken into account.

It takes time to appoint specialist contractors with the appropriate skills and professional indemnities, especially when many other organisations are also conducting similar inspections.

Preparing for inspection is a technically complex process and detailed preparation is required to ensure the correct parts of each building are exposed. The contractors work at height and sometimes poor weather means it is not safe to work; they have also found the physical process of removal sometimes takes longer than expected.

Reports for a significant number of blocks are underway. To ensure the reports are produced in a timely fashion and made available as fairly and efficiently as possible we've drawn up a programme. We've prioritised the inspections predominantly based on the length of time people have been waiting for a report; to ensure the programme is more efficient we've tried to undertake inspections by plot. We have also tried to take specific personal circumstances into account where possible.

4. Why didn't you start earlier?

The AN14 guidance was published in December 2018. As has been widely reported, the guidance is not clear, and we needed to be sure that our interpretation was correct and properly applied. Other organisations in our position have also had to take the same approach.

The government issued additional advice notes throughout 2019, which also needed careful consideration, in particular in relation to the new guidance emerging from the Grenfell Fire Inquiry, the first stage of which has only recently concluded. As a responsible housing provider, we did not want to start an extensive and intrusive programme of inspections while the guidance was still being assessed.

There was a long period before some financial institutions linked mortgage finance decisions to AN14. Many sales and staircasing transactions took place as normal in the first six months of the year and over the summer. Once this link became evident and we understood the consequences for residents, we took steps to obtain the reports from EVMML, which duly began the commissioning process.

5. Which blocks have a completed report?

We have a report for Kaleidoscope House.

Inspections took place in December 2019 at Festuca House, Lucia Heights, Titian Heights, and we are expecting the reports imminently.

Festive Mansions was partially inspected in December and the inspection will be completed on 17 January 2020. The report takes approximately 10 working days to produce.

6. When can I expect to receive the report for my block?

Our outline programme is as follows:

Report Due in:	Building Name
January	Festuca House Lucia Heights Titian Heights
February	Festive Mansions Karner House Meander House Tucana Heights
March	Tayberry House Kotata House Samphire Heights
April	Vesta House Saddlers House Cavesson House
May	Aurelia House Rye Mansions Titan House
June	Asterid Heights Chroma Mansions Sable House
July	Verna House Vega House Burgundy House
August	Further blocks as required

The above timeline is only an indication based on the preliminary assessments. We're working with the engineer and our contractors with aim of reducing the time taken to complete the programme as the work crew becomes more familiar with each building.

As with all outside activities, bad weather can disrupt progress.

We know how important it is for you to have information about the programme, so we'll regularly update our website to keep you informed about the timetable.

7. How can I get a copy of the report?

We'll send you a copy as soon as we receive it, provided we have your details on our list. If you're not sure, contact us via info@triathlonhomes.com

We'll keep our website updated so you can check to see whether a report has been completed for your block. Send an email to info@triathlonhomes.com and we'll send you a copy of the completed report.

We're also working closely with the sales and staircasing teams to ensure the information packs are up to date.

8. What if my block's not on the list?

Contact us at info@triathlonhomes.com

9. What will happen if the report highlights a problem?

EVML has employed specialist consultants in fire safety and external wall construction. They are ready to advise on the course of action we'll take.

Our priority is to ensure your safety and we'll focus on any remedial works necessary to prevent the spread of fire.

10. What would you recommend if I want to put my home on the market?

It's worth speaking to one of our team.

Please contact Sales.servicesnorth@shgroup.org.uk You'll need to balance the length of time it takes to find a buyer with our ability to get you an AN14 report. A sale may fall through if your buyer doesn't want to wait for the report. We are unable to give you any financial advice but may be able to make sure you're asking the right questions.

11. What would you recommend if I want to staircase up and increase my share of ownership?

It's worth speaking to one of our team.

Please contact Sales.servicesnorth@shgroup.org.uk We are unable to give you any financial advice but may be able to make sure you're asking the right questions.

12. I'm re-mortgaging, who should I talk to?

Please contact Sales.servicescentral@shgroup.org.uk We'll be able to discuss your options.

13. Can you compensate me for additional finance costs or charges?

We're sorry we're unable to pay compensation for any additional costs you incur because you're waiting for an AN14 report. This is because the issue arose when banks and building societies linked their lending decisions to the government's Advice Note, a situation that is outside of our direct control.

We'll always look at individual cases, so if you feel you have been badly served by our service provider or we've done something wrong, please let us know. We understand that some people may feel let down. We would like to reassure you that we're doing all we can to get the reports completed as soon as possible.

14. What has been done to ensure buildings are safe after the Grenfell fire?

In October 2017 EVML asked a firm of fire safety engineers to undertake a risk assessment of the external wall façade and cladding materials. This exercise looked at each block in East Village and reviewed the fire risk, fire strategy and fire safety measures. The report was based on a desk top audit of the building materials and site visits. A report was written which covered each block at East Village. This report is separate to the requirements of AN14 and does not refer to the government's subsequent guidance.

The predominant façade at East Village is pre-cast concrete cladding. There is a small amount of aluminium composite material (ACM) at East Village in Plots N02 and N07. ACM is a combustible material, and we are currently planning to remove it. None of the blocks are wholly covered in ACM, it is used in limited areas and as a decorative trim.

We would like to reassure residents that the design and construction of each block at East Village has been specified to a high standard. Each block received Building Control sign-off at the time they were built and approved by a licensed warranty provider (NHBC) after they were built. Every block has an up-to-date Fire Risk Assessment. These are independently reviewed every year and recommendations are dealt with immediately or, where appropriate, put into a programme of work to be completed within a suitable timeframe.

The security team is present 24/7 and is regularly trained so that every team member is prepared and knows how to react in case of fire. The team also monitors the communal fire alarms from the Control Centre. EVML meet regularly with the London Fire Brigade to discuss fire safety and fire risk across the Village.

EVML has employed independent and qualified consultants to advise on fire safety and to review the government advice notes. They have a comprehensive programme in place for checking each block in light of the guidance. However, given the large number of buildings at East Village and the fact that working at height can only take place when weather conditions permit the process will take months to complete.

15. Next steps

We are not working alone on this important issue. Together with a group of the largest London-based housing associations, we are seeking clarity on the advice required by lenders and to see whether certification can be less onerous. Our hope is that this will reassure residents, encourage mortgage lenders to take a more considered view, and give building owners a reasonable and realistic timeframe in which to follow government advice.

In the meantime, we appreciate that this is a frustrating and worrying time for customers who are affected by this and we will continue to work on providing assurance to mortgage lenders where we can.

If you have questions or concerns regarding the government advice notes and the safety of your building, please contact us by emailing info@triathlonhomes.com

If you are concerned that your ability to re-mortgage, staircase or sell your home might be affected by these changes, please seek advice directly from your lender or mortgage broker.