

## Innovative voice safety pilot system for high rise flats

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A pilot system designed to give clear instructions to residents in high rise social housing during emergencies is being launched by NFA member South Essex Homes in Southend-on-Sea. The announcement system is being trialled in Longbow Flats and is thought to be one of the first installations of its kind in a social housing tower block.

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, in partnership with South Essex Homes and Essex County Fire & Rescue Service's Technical Fire Safety Team, have approved the system which gives fire rescue services access to a one-way microphone from the ground floor to every floor in the building in the event of an emergency.

If successful, the pilot scheme could be rolled out to other social housing blocks in the area as a direct response to the report into Grenfell Tower fire.

One of the early findings in the public enquiry following the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017 was that the Fire Rescue Service could not communicate with the residents in the block to advise them whether or not to leave their flats. Phase one of the public enquiry highlighted a need for some means to send an evacuation signal to all or a selected part of each building.

Cllr Ian Gilbert, Leader of Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, said: "We will support any scheme which helps keep our residents safe, especially within their own homes, and we are grateful to South Essex Homes and Essex County Fire & Rescue for initiating this pilot and putting Southend's high rise social housing at the forefront of these changes."

A network of loudspeakers on the communal landings, stairwells and above the entrance doors of each home will make it possible for rescuers to communicate with individual floors or all of them

Mario Ambrose, Executive Director at South Essex Homes, said: "As this project is unique in the social housing sector, once it is complete we will need time for Essex County Fire & Rescue Service to assess its effectiveness as they will ultimately be the end users. Should it prove successful, we will then look to begin a programme to have similar systems installed in all the high rise blocks in Southend."

Installation of the system will take about four months and is expected to be ready to use in March 2021.

Mark Earwicker, Group Manager of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, said: "With this system in place, residents can be reassured. This is a positive advancement in fire safety equipment which will not only help to protect the residents of the building, but make it easier for firefighters to communicate and evacuate the building if required."

**ENDS**

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Note to editors: The National Federation of ALMOs Ltd (NFA) represents England's 31 arms-length management organisations (ALMOs). ALMOs are not-for-profit council-owned housing companies that **manage nearly 420,000 council homes across 34 local authorities.**

First established in 2002 as part of the Government's Decent Homes programme, ALMO companies now work with their parent councils to deliver diverse housing services. These range from new-build development to support for residents' employability, financial resilience and health and well-being.