



FPRA
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The Voice of Leaseholders

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Blocks of flats face electricity disconnection because utility companies treat them as commercial premises

When an ordinary householder is threatened with electricity disconnection, there are procedural safeguards in place to ensure that the utility company does not act irresponsibly and put people at risk. But if you happen to live in a block of flats there are no such safeguards. This is because blocks are regarded as commercial premises which lack the disconnection protocols required of domestic properties.

This means that the electricity that powers shared services in a block of flats - stairwell lighting, water supply, lifts, entrance security, fire and smoke alarms - can be disconnected at a stroke by a utility company for non-payment, plunging an entire block into potentially dangerous chaos through no fault of the residents themselves.

The Federation of Private Residents' Associations (FPRA), which represents flat owners in England and Wales, is lobbying the Department of Energy and Climate Change to put pressure energy companies to treat block of flats as homes and not businesses, and to sign up to disconnection procedures that will safeguard flat residents in the same way as house residents.

Communal electricity in blocks of flats is paid for by contributions from owners or leaseholders who pay into a service charge account, which might be managed by an agent or the residents themselves. But as there are so many parties involved it can occasionally be difficult to pay electricity bills on time. For small resident-run blocks there might be a cash flow problem due to some leaseholders paying late or disputing charges; in new developments the developer may go bust leaving a financial black hole and no funds to

pay the utility company; or the electricity company can be careless in addressing their bills and notices of non-payment. It is not uncommon for utility companies to send bills to the building itself, where they get lost and gather dust in the hallway, instead of sending it to the agent or the freehold company. But whatever the reason for non-payment, all too soon residents can suddenly find their block cut off from electricity.

When that happens, it's a potentially dangerous and miserable situation for residents, as FPRA Chairman Bob Smytherman explains:

"Residents will be left with no lift, no lighting in the stairways at night, no working fire alarm to alert you if there is a fire, no water supply because the building relies on electricity to pump it into the pipes and tanks, and you won't be able to buzz-in visitors because the intercom system doesn't work. Local authorities may even have to find temporary accommodation for those affected. Thankfully the disconnection of common parts does not happen often, but when it does the impact can be devastating, especially for the old and vulnerable. That's why we need to act now to stop it happening".

The FPRA believes a new Disconnection Protocol for blocks of flats should include:-

- Recognition that supplies to common parts of blocks are treated as domestic, not commercial premises
- Utility companies must ensure that Disconnection Notices are served on the responsible party, not anonymously addressed to the building itself
- In new blocks the utility company should track down the developer as the responsible party. If the developer is in receivership or administration, the utility company will need to find the insolvency practitioner
- The supplier should establish whether disconnection will affect any vulnerable persons living in the block
- 1. The supplier should establish whether disconnection will prevent the supply of water and sewerage services to the block
- The supplier should establish whether disconnection will mean that the fire alarm, emergency lighting and smoke detection systems will cease to operate and so endanger occupants' lives
- The supplier should inform the local authority before any disconnection
- The supplier should inform the fire service before any disconnection.

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For an interview with our Chairman call 07867 562538

Notes to Editors:

The FPRA committee would like to invite Property Journalists and Reporters to join us for our AGM this Wednesday 27th October 2010 from 6.00pm In the Grill Room at the Victory Services Club, 63 - 79 Seymour Street, London, W2 2HF with our guest speaker this year Nigel Wilkins from Campaign for the Abolition of Residential Leasehold (CARL).

The FPRA is a non-political, not-for-profit advice, support and lobbying organisation for our members who include private residential leaseholders, tenants' and residents' associations and residential management companies as well as those companies where the leaseholders together own the freehold of their own residential block.

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