



Headlines from

Lessons from Grenfell: Social housing at the forefront

Policy Think Tank 4th-5th December 2017

1. There are systemic failures in building regulations and fire safety. **The current system of regulating the design, building and use of high-rise and multi-storey blocks of flats is not fit for purpose.** There are gaps between what is designed, what gets built and how it is eventually used. The **chain of responsibility is not clear** due to the complex commissioning and procurement system where multiple contractors and subcontractors are involved making compliance and the enforcement of regulations difficult.
2. **Neither fire nor building regulations are clear enough**, making it hard to interpret some provisions and allowing space for cutting corners and non-adherence. It is unclear where the responsibility lies for implementation and enforcement of some regulations. Sometimes conflicting advice about fire safety is offered from different fire authorities.
3. There is a **general lack of scrutiny and oversight** among social landlords, particularly local authorities. There has been a drop in local authorities' performance since the abolition of the Audit Commission. At the same time, both local authorities and fire services have lost capacity to enforce exacting safety measures due to the impact of austerity which has led to a reduction in the number of fire and building inspectors and full, in-depth inspections audits.
4. The working **relationship between the Fire Service, architects and construction sectors needs to be much closer.**
5. There are concerns about the way Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs) are carried out. The **qualifications required of fire risk assessors** are not exacting enough, with no independently approved inspectors. Many social housing blocks do not have up-to-date or in-depth Fire Risk Assessments.
6. The benefits of on-site management of social housing estates is known and recognised, yet many large social landlords find it too costly, especially with their constrained budgets, leading to many layers of management becoming remote. The **negative impact of remote management on conditions in multi-storey blocks** contribute to the poor reputation and image of social housing. This is exacerbated by the reduction in the social housing stock and the concentration of vulnerable people within the same area.
7. Many social landlords **lack a detailed knowledge of who lives on their estates and there is often incomplete data on issues connected with their property.** This means they are not fully aware of safety conditions in their properties as changes are made to buildings by other service providers or DIY refurbishments by residents. Some of these can **compromise compartmentation**, which is key to fire safety in multi-storey blocks. For example, replacing fire doors with decorative doors, or drilling through walls to renew wiring and gas or water pipes.

8. While many landlords are committed to working with and involving their residents in decision making, many social housing estates suffer from a **huge gulf in communication between tenants and landlords**. This leads to a sense of powerlessness and of 'being done to' among tenants, who are usually more knowledgeable about their estates, about fire safety shortcomings, and about changes that are made to buildings.
9. In many cases, **landlords are more preoccupied with building new properties than with taking care of their existing stock**. This leads to a deterioration of their assets and lack of adherence to strict fire safety in those buildings. This not only contributes to the stigma attached to being social housing tenants but also to an increasingly negative image of social landlords and the sector as a whole.

Ways Forward

- ❖ There needs to be a single point of contact within the landlord system, for every estate and every block, so that in any emergency or any need for help, there can be no escaping responsibility.
- ❖ The chain of responsibility during the design and construction of multi-storey blocks needs to be absolutely clear. Those responsible for overseeing and enforcing standards, including building and fire regulations driving the different stages of design and construction, should be named and identifiable, so that all parties involved know who is in charge.
- ❖ An annual in-depth safety check of multi-storey buildings, akin of the MOT test for vehicles should be enforced on all landlords to ensure the safety and integrity of buildings. The test result should be made public to reassure residents that their homes are safe places to live. The checks would include, among others, surveying fire safety doors and alarm systems and intrusive inspections inside flats to check compartmentation is not compromised.
- ❖ There should be a wider body that regulates all local authority social landlords, alongside housing associations, to hold them to account. This system should revive the positive features of the Audit Commission while improving on its flaws.
- ❖ Bespoke fire safety and evacuation plans for each building must be clearly communicated to all residents. The installation of sprinklers by landlords in all multi-story blocks is strongly advocated by fire safety experts and is already enforced in Scotland.
- ❖ Building, fire and other safety regulations, e.g. electrics, should be consistent, coherent and clear in order to avoid non-compliance and increase accountability.
- ❖ Retrofitting and fire safety best practice should be published and widely circulated within the social housing sector.
- ❖ Landlords should invest in an integrated data system to enhance the quality of data concerning their properties, and gain clarity over what is happening in their buildings at any point in time. Correct and full information will lead to more efficient and effective decision making when it comes to safety.

- ❖ Residents should be integral partners in the management of social housing estates. Landlords must listen to tenants and take on board what they say, so they are able to influence decisions through open and transparent communication with their landlords. Tenants know more about their estate than anyone else and should be involved in regular fire safety inspections.
- ❖ A system through which residents can report on the performance of their landlords should be instituted in order to increase accountability. Having elected resident representatives, who receive training in scrutiny is invaluable.
- ❖ Competence requirements for Fire Risk Assessors should be seriously tightened. Resident caretakers and front-line staff can be trained in fire safety and compartmentation to raise any problems to management as soon as they take place.
- ❖ Multi-storey buildings have complex systems and can suffer big technical failures, so the landlord must have a handle on such complex systems.
- ❖ Compartmentation must be frequently checked – ensuring each flat is fully separated with no holes or breaches in walls.
- ❖ Local management of multi-storey blocks is crucial to the survival of social housing estates. It prevents problems from getting out of hand. It also enhances landlords' ability to respond to resident needs; and it prioritises day to day maintenance and safety issues.
- ❖ Social landlords should give higher priority to looking after their existing stock and not let the push for new build jeopardise the conditions of their current tenants. This involves a commitment to building communities, alongside taking care of bricks and mortar.
- ❖ In order to promote their valuable role in society, social landlords must revisit and strengthen their mission and the key purpose of social housing provision. Second, they should have a united voice that sends a coherent message to government. Third, they should assume a wider place-shaping role building sustainable communities. Finally, social landlords can launch a national campaign to showcase best practice.
- ❖ There must be nationwide recognition of the value of social housing as a national asset and social good that needs investing in. It is crucial to convey the share of tenants who work in vital, even if low paid, jobs to overcome prejudice and stigma. As austerity and continuing welfare cuts raise poverty levels, there is a desperate need for a shift from a belief that home ownership is the ultimate goal to one that advocates for secure tenancies and more social housing. The Right-to-Buy and follow-on lettings in multi-storey blocks should be revisited. The loss of stock and private lettings cause huge pressures.