

Headlines from Lessons from Grenfell Community Think Tank, 30th-31st October 2017

1. The fire service **offers basic advice on what should be routine safety:**
 - Residents need a **simple information pack** with an **evacuation plan** as well as the **key contact point and basic safety guidance**;
 - There should be **clear rules** to be used in an emergency;
 - Completely **clear entrances, corridors, landings, doorways** are an essential safety requirement;
 - **High-powered gadgets** should not be left running while out or overnight e.g. washing machine, dryer, laptops and chargers. This is a **potential fire hazard**;
 - **Compartmentation is key** – regular fire checks, especially if works are carried out, must be **intensive and in-depth**;
 - There must be **yearly checks on gas** and **five year checks on electric** supply
2. High rise buildings are comparatively safe in spite of these warnings, with relatively few disasters if basic fire safety is followed. However, Grenfell has challenged housing, building and fire services to step up their efforts as it shows what happens when **rules become lax, information is scant and costs are cut at the expense of safety.**
 - **Hospitals and care homes are much more vulnerable** and need frequent checks. Cladding issues in buildings delivering these other services have not yet received the attention they deserve;
 - Following Grenfell, **all multi-storey buildings** need to be careful fire safety enforcement.
3. **All multi-storey estates need a single point of contact** for maintenance and supervision of conditions. It is often hard to identify the responsible person and therefore difficult to ensure that actions are followed through. A named and known person makes it a lot easier to get things done and if they are on site, to check that things are actually done properly.
4. Debates around **“Stay Put” or “Get Out”** were heated and the strong advice from all three Fire Officers (including two tenants who were previously Fire Officers) was to have clear information, evacuation plans and fire safety practises. It is crucial that when evacuation is necessary, it should happen in an **orderly, controlled way**. Firemen must reach the water/fire hydrants and the source of the fire first. This should only take minutes. Avoiding a panicked escape down fire staircases is crucial to firefighters.
5. **Tenants’ representatives and frontline staff need training** in fire safety:
 - Regular fire drills can be held as part of **fun events**. Involving children and local schools helps spread the word
 - Training tenants as **volunteer fire guardians and block guardians** is a valuable way of getting a higher response from residents
 - All volunteers in the field of safety advice need training
 - It is important constantly to refresh tenant involvement through recognition of their input and positive recognition. Training helps with this.

6. **Solar panels are not flammable** but if installed on the walls of blocks, or on roofs, there must be a gap between the panels and the surface of the building as they become extremely hot and can set fire to the material behind the panels. A gap is an essential safety measure. If the insulation material behind the solar panels is non-flammable, then the risk of fire is minimised. Nonetheless, the advice is always to leave an air gap behind the solar panels to avoid overheating.

7. **Residents are keen to work with council landlords and housing associations.** They sometimes find it hard to persuade the landlord to listen to tenants. When they do and there is a real partnership, conditions improve a lot. There is a stark contrast between the places where social landlords and tenant relations are strong and positive, and where communication is poor.

8. Residents experience **many challenges living in high rise blocks**. There are also some positive aspects. Residents gave their own accounts of major problems:
 - One participant with five children was evacuated at 1am following a gas explosion in the basement. The roof of the boiler house was blown from the ground floor up to 22nd floor;
 - Another tenant was in a block with large cracks between flats – so the gas was turned off and tenants had no hot water;
 - Another tenant reported on lettings problems and noise issues with small children living on high floors;
 - Maintenance of lifts, roofs, entrances, fire doors, alarm systems often posed a problem;

On the other hand, many residents live in tower blocks that are well maintained, where tenants feel safe, secure and well looked after. Tight management, on-site supervision, enforcement of conditions, and careful allocations are key methods.

9. **Multi-storey buildings last a long time** if maintained properly. But they need careful, on-going, on-site management. Having a **concierge or on-site caretaker** helps a lot. Estate-based TMOs can afford on-site supervision, even on small estates with a limited budget, basically because they have a local focus and prioritise local additions and services. This means that bigger landlords have the capacity to prioritise front-line housing management, as many are now doing.

Remote management systems are a major cause of problems spreading, because recommendations for safety are not always implemented as they get lost in the system

10. Multi-storey blocks built by Councils now have **multiple owners and different, often unknown**, landlords due to the Right to Buy and follow-on sales. This needs careful management. For example, there is a high service charge on leaseholders (up to £17,000 per annum) to cover safety checks and maintenance for gas, electrics, fire doors, leaks, external window cleaning, etc. Leaks are sometimes very hard to trace in multi-storey blocks and are one of the commonest problems, particularly where multiple owners are involved.

11. The official **Housing Health and Safety Standard** can be used to enforce fire safety measures. Local authorities have powers to close buildings and enforce remedial safety works on owners and landlords. However, where the Council is the landlord, the enforcement may be much weaker as it relies on the Council enforcing itself. Budget cuts and staff reductions undermine local authorities' capacity to enforce.

The government is conducting an **in-depth review of building** regulations, which should lead to a tightening of standards but many question whether any reforms and standards will be properly enforced if they are revised to a higher, more exacting standard. There is also a debate about whether the Fire Brigade should have enforcement powers on issues directly relating to fire safety.

12. Architects for major retrofit projects **keep complete building records** of their work. This helps to sort out building problems that arise after completion. Local authorities and housing associations do not always keep full records.

Architects are necessary, not just at the design stage, but to **see the work through to completion**, so that ultimate responsibility lies throughout the process and in the aftermath with the architect and the builders with architect supervisors.

13. **Public health plays a vital role in helping communities** flourish in relation to housing, health and wellbeing. It is an evidence based profession, addressing three community needs that play a big part in community health:
- Safe, affordable, decent quality housing;
 - Power and control over your own life;
 - Community as key element of wellbeing

All three are highly relevant in the post-Grenfell situation and apply to literally hundreds of estates around the country.

14. Social landlords and government need to **portray a more positive image** of what residents can do, and what many do in practise. It is also important to show that high rise flats and tower blocks can be made to work. Many tenants talk with real pride about where they live on high floors and they praise their landlords for making it work by working with residents.

Key tenant perspectives from residents on the Lessons from Grenfell

- Tenants want to be respected and listened to
- They want front-line estate based management on their estates
- They want full and clear information and reports on inspections concerning safety
- They want enforcement on bad behaviour, and also on regulations, fire safety, etc.
- They want to work as partners with landlords but they feel dependent and are treated as though they are "second class"