

Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Policy Workshop

How landlords can cope with the tough Grenfell Inquiry recommendations

London School of Economics, 27th February 2020

1. Part 1 of Grenfell Inquiry highlighted **serious failures in fire services**. It also showed significant gaps in the **way landlords manage multi-storey buildings**. The key recommendations of the Inquiry Report (Phase 1) highlight some major ways in which landlords must change the way they are working.
2. Some leading recommendations affecting landlords include:
 - a. **Fire doors and door closers** should be inspected at least every 3 months in all buildings.
 - b. **Each floor in all high-rise blocks should be clearly marked and each flat clearly numbered** with signs visible in low light and smoky conditions.
 - c. **Fire information signs** should be simple to understand and available in a variety of languages.
 - d. **Combustible cladding** should be removed from all buildings as quickly as possible.
 - e. Details of external walls and the materials used should be provided to the fire services by the owner/manager of every high-rise building; services should also be informed of any changes. **All fire services personnel** at all levels should understand the risk of flammable cladding.
 - f. All owners and managers **should provide paper and electronic plans of all high-rise buildings** to fire services. Every building should have a **secure premises information box** that includes floor plans at the foot of each block. The paper plans and records should be stored here.
 - g. **Every lift should be regularly inspected**. The mechanism that allows fire fighters to take control of the emergency lift should be directly controlled by the fire service.
 - h. **New training and guidance for the fire service** in inspecting high rise buildings is essential.
 - i. **Managing the transition from “stay put” to “get out”** needs to be made much clearer.
 - j. **The flow of information between different parts of the fire service** needs to be transformed e.g. between emergency call operators and fire fighters. Also, the same should be applied to other emergency services.
3. **The Inquiry recommendations place major pressure on resources**. The need to respond to the Inquiry recommendations clashes with the pressure to build more units and improve the energy efficiency of existing stock. Some landlords are working out how these recommendations can be incorporated into current plans to upgrade the existing stock. For

example, workmen who are already going into a building for a standard repair can be trained to carry out fire door checks at the same time.

All landlords are worried how they will fund this additional work. The additional burden helps to support the case for government grant funding. Increasing service charges is one option but this will be very unpopular with leaseholders, private tenants, and social housing tenants not receiving housing benefit.

4. **The key recommendations need to be turned into legislation as soon as possible.** Many landlords feel that they should act now based on their duty to ensure the safety of their tenants. Therefore, they feel they cannot wait for the government to make the necessary legislative changes. Landlords need some time to plan and implement the changes, especially where they own multiple blocks. Even smaller housing associations, such as Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association, with around 6000 properties, may have over 100 multi-storey blocks. Some housing associations feel that the Inquiry recommendations need apply more widely to the social housing stock. The safety and care principles should apply to all buildings.
5. There is a separate but connected worry that the **existing supply chains will not be able to deliver what is needed** including carrying out the necessary works. One local authority has set up its own accredited team to check, fix and fit fire doors to ensure that the work is carried out to a high standard.
6. **All works need to be thoroughly and independently checked.** All fire inspections, which must be done annually, need to be in-depth, and conducted by qualified inspectors. Inspections need to be “intrusive” i.e. inside flats, in and behind cupboards, shelves, appliances and equipment. Inspections also need to cover fire alarms, sprinklers and ventilation systems, at least annually.
7. **Measures which aim to improve fire safety can also cause problems.** For example, sprinkler and alarm systems need to be fitted properly so that they do not breach compartmentation, that is the fire-proof division between flats.
8. **Landlords need to have accurate up to date records on all buildings with documentation of any changes** that may affect health and safety measures. Programmes like Building Information Modelling (BIM) can help organisations to do this effectively.
9. **Landlords must make evacuation plans for all residents,** specific to each block, to ensure safety in case of an emergency.
10. **Landlords need to know who is living in every property.** This can be challenging, especially with leasehold properties that are then let to private tenants. There are several different ways that landlords can find information about private tenants in their buildings:
 - a. Organising and supporting a leaseholders forum;
 - b. Engaging them in fun days and community days;
 - c. Using the concierge/caretaker of the block to make contact with all residents;

- d. Offering free inspections (essential checks) and offering reduced-cost repairs services on favourable terms.

11. **Onsite management can make a major difference** for several reasons:

- a. It helps landlords develop contact with their tenants;
- b. It ensures they know who is living in their blocks;
- c. It allows tenants to report health and safety issues quickly and directly;
- d. The landlord is able to respond to issues quicker.

In spite of these known benefits, many landlord organisations have cut back on estate-based management to save money, as costs rise.

12. **Technology can play a useful role in supporting the careful management of buildings.** For example, emergency lighting can be fitted with a device that sends a message to head office if a light fails. However, technology can carry out a limited range of functions without replacing the value of human contact and over-sight. It was agreed that *“you can’t manage neighbourhoods online”*. One of the greatest benefits of on-site management is that both front-line housing staff and tenants have direct ways of maintaining decent, safe conditions.

13. **Tenants play an important role in helping keep buildings safe and well maintained.**

- a. Most tenants have a **in-depth knowledge of the buildings** and work that has been done in the past. Their knowledge is sometimes more accurate and up-to-date than the landlords records, which are often out-of-date.
- b. Tenants can receive **training in how to carry out checks on repairs** and report on specific problems any problems. Of course, there needs to be a clear channel of communication for tenants.
- c. Tenants need to be able to **hold their landlord to account over safety** and wider maintenance issues.

14. Tenants need to be presented with **clear, easy to understand health and safety information**. This should be presented in several different forms (leaflets, videos, face to face) to make it accessible to all tenants. It should also be available in a range of languages.

15. **Landlords need to work closely with the local fire brigade** to ensure the fire service have the correct, up to date information about properties.

Summary and Overview

High rise blocks are sometimes difficult to manage because they may have built-in design flaws. Often the design and subsequent problems impact a whole block or estate and create the stigma that is often attached to high-rise blocks. Yet, high-rise housing is valuable to social landlords as an existing housing resource, providing spacious flats which applicants for social housing need. We therefore need to ensure the survival of this-ready made housing supply into the future as an irreplaceable housing resource.

Landlords need to adopt a holistic approach and consider all aspects of the buildings they own in order to maintain buildings adequately and make sure they are safe. Any repair work on a property and any modification or improvement has the potential to breach basic fire safety. All workmen and contractors must be properly trained, and understand all the potential ramifications of the works they are doing e.g. using sealant for repairs, installing shelves and cupboards, doing any rewiring, adding electricity plugs etc. Even basic jobs can cause complications and breaches.

All staff that enter a building should be **trained to spot maintenance defects**, including breaches in health and safety, and other problems with the building. The system of reporting for staff needs to be clear, and there needs to be a single point of control so that any problems can be quickly resolved.