



BEST STORIES IN
CONSTRUCTION 2022

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FOREWORD FROM IBP CHAIR



IBP CHAIR, HARRIETT HINDMARSH

I am delighted to introduce our first IBP Awards publication, celebrating all our winners and those who were shortlisted for our 2022 awards.

Congratulations to everyone again, a stellar list of winners against very stiff competition. This year, in support of our new vision and purpose, we expanded our judging panel and each of our judges, new and existing, was impressed, not just by the quality of the writing, but also the commitment of all those who entered to both their craft and their subject matter.

I want to extend thanks on behalf of the IBP board to our judges, whose time and effort is critical in helping us fulfil our vision.

The purpose of IBP is to bring together a diverse community of journalists and communication professionals who share a common passion for the built environment. To create the opportunity for our peers, and those who want to enter our industry, to succeed, by recognising, celebrating and sharing their contribution in making this a deeply exciting sector to work in. Through our work we are helping to create a better world, and by encouraging greater inclusivity we hope to provide opportunities to those who are currently under-represented in built environment journalism and communications. By championing the very best in built environment journalism and communications through our Awards, we can highlight and influence the important contribution that designers, constructors, developers, investors and consultants make towards the future prosperity of our society. The built environment is at the heart of who we are and how we live. We are focussed on ensuring that all those who want to enter our industry have the opportunity to succeed, and partner with third parties so that those who are under-represented can benefit from the expertise you, our members, provide.

I want to say thank you to the team who helped to pull this year's awards together - special thanks to Cristie Hammond, Andy Geldard, Ruth Slavid, Richard Aylwin and Derek Harris who supported IBP President Tom Broughton and me this year - and to all our sponsors and supporters in 2022.

MESSAGE FROM CHAIR OF JUDGES



CHAIR OF JUDGES, SARAH RICHARDSON

Determined, passionate and informative: these are just three of the plaudits that cropped up time and again in the judging sessions for this year's IBP Awards. Whether they were looking at hard-hitting investigations, thought-provoking features or the way that the built environment's leading brands have evolved over the past year, our judges were deeply impressed with the best-in-class journalism that this year's winning entries, and those on the shortlists, represent.

The built environment affects every aspect of our society, and the journalists reporting on it today are helping to bring issues of immense importance - environmental sustainability, building safety, dire housing shortages - to the top of the national agenda. Their skill in doing so shone through in this year's Awards, and the judges hope that this collection of their work will inspire others to put themselves forward for recognition next year.

We welcomed several new judges to our panels for 2022, as part of a revamped process to ensure the Awards reflect the values that IBP wishes to champion: excellence in built environment journalism, and opportunity for talented people, whatever their background, to make their mark in this deeply valuable section of the media.

I would like to thank all our judges, new and returning, for the time and expertise they brought to the judging process. On their behalf, I would all also like to thank the many journalists who entered this year's Awards; reading your work was a genuine privilege, and we wish you every success now and in the future.

IBP AWARDS JUDGES

The IBP Journalism Awards are judged by a panel of influential journalists and professionals drawn from across the industry. A huge thank you to all of our judges:

- Adrian Barrick – Group editorial director, Incisive Media. Former editor, Building
 - Dr. Barbara Rowlands – Media consultant and educator. Former Associate Professor in Journalism, City, University of London
 - Caroline Thorpe – Freelance journalist
 - David Taylor – Editor of NLQ, New London Weekly & Velocity Magazine. Strategic consultant, ING Media
 - Denise Chevin MBE – Freelance editor and journalist. Former editor, Building
 - Dominic Morgan – Director, ING Media. Former deputy editor, Property Week
 - Emma Maier – Freelance editor and publishing consultant. Former editor Inside Housing
 - Giles Barrie – Senior Managing Director, FTI Consulting. Former editor of Property Week & Deputy Editor of Building
 - James Whitmore – Director, Tavistock. Former executive editor, Property Week
 - John Slaughter – Director of Industry Affairs, Home Builders Federation
 - Katherine Smale – Business Development Manager, Ferrovia. Former technical journalist, New Civil Engineer
 - Kunle Barker – Group Chairman, Studio Anyo. Presenter & Curator, Grand Designs Live
 - Mike Leonard – CEO, Building Alliance
 - Nick Duxbury – Group Creative Lead, Redwood BBDO. Former executive editor, Inside Housing
 - Phin Harper – Chief Executive, Open City and columnist at Dezeen. Former deputy editor, The Architectural Review
 - Rebecca Evans – Director of Impact and Communications, Revealing Reality. Former editor, Construction News
 - Richard Northedge – Finance writer. Former editor, Sunday Business.
 - Sarah Richardson – Group Editor, Research Professional News. Former editor, Building.
 - Tim Danton – Director, Danton Media, Consultant to Dennis Publishing
 - Vanessa Norwood – Architecture curator and consultant
 - Yasmin Jones-Henry – Cities Strategist - Culture & Place, ING Media
-

IBP HEADLINE SUPPORTER



MESSAGE FROM PAUL MARSHALL, MARLEY



As longstanding supporters of the IBP Awards, Marley is delighted to be sponsoring the 2022 Awards which recognise and celebrate outstanding journalism within the UK construction industry. We would like to congratulate all those who made the shortlist and look forward to meeting the 2022 winners.

IBP SUPPORTERS



THE SHORTLIST

New Journalist of the Year

Grainne Cuffe, Inside Housing (WINNER)
Daniel Gayne, Building
Rob Hakimian, New Civil Engineer
James Parkes, Dezeen
Tiya Thomas-Alexander, Construction News

Architectural Writer of the Year

Will Ing, Architects' Journal (WINNER)
Nat Barker, Dezeen
Lizzie Crook, Dezeen
Ben Flatman, Building Design
Fran Williams, Architects' Journal

Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Joshua Stein, Construction News (WINNER)
Will Ing, Architects' Journal
Dave Rogers, Building

Construction / Infrastructure Journalist of the Year

Rob Horgan, New Civil Engineer (WINNER)
Carl Brown, Building
Thomas Lane, Building
Joshua Stein, Construction News

Feature Writer of the Year

Peter Apps, Inside Housing (WINNER)
Jack Simpson, Inside Housing (HIGHLY COMMENDED)
Thomas Lane, Building
Thomas Lowe, Building
Jess McCabe, Inside Housing

Housing / Residential Property Journalist of the Year

Peter Apps, Inside Housing (WINNER)
Harry Scoffin, Leasehold Knowledge
Jack Simpson, Inside Housing

News Reporter of the Year

Will Ing, Architects' Journal (WINNER)
Jennifer Hahn, Dezeen
Jack Simpson, Inside Housing

Scoop of the Year

Jack Simpson, Inside Housing (WINNER)
Dave Rogers, Building
Ian Weinfass, Construction News

Editorial Brand of the Year

Dezeen (WINNER)
Architects' Journal
Building
The Developer
Housing Today
Inside Housing
New Civil Engineer

NEW JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

Grainne Cuffe

Inside Housing

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

The judges were impressed by the high standard of entries, which included many stories the sector needs to hear. There was however a clear winner, who impressed with their impassioned and painstaking reporting, revealing new and engaging angles on important national issues. Their highly inquisitive approach drew on a range of detailed sources, including the extensive use of Freedom of Information requests, demonstrating great journalistic craft and determination, coupled with the 'scoop factor'.

ITEM 1:

Revealed: how often are landlords really surveying the condition of their housing stock?

With disrepair scandal following disrepair scandal, it would seem like this was as important a time as ever for social landlords to have information on their stock. That is what Grainne thought anyway and decided to investigate. Using Freedom of Information to assess how much councils were checking their homes, the revelations were shocking, with a third of councils and ALMOS still doing only partial surveys of their blocks. Even more shocking, she also found that some councils had never done any full stock surveys. Grainne's feature weaves in hard data with engaging commentary analysing the history of stock condition surveys, why councils have different approaches and the potential repercussions of failing to have accurate information on the state of their homes. With council housing conditions fully in focus after the ITV investigation into Croydon's housing, the piece was extremely timely and added to the body of work showing the deteriorating condition of social housing stock, and landlords' lack of action in improving it. It not only highlights her deep knowledge of her own patch, the challenges facing the sector, but also her ability to unearth important issues that need to be addressed.

ITEM 2:

We're not stopping: an interview with the ITV journalist exposing poor housing conditions

Grainne's second piece showed a different side to her journalistic skills and her ability to ask the right questions and produce engaging and insightful copy. The biggest scandal facing the social housing sector in recent times is the horrific living conditions some tenants have been forced to endure. Since ITV launched its long-running investigation into the state of social housing in March 2021, journalist Daniel Hewitt and a small team have been exposing widespread disrepair issues and shameful practices by social landlords. Identifying him as a key figure to speak to help the sector to understand the issues it was facing, Grainne sought an interview with him. The powerful interview feature she produced highlighted what led to the extensive investigation, what Mr Hewitt has learned, the impact poor living conditions have on tenants, and explored what has happened in the sector to get to this point. It was one of Inside Housing's best read interview pieces in over two years, was on the front page of the December issue, and highlights Grainne's ability to ask the right questions and her ability to pull together compelling pieces, with a bit more colour compared to her hard hitting reporting and investigations.

ITEM 3:

Revealed: the rise in housing disrepair claims

In this third piece, Grainne Cuff gathered figures from multiple social landlords to show how housing disrepair claims have been rising over the past few years. She worked on a detailed breakdown of the figures, and examined why claims are on the rise and what can be done to halt this concerning trend.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

Revealed: how often are landlords really surveying the condition of their housing stock?

31 Aug 2022

With disrepair scandal following disrepair scandal, one of the key questions for the sector right now is: what condition are your homes really in? One answer is to do a stock condition survey. *Inside Housing's* exclusive research reveals how often councils are doing these surveys, and what they are surveying.



Image from inside the flat of Lewisham Homes tenant Mehdi Sheikh (picture: ITV)

Lewisham Homes tenant Mehdi Sheikh had been living in horrific conditions for nearly a year when ITV News' long-running investigation into housing conditions uncovered his story in September 2021.

Mr Sheikh's home was unliveable. His flat was flooded, black mould covered the walls, and an environmental health inspector found "100% chance of electrocution" at points in the property.

Mr Sheikh told ITV that he was on the "verge of a nervous breakdown".

The arm's-length management organisation (ALMO), which manages Mr Sheikh's home on behalf of Lewisham Council, had visited the flat, but it failed to fix the problem or move Mr Sheikh to a different property.

After the coverage, he was moved immediately and the social landlord apologised "unreservedly for [its] failings in this case".

It later emerged that Mr Sheikh was not the only Lewisham Homes tenant whose life was being blighted by damp and mould. In fact, the organisation had carried out a survey of its 19,000 homes between 2019 and 2020. This stock condition survey was completed six months before the leaks in Mr Sheikh's home started. The survey had aimed to inspect 100% of the landlord's properties inside and out – and in the final result, 70% of properties had an internal survey.

After collecting the data, the ALMO realised that a large number of its homes needed investment to bring them up to the Decent Homes Standard, while there was also a problem with damp and mould. It developed a plan, significant details of which emerged in January. Much of the work is now under way.

Margaret Dodwell, chief executive at Lewisham Homes, says: "Like a lot of people, we took a hard, cold look at ourselves after we were on ITV News. "And when we did... we were so glad we had the stock condition survey."

This was because when Mr Sheikh's case was highlighted, the ALMO had already done significant work on developing a plan to tackle disrepair. Using the data collected during the survey, it had created a register of homes that had problems with damp and mould so it could proactively go to the properties to deal with it. It also created a dedicated damp and mould team. A leak detection team was created directly as a result of Mr Sheikh's case.

Lewisham Homes now plans to do a rolling survey of its stock, aiming to inspect every property inside and out every five years. Before 2019-20, it had not carried out a significant stock condition survey in more than a decade. This isn't unusual. Councils like Crawley and Islington are in a similar position, while it has been 30 years for 3,000-home Tendring District Council.



Mehdi Sheikh was living in a leaking flat which is covered in mould (picture: ITV)

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

Quality of information

While what happened to Mr Sheikh is a story about one individual social landlord, when coupled with the wider problems uncovered by ITV News and housing activists like Kwajo Tweneboa, it raises serious questions about the quality of the information social landlords have about their stock. Lewisham Homes uncovered significant problems when it investigated, so what else is happening? And, crucially, just how hard are social landlords looking?

In an attempt to answer this question, Inside Housing sent a Freedom of Information request to all English councils and ALMOs. Now, for the first time, we can reveal precisely how often stock-owning councils are scrutinising the quality of the homes they own and manage.

So, what did our investigation find? The answer is something of a postcode lottery for tenants. Of the 102 council and ALMO landlords that responded, 38 said that they survey their homes on a rolling basis – that means inspecting 100% of stock internally and externally over a defined period of time (over the course of a three-year period, for example). This is the position that Lewisham Homes has now adopted.

The second-largest group (30) indicated they do partial surveys, relying on a sample of stock to assume the condition of the rest. This conceals a vast range in sample size, with some samples as low as 10%. Our tables in this story give a detailed breakdown of these ranges and find out which councils are adopting what approach.

A smaller proportion of local authorities (12) do full surveys – trying to survey 100% of homes in a short period of time and then repeating the process at a planned interval of time.

The rest are moving from partial surveys to rolling (11), or do not use surveys any more (six). Some of this latter group haven't carried out a survey for many years. Instead, they say they rely on repairs, maintenance programmes and void inspections to update their stock condition data. Tendring District Council, which follows this approach, said full stock condition surveys are of limited value as it "only provides a snapshot of information on our housing stock, which is not an effective use of our time and resources". A small number (three) do partial rolling surveys, mainly citing lack of resources to be able to do the full 100%. The remaining two councils did not provide full data.

What to look for

It is important to set out what kind of things social landlords are looking to examine as part of these surveys. Broadly speaking, councils and housing associations use them to understand the life-cycle of individual parts of tenants' homes, such as kitchens, bathrooms, roofs, windows and doors. If done well, this will help landlords accurately plan maintenance work, or identify any hazards that may need more urgent attention.

Given the obvious importance of stock condition surveys and the variation in approach and performance our investigation has uncovered, you would be forgiven for wondering at this point what kind of advice, if any, government has issued about their use.

In truth, it has been pretty vague. When the then- Labour government launched the Decent Homes Standard more than two decades ago, it did not issue specific guidance on what percentage of stock should be surveyed. It did stress that all types of property should be represented in the sample, rather than large samples of all the same type. Today, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities says "it is up to individual councils to decide how regularly stock condition surveys should be conducted".

When councils are facing rising legal disrepair cases across the country and a looming target to get homes to at least an Energy Performance Certificate Band C rating by 2030, are partial surveys sufficient?



Mould is everywhere in Mehdi Sheikh's home (picture: ITV)

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

Jon Slade, who leads on asset management and compliance at consultancy Campbell Tickell, argues that partial surveys are "sub-optimal".

"If I opened your wardrobe and picked out 20% of its contents at random, if I was unlucky, I'd pick out the 20% that were most worn and form an unfair view of how much wear your wardrobe had been subjected to," he says.

Mr Slade states that a "level of unhappiness" began to emerge among housing associations with the cloning approach about 10 years ago – leading to a shift towards rolling programmes of surveys.

"People felt that the risks that arise through cloning were levels of risk that they weren't content with.

"Generally, as an indicator of risk, the higher the cloning percentage, the higher the risk you are carrying," he adds.



Stock condition surveys are crucial for discovering issues such as damp and mould (picture: ITV)

Partial surveys

Some councils which do partial surveys say they are confident about the condition of their homes because they collect data in other ways, such as via repairs and maintenance programmes and void inspections. Some say the costs of surveying every home outweighs the benefits, while one says they do not want to disrupt residents' lives unnecessarily.

Paul Price, chief executive of the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH), says: "Clearly 100% full stock surveys are going to be the most accurate measure of stock condition."

But he says factors such as the accuracy of repairs recording, resident-generated repairs reporting systems, and typologies of stock will influence the frequency and depth of surveys.

"If you have a uniform stock typology in a specific area – the properties on a road or in a block are identical and were unmodified on the last survey – certain assumptions can be made about the condition of the stock," Mr Price says.

Councils and ALMOs which do full surveys, either one every few years or rolling programmes, say that they are essential when it comes to effective strategic asset management, identifying disrepair and planning for net zero.

One director of asset management at a large ALMO which has recently moved from a partial to a 100% five-year rolling programme, explains the decision.

"Lack of data – it's as simple as that. If we've got the stock condition [data], it allows us to plan more medium and long term. It's important that we are able to make those informed decisions going forward and we're targeting correct investment in the right areas," he says.

He says stock surveys are "key" for identifying issues with disrepair. "As part of the investment proposal, they are the first things that we challenge. If there are damp, mould, trip hazards, Category 1 hazards that come in, we react to them immediately and put works on the system for them to be done," he says.

That view is what prompted Lewisham Homes to attempt a full survey of its properties in 2019-20.

"We felt that we really needed to understand what our stock is like. We needed to understand how much it's going to cost to maintain it in the future, to understand which [of our assets] are performing well and which ones are going to cost a lot of money," Ms Dodwell tells Inside Housing.

Lewisham Homes says it will also use the data it collected to speed up repairs to windows and doors in homes with low energy efficiency ratings ahead of winter.

"Those properties might not be down to get a repair for two years, but that means two winters in a cost of living and energy crisis," says Sarah Willcox-Jones, director of repairs at the ALMO.

The cost of a full survey is not cheap. Ms Dodwell says it cost Lewisham Homes hundreds of thousands of pounds. She argues that if this then means the organisation can be more proactive in its approach to repairs, "it saves money in the longer term".

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

North London ALMO Barnet Homes is currently doing a full survey ahead of moving to a five year rolling programme for its 15,000 homes. Tim Mulvenna, its chief executive, says making long-term assumptions around stock investment has a big impact on the viability of "stretched" Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs).

"We knew that we needed to make sure the HRA is viable, to make sure that the money we're setting aside for planning works is the right amount of money.

"It's clearly an investment to do constant stock condition surveys... but it's worth it when you're putting together multimillion-pound tenders to have the right data," he says.

For South Derbyshire Council, which uses a five-year programme to survey its 3,000 homes, retrofitting is the main driver.

Paul Whittingham, head of housing services at the local authority, says: "What our experience in the past two years has taught us with retrofit is basically that the traditional stock condition surveys really are not fit for purpose."

The council was awarded £1.1m in the first wave of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF).

Mr Whittingham says it became clear during the application process that stock data needs to be far more robust than traditional surveys would collect.

"What we're learning is that actually to do the retrofit stuff properly, we're going to have to get our heads around doing some more intrusive surveys.

"It's going to be much more about ventilation, thermal efficiency, carbon footprint.

"It is quite a challenge. Other things like fixtures and fittings, kitchens, bathrooms etc can quite conceivably start to look a bit like second place behind all that stuff," he says.

When surveying properties, for example, the council found that some homes it believed to have cavity insulation had none at all when they drilled through the walls.

Mr Whittingham says: "You should be properly surveying your property once every five years.

"But that survey has got to look a bit different to what we've done up to now."

Horror stories like that of Mehdi Sheikh demonstrate why all social landlords need to ask themselves if they are sure their data really allows them be confident about the living conditions in their homes.

Responses from councils and ALMOs

An East Devon District Council spokesperson said: "East Devon District Council has recently started a full stock condition survey which will encompass 100 per cent of the housing services' property portfolio over the next 12 months. This includes 4,200 homes, plus other buildings, such as shops, garages, offices etc.

"Following this complex piece of work, we will be delivering this service in house on a rolling basis that will see surveys carried out in 20 per cent of the properties per annum, to ensure our stock data is always up to date.

"The survey will assist us in making appropriate decisions regarding the upgrading and retrofitting of our properties for all our tenants, and enable us to make the best possible use of resources."

Frances Umeh, cabinet member for housing and homelessness at Hammersmith & Fulham, said: "We need to understand the condition of our homes, both inside and out.

"That's why we're surveying every home we own over the next two years. Along with new energy and safety assessments, this will give us quality data to help accurately plan our £1m-a-week modernisation and refurbishment programme.

"We're determined to future-proof our existing homes for generations by enhancing safety measures, reducing the use of carbon and installing insulation to tackle fuel poverty, improving our repairs service, and increasing our resilience to climate change."

A spokesperson for Stoke-on-Trent City Council said: "Our housing stock condition surveys are conducted by Unitas.

"Unitas is the council's dedicated repairs and maintenance company that oversees the efficient maintenance of all housing stock owned by Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

"From 2018, full internal and external SCSs have been carried out by a team of in-house asset surveyors – there is a five-year rolling programme where c3,500 each year are surveyed and the asset management database updated.

"So at the end of each five-year 'cycle', all 100% of properties have been surveyed. The programme then repeats and rolls on."

Clare Golby, portfolio holder for housing and communities at Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, said: "Like most housing providers, we conduct stock condition surveys on a proportion of our stock, internal and external, in a given year.

"In this way we are able to update our stock condition information on a rolling basis. "We are, however, currently producing a specification for a full survey of our stock to be carried out in the next 12 months."

A spokesperson for Wandsworth Council said: "As part of the council's plan to greenup council homes, published 21 January 2022, Wandsworth is looking at a long-term plan to upgrade council house heating systems and make them more energy efficient.

"Part of this has included developing a long-term retrofit plan. Council properties will be surveyed to check what condition they are in and what needs to be done to meet the targets set out in the Wandsworth Environment and Sustainability Strategy.

"The council is currently undertaking a stock condition survey. The results and data are due to be back in early 2023.

"The information gathered from the stock condition survey of a 10% sample of tenanted homes (internal) and a 20% sample of blocks (external) will provide an indication of stock condition across the borough and identify dwellings which may be suitable for further evaluation/assessment/survey for retrofit improvements.

"The sample approach is correct where you have large numbers of tenanted blocks that are identical in terms of age, design and build.

"Future stock condition surveys will be carried out at a frequency to be discussed, subject to a range of other factors."

A spokesperson for Broxtowe Council said: "We agree that a full 100% stock condition survey would be beneficial.

"That said, we have a rolling programme of works that are ongoing on a yearly basis."

A spokesperson for Gateshead Council said: "Stock condition is a critically important dataset for an organisation in terms of business planning, investment, performance and viability decisions.

"But it must be maintained to ensure that its data value and accuracy are upheld.

"Gateshead has adopted the approach of a rolling programme of stock condition surveys that will see properties revisited on a roughly five-year inspection cycle.

"We anticipate all stock will be surveyed by the end of 2023. This will be achieved using an internal surveying resource.

"The use of partial datasets or cloning can provide a valuable insight into the performance and condition of a housing portfolio, particularly when combined with the analysis of other datasets, including repairs and maintenance performance.

"However, we appreciate that property conditions can vary greatly due social, economic and geographical factors. For this reason, Gateshead Council has decided to opt for collecting 100% stock condition and maintaining that through regular updating and reinspection."

An Ealing Council spokesperson said: "Our stock condition surveys look at 20% of our homes each time, on a rolling programme.

"All examples of the different types and locations of the homes we let are included in the surveys, to ensure they are representative both in terms of property types and the geography of the borough."

A Gosport Borough Council spokesperson said: "Gosport Borough Council uses every opportunity to gain data on the condition of its stock through repairs visits, void inspections, Energy Performance Certificate surveys and planned works surveys, not just relying on partial surveys.

"Using this approach gives the council confidence that it has broad knowledge of its housing stock condition."

A Charnwood Borough Council spokesperson said: "We are committed to providing the best possible homes for our tenants and we monitor the condition of our housing stock in a number of ways.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

"We survey all of our housing stock for compliance issues relating to gas and electricity. We also undertake a sample survey of our stock on a regular basis. When a property is void, a full survey of the property is undertaken by the in-house team."

A Dover Council spokesperson said: "We do recognise the importance of housing stock data, and continue to look into appropriate ways to obtain an accurate snapshot of our stock, to help shape future maintenance moving forward."

"Management of our housing stock was taken back in house in October 2020, and like other councils, we have faced challenges of accessing homes through the pandemic."

"Like all housing providers, we also have to strike a careful balance between undertaking sufficient surveys and avoiding unnecessary disruption to the lives of tenants."

"There are advantages and disadvantages to both periodic partial surveys and rolling surveys."

"We are currently exploring a blended approach that identifies the archetypes that comprise the stock, commissions a full conditions survey for a statistically significant sample of each archetype and uses these 'beacon' properties to inform planned maintenance and enhancement programmes."

Charlotte Cordingley, director of housing, property and corporate assets at Wigan Council, said: "By grouping properties in their architectural type and carrying out a survey on 10% of each group, we are able to carry out a systematic check of our housing stock in a cost-effective and efficient way."

"This ensures we have a representative picture of its condition and allows us to model what future works and investment will be needed."

"While this sample gives us an overview of our housing stock, we also have a dedicated repairs service which carries out repairs that are reported by our tenants and provides an inspection service to investigate and resolve complex issues."

An Islington Council spokesperson said: "Islington Council is committed to creating a more equal borough, where everyone has a place to call home that is secure, decent and genuinely affordable."

"As part of this, Islington Council operates a 'rolling' principle to keep stock condition surveys up to date. This operates as follows:

- When major works are completed, the council updates building components and life cycles accordingly in its stock condition survey database.
- The council visits properties seven years after works are complete to see when works are again required. Properties are generally reviewed again during the 10th year.
- The council updates records based on updates from its repairs services, such as voids, servicing contracts and boiler renewals.
- All of the above data is put into the council's SAP [Standard Assessment Procedure] calculator, and sent for third-party validation.
- The council is currently reviewing its tall blocks, in line with building safety case principles.

"The council feels that this constant updating of data provides accurate information on the council's full housing stock, and negates the need for large stock condition surveys."

"Earlier this year, the management of approximately 4,000 homes previously managed by [HA] Partners for Improvement came back in-house. The council did a 100% external and 50% internal stock condition survey of all street properties returning from Partners."

A spokesperson for Hinckley and Bosworth Council said: "The council maintains a good record of its stock condition data on the 'Promaster' stock condition database to manage the dwelling stock asset base."

"The stock condition database is populated with data from a stock condition survey commissioned in 2016, which surveyed 20% of all stock. This has since been updated in an opportunistic and periodic manner."

"Further review of stock data was commissioned in 2020 and work continues to ensure that comprehensive asset information is held and reviewed on an ongoing basis."

"Good systems are in place to ensure that stock condition data is updated as works to properties are completed."

"As yearly planned programmes of work are completed, the asset management software is automatically updated via an interface with the housing management system in order to provide an accurate renewal date of key components."

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

"This stock condition updating feature is one that many social landlords struggle to achieve, but a feature that has been in place in Hinckley and Bosworth for a number of years.

"Further confidence in stock data is ensured via the decent homes report produced on 1 April each year. This affords an opportunity to further scrutinise and rectify any information that is considered to be inaccurate.

"These and other measures ensure that we have a robust, up-to-date stock condition data to help plan our future investment priorities."

Connie Hockley, executive member for housing at Fareham Borough Council, said: "The council has aspirations to complete a 100% survey of its stock over time, and anticipates a further 20% survey within the next two years.

"Generally, the council uses surveyed and extrapolated data to programme works and maintains good living standards. This data is backed up by regular validation surveys, undertaken by our surveyors, to reduce inherent risks prior to contracting works."

A Southampton City Council spokesperson said: "Southampton City Council aims to complete a five-year rolling stock conditions survey, where resources permit.

"Stock condition information is captured using internal resources supported by external consultants and includes surveying both the external and the internal condition of dwellings. Southampton City Council uses cloned and partial surveys."

Steve Waddington, strategic director for housing at Hackney Council, said: "We recognise the importance of understanding the condition of our housing stock to enable effective investment decisions to be taken.

"While the cyber attack in 2020 has impacted how we collect our data, we are currently in the process of procuring a new stock condition survey."

A Crawley Council spokesperson said: "Our current conditions survey method is still to carry out partial stock surveys.

"These are carried out to all void properties and each time a surveyor makes a visit for routine maintenance (ie voids, kitchens, bathrooms, roofing, major works, damp surveys etc).

"This equates to approximately 15% of the stock being surveyed each year, which we feel represents a good mix across all the stock and gives adequate, accurate survey data.

"However, we are currently in the process of installing a new housing, repairs and asset management database, and we will be reviewing our asset management plans when we go live later in the year.

"That may lead to a change in our thinking with regards to asset surveys, but will be dependent on the outcome of our asset management plan review."

David Langhorne, assets and development director at Your Homes Newcastle, said: "We are committed to making sure the council's housing stock is evaluated so that homes are suitable for customers.

"In 2013, we completed the Modern Homes Programme, and since then we have continued to update stock condition surveys when work is completed either through a planned programme or when elements are replaced through repairs and maintenance."

Paul Honeywood, cabinet member for housing at Tendring District Council (TDC), said a full stock condition was only of limited use but the condition of properties was known through the regular inspection and maintenance regime – as well as through work to look at carbon reduction across the portfolio.

"A full stock condition survey only provides a snapshot of information on our housing stock, which is not an effective use of our time and resources.

"We hold a variety of data built up from regular and routine visits to our properties – such as for gas safety checks, alarm maintenance and checks, or for checking empty homes – which provides a much better picture of the state of our portfolio than a one-off check.

"We have allocated funding to carry out a further, archetype-based stock survey in the coming year to ensure we understand any potential risks and requirements around the types of properties we own, and will of course continue with our responsive checks and maintenance to ensure the ongoing high quality of housing for our tenants.

"All of this is in addition to the work we do to ensure quality within the private sector too, recognising the importance of good housing to wider health and quality of life outcomes."

The council said a survey of council tenants conducted in autumn 2021 found 84% of residents were very or fairly satisfied with the quality of their home and 83% were similarly satisfied with repairs and maintenance, while overall satisfaction with the service provided by TDC as a landlord was 86%.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

Stephen Conway, executive member for housing at Wokingham Council, said: "We decided to do a full survey of all of our housing stock as we hadn't done a full survey in a number of years and as we are creating a new database of our housing, this gives us up-to-date information on all our stock to start the new database with."

"We are also doing energy surveys of all our housing properties at the same time, looking to reduce the carbon footprint of our housing."

"We started the programme last year and so far we have surveyed 1,853 of our rental houses and flats, 139 of our sheltered accommodation flats, and 229 flats and houses owned by our local housing company. We anticipate finishing the surveys this September."

John Smart, project officer for the stock condition survey at South Kesteven Council, said: "I can confirm that the survey was a full 100% stock condition survey and the benefits are that all our data is accurate for project plans rather than 'assumed', which can cause issues in the future/middle of a project."

A St Albans City and District Council spokesperson said: "The benefits are a more complete dataset to help produce short, medium and long-term asset management plans, including scope of works and joinedup strategies."

"They also provide relevant and accurate data to help with energy strategies."

A Darlington Council spokesperson said: "We have always successfully done partial surveys on a periodic basis and properties are carefully selected for each survey so they accurately reflect the condition of our stock."

"We undertake routine stock condition checks on an ongoing basis to ensure the quality of data is accurate."

"We acknowledge there are risks in doing this, but due to the work carried out to target appropriate reflective properties of the whole housing stock, the percentage identified is a suitable sample size, supported by the ongoing review."

"However in acknowledgement of those risks, we are looking to introduce a 100% stock survey continuous rolling programme."

Ian Gardner, director of property services at Wolverhampton Homes, said: "The previous major Decent Homes investment programmes delivered by Wolverhampton Homes did provide assurance regarding the company's baseline position and there has also been investment in new asset management systems to enhance the accuracy of future scenario modelling and data management."

"Wolverhampton Homes will be launching a full stock condition validation survey over the next five years, and subject to the findings of this five-year programme, the company may consider moving to a 100% stock inspection programme over a rolling 10-year cycle, or a variable cycle based on archetype."

A Barking and Dagenham Council spokesperson said: "To ensure the council's stock condition information is up to date, we are moving towards a five-year rolling survey programme so that 20% of the stock is surveyed annually, rather than undertaking a single full stock survey every five years."

"We've found undertaking 100% stock condition surveys at any one time presents challenges in terms of potential disruption to tenants, and in our case, 80% of our residential stock has already received internal works such as new kitchens, bathrooms and boilers over the past 10 years."

"The five-year rolling programme also gives us a more current view of our residential stock, which better informs our approach to maintaining properties through our Stock Investment Programme, and helps us to efficiently identify where energy-related improvements might be required."

A Lambeth Council spokesperson said: "Lambeth has more than 33,000 council homes and our priority is ensuring all of these are safe and well-maintained for our tenants."

"Over the past 12 years, we have seen significant cuts in government funding, the withdrawal of Decent Homes grant funding and enforced rent reductions, which have reduced the amount the council is able to borrow to fund refurbishment or retrofit."

"But we have invested hundreds of millions of pounds in improving our council homes and estates in recent years, in line with the Lambeth Housing Standard."

"Lambeth commenced our stock condition surveys on 9 May and, by 5 August, we had completed approximately 5,000 surveys. We have a target to undertake 13,000 actual surveys by the end of December this year."

"The surveys will not use cloned data; these are on-site surveys. The information obtained will assist Lambeth in producing its asset management strategy and investment requirements for our housing stock."

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

'We're not stopping': an interview with the ITV journalist exposing poor housing conditions

13 Dec 2021



Daniel Hewitt, a political correspondent at ITV News

Over the past eight months, Daniel Hewitt and a small team at ITV News have been investigating social housing conditions across England. What they have found has often been shocking. Grainne Cuffe asks him what he has learned and where the investigation is going next. Photography by Sam Mellish



The Regina Road Estate was one of the first to be investigated

"It was like a house of horrors." ITV News journalist Daniel Hewitt stands outside a block in South Norwood, south London, with Inside Housing on a bleak morning. Thanks to his work, we know that conditions inside the building are even less hospitable.

This block on Regina Road, owned and run by Croydon Council, is where an investigation that has brought shame on the sector started for Mr Hewitt.

One of the tenants he met on his first visit to the estate was Fransoy Hewitt. Footage of her flat revealed the appalling conditions that she and her two sons were living in: walls covered in thick black mould and damp so bad the carpet squelched under her feet. Water leaked from lights and into sockets, leading her to unplug her fridge to avoid electrocution. Ms Hewitt had been complaining to the council for 18 months.

Her flat was not the only one. Many residents in the block and in another across the road had repeatedly complained to the council about the state of their homes. He might not have known it at the time, but for Mr Hewitt and his colleagues, that first report was the start of an odyssey that would go on to highlight cases of poor social housing conditions across England.

Rightly, this is the story that everyone who lives and works in social housing has been talking about this year. Inside Housing meets with Mr Hewitt to find out what lessons he thinks need to be learned, what he thinks of the response so far and where he plans to take the investigation next.

Opening an investigation

Early on during the interview, Mr Hewitt asks that the rest of the ITV team – Sophie Alexander, Imogen Barrer, Sarah O'Connell – are mentioned. "The idea that I've done this by myself is ludicrous," he says, later adding that ITV management "deserve an enormous amount of credit" for committing resources to the investigation.

For Mr Hewitt and the ITV News team, the investigation began to take shape at the end of 2020, when he made a pitch to his boss about doing more stories on housing. It was an idea that had been eating away at him since an investigation into child poverty in the North West in 2017 revealed that the conditions of people's homes were often poor.

"We hadn't really focused on that element [housing conditions] of it... even though it was clearly a massive problem for families. Often it was the thing that was making them most frustrated, or ill, or angry, and yet we never really talked about it," Mr Hewitt explains.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

The pitch was successful. Ms O'Connell, Mr Hewitt's producer at the time, said he should follow up on an older story ITV had covered in Croydon, south London, on housing problems. The tenant involved suggested he go to Regina Road.

After taking photos, we move to a cafe near the estate. Over a tea, Mr Hewitt reveals how he felt when he saw Ms Hewitt's flat. "It was the most angry I've ever been as a journalist, as a human being," he states.

"Walking into that flat and seeing not just appalling, squalid conditions, but the fact that it was quite obviously dangerous and Fransoy was living there with her two little boys."

It was the smell and the cold of Ms Hewitt's home which Mr Hewitt says have stuck with him – as well as knowing that repairs teams had been round and she had called the council over and over again.

"I remember thinking that I couldn't live in this for a day, never mind for months and months and months," Mr Hewitt adds.

After being exposed, Croydon Council apologised and moved Ms Hewitt – she was offered a new permanent home a week later. The council launched an independent inquiry and, in May, a damning report concluded that Croydon and its repairs services contractor Axis had "failed to deliver even basic 'core' housing services", while there was a "poor operating culture with a lack of care and respect for tenants".

After the report, ITV was flooded with emails from people across the country living in similar conditions; their mental and physical health often severely affected.

"If you could bottle the dignity and resilience of the people we've spoken to and sell it, you'd make a lot of money, because they have to put up with so much more than most people," Mr Hewitt says. "Everything about their lives starts to crumble and fall apart. How can a child go to school and do well educationally when their home is riddled with damp and is wet and leaking?"

"Families have had their lives completely destroyed by this," he adds.

Mr Hewitt found throughout his investigation that residents felt they were looked down on, not listened to and not respected. Some believed they were treated worse or ignored because of their ethnicity.

Another part of his investigation, published last month, revealed that racism is "rife" at an unnamed London council, with a whistleblower saying that housing department managers were making racially motivated judgements about tenants, were dismissive of their complaints and blamed them for the problems.

This followed an Inside Housing story into how race affects housing conditions, which found that white residents are less likely to be living in a damp home.



The smell and the cold of a flat at the Regina Road block in Croydon are what stuck with Daniel Hewitt when he first visited residents

What is Mr Hewitt's opinion about how councils and housing associations have responded to his stories? Although he does give one example of a positive response – Bromford – he says that most responded in broadly similar ways: apologising but "defensively" claiming the cases were "isolated".

"It's almost trying to paint them as if they're the problem, rather than actually saying 'we've got a problem that we need to solve at our organisation'.

"Hundreds of people were contacting us from housing associations and councils across the country every single week, leading to thousands.

"During our investigation, we could have run a piece every single night on this," he explains.

He says one common response has been asking why ITV is not focusing on private landlords, which are allegedly "worse".

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

The answer? People “expect better of social housing”, says Mr Hewitt. “If people in the social housing sector are treating tenants like that... they just lose all hope that anyone is ever going to treat them well.”

“And because people often don't have anywhere else to go, when they complain there's a sense of ‘what's the urgency, they're not going to leave’. Whether it's unconsciously, there is potentially this culture that's seeped in of ‘we don't need to rush this’ – and that's a really dangerous conclusion to come to.”

Findings and feelings

Does Mr Hewitt believe social landlords have lost sight of their core purpose? He says he is no expert.

“What I would say is that it's quite clear that there's a pattern of treating tenants like the problems that they're living with are their own fault.

“And there's a culture of not actually listening to what they're saying. There is a culture of not taking their complaints seriously,” he says.

He adds that a big part of the problem is poor record-keeping. “The amount of people I've spoken to who said they rang up seven or eight times about this and every single time they've had to explain the problem again. Do you know how frustrating that is?”

There is also a feeling of “us and them” among tenants, he states. When interviewed by Mr Hewitt for his investigation, then-housing secretary Robert Jenrick suggested that pay at some housing associations was “out of control”.

Mr Hewitt is reticent to give his personal opinion on pay. However, referring to Clarion chief executive Clare Miller being given a £50,000 bonus this year, he says this has led to some tenants feeling that there is a disconnect between what is happening on the ground and in the boardroom. Clarion's Eastfields Estate in Mitcham, south London, was the subject of one of ITV's exposés.

In terms of the wider learning that should be taken from his investigation, Mr Hewitt says the blame does not lie solely with social landlords. There is not enough social housing, the quality of stock is poor and some demolition will be necessary, he states.

Local authority funding has been slashed over the past decade, although when Mr Hewitt questioned Mr Jenrick about that, he said the poor conditions have “nothing to do” with cuts and were instead caused by “a lack of compassion and poor management in a small number of councils and housing associations”.



Daniel Hewitt explains to Inside Housing's Grainne Cuffe that ITV heard from thousands of people across the country

What did Mr Hewitt think of that? “I wasn't surprised, but if you looked at the past decade and suggest that austerity to the council budget had nothing to do with council performance in housing, it's stretching reality to the nth degree,” he says.

Regardless of what led to it, disrepair is a significant problem facing social landlords today. Following ITV's coverage, the Housing Ombudsman launched an investigation into damp and mould. The subsequent report accused social landlords of creating a “culture of blame” for tenants living in squalid conditions and urged them to take a zero-tolerance approach to the problem.

What did Mr Hewitt think of the findings? “I was surprised by how blunt it was... He [housing ombudsman Richard Blakeway] actually said we've got a problem and we need to sort it out.

“But why has it taken our investigation for the ombudsman to come out and say that publicly?” This is frustrating given there has been a “systemic failure across the whole sector”.

What does Mr Hewitt think the solution is? For starters, a national body that represents social tenants is urgently needed, he argues. “If there was a national body funded by the state that meant that when these problems occurred, the alarm would have been raised, I don't think we would be sat here having this conversation.”

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

This, of course, is something Inside Housing, along with other organisations, such as housing charity Shelter, have long been calling for. To date, there has been little sign of action from the government.

Mr Hewitt says focus on the sector needs to stay at the forefront in the national media, while progress on implementing the Social Housing White Paper needs to speed up. "The government talks a very good game about learning the lessons of Grenfell and our investigation. But where is the action? It would be hard not to draw the conclusion that it's not a priority."

And what about the future of the investigation? The answer will not come as a surprise: "We're not stopping. We plan to continue to shine a light on the treatment of tenants and the conditions they are living in, and keep questioning what is being done about it."

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

Revealed: the rise in housing disrepair claims

13 Dec 2021



New figures gathered by Inside Housing show how housing disrepair claims against social landlords have been rising over the past few years. Grainne Cuffe reveals a breakdown of the figures, why claims are on the rise and what can be done to halt this concerning trend.

My little boy is still sharing a room with me – he’s 10 years old and has never had his own room because his is smothered with damp and rot,” says Mary* (not her real name). Mary is a Lambeth Council tenant. She has lived on the Leigham Court Estate for two decades. During that time she has suffered with leaks, damp, mould and cracks in the walls. The cost of keeping warm in winter has put her up to £3,000 in debt.

Despite many requests for repairs, nothing was done. Two years ago, feeling she had no other option, Mary went to Citizens Advice. She met a solicitor and with his help brought a legal disrepair claim against Lambeth. The council agreed to settle and pay £10,000 in compensation. But Mary’s problems remain. In fact, she has so far refused to take the money because so many issues with her home remain outstanding. “I feel like if I take it, they might not do it,” she tells Inside Housing. “I wish – and this is the God’s honest truth – that they had used that money to fix this house.”

Mary is not alone – neither on her estate nor in Lambeth. Many residents in her shoes are also turning to lawyers. This translates into large sums of money for the local authority. Last November, Lambeth revealed that the number of disrepair claims being brought against it had increased by 600% in four years. It was paying out on average £3m a year for damages, opposition legal fees and its own defence costs. It set out an action plan to deal with the issue.

Nationwide trend

Figures gathered by Inside Housing show that this is a nationwide trend. Across 70 English councils that own their own stock, there have been nearly 17,000 disrepair claims in the past five years, with more than £55.1m paid out. However, the figures will be much higher because about 100 councils did not provide data.

There has also been an exponential rise. Legal costs nearly doubled between 2017-18 and 2020-21 (and our overall total includes figures for part of 2021-22), while the number of cases increased by 132%. Of the councils that provided data for every year, 91% saw an increase in costs, while 93% saw an increase in cases.

The issue appears to be most acute in the capital. Of the 29 boroughs (including the City of London) that own and manage housing stock, 12 provided costs – more than £39m spent on claims since 2017-18, and 17 provided the number of cases – nearly 8,000 and up 135%. It is also primarily an urban problem: the 13 London boroughs plus Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield represent £48m, 89% of total costs. The 11 London councils that provided figures for every year saw costs increase by 53% from £6.4m to nearly £10m in 2020-21.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

What is driving this surge in claims? One explanation would be the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which came into full force in England in March 2020. This law required all landlords in England to maintain their properties to meet minimum standards of human habitation – and aimed to protect tenants by giving them the power to take legal action against landlords they believe are not doing so.

But blaming this act is too simplistic. The start of the increase in cases can be traced back to 2013, when legal aid for disrepair cases was effectively scrapped.

"Once legal aid stopped, you were always going to see a growth in 'no win, no fee'-type work," says specialist barrister Justin Bates, who co-wrote the Homes Act.

2013 also saw changes to personal injury claims – where many 'no win, no fee' lawyers had previously made their living. The so-called Jackson Reforms, named after Sir Rupert Jackson, the judge who proposed them, stopped legal firms being able to recuperate success fees from the losing party. Instead, they came from the damages paid to the claimant, with fees capped at 25%.

There is no such limit on disrepair claims. According to Giles Peaker, a partner at Anthony Gold and another co-author of the Homes Act, this "exacerbated" the movement of 'claims farmer'-type lawyers into disrepair.

"That is not good because tenants are being charged extortionate success fees," he says. Indeed, in its report, Lambeth said tenants were handing over up to 80% of their compensation to these firms.

But this is not to say that the disrepair claims are bogus. Donna McCarthy, head of housing management and property litigation at law firm Devonshires, estimates that eight out of 10 claims that she deals with for landlords would be "valid" if dealt with in court.

Nonetheless, since the reduction in legal aid, the number of spurious claims has increased. Ms McCarthy, who represents social landlords, says the rules around getting legal aid before it was cut were "stringent".

£10,000 - Compensation offered to Mary* by Lambeth Council

600% - Disrepair claims increase against Lambeth in four years

17,000 - Disrepair claims across 70 English councils over five years

"That acted as a filter for claims that were more spurious," she says. If a tenant had a legal aid certificate, "99 times out of 100, there was merit in that claim". "Now I would say that for every 10 [claims], two of them are usually spurious," she says.

"Disrepair claims coming from them [claims farmers] are often of less merit. The way they operate seems to be designed to maximise their ability to recover costs, not to get the best results for their clients," she says.

Ms McCarthy adds that firms are paying to be at the top of Google searches when tenants type in 'disrepair' and the name of their landlord.

"From that people get drawn into legal representation where they might not otherwise have done it. I have clients who are on the South Coast who have tenants being represented by a firm in Liverpool," she says.

Dorota Pawlowski, managing associate at Trowers & Hamblins, says that a few years ago, disrepair represented about 20% of her caseload. "Now it's about 85%," she says, adding that it is "increasing year on year".

She agrees that it is not the new legislation causing the increases. "The majority of the claim is still based around [the prior legislation]," she says. "Some solicitors are bringing in more claims through the Fitness Act, but there is also an overlap between disrepair and fitness for human habitation. I personally think it's a coincidence."

Claims farmers moving into the market may be driving up cases, but the root of the problem is arguably the most obvious – that tenants feel they have to take legal action because they are living in disrepair and nothing is being done about it.

ITV's ongoing investigation has revealed some of the appalling living conditions people are forced to endure. A key feature of that reporting has been the struggle residents face trying to have the issue dealt with through the landlords' own channels.

Recently, the Housing Ombudsman published a special report on Lambeth Council, revealing key themes of poor record-keeping, delays or failing to respond to complaints, and failings in responding to repairs.

Lack of investment

So, why are councils struggling? Lack of funding is the main reason offered up.

Grainne Cuffe - New Journalist of the Year

Outside of the Decent Homes Programme for some local authorities, there has been precious little investment in council housing stock since the council housebuilding booms of the postwar decades, beyond the rent paid by residents. These properties are reaching a stage in their life cycle where the lack of investment is starting to bite.

There have also been more recent pressures. London Councils estimates that the four-year, 1% rent reduction for tenants means that rental income for boroughs in the capital in 2021-22 is £459m lower than it would have been had it not been imposed.

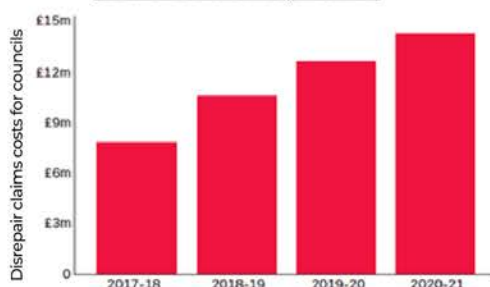
Darren Rodwell, executive member for housing and planning at London Councils, tells Inside Housing that boroughs "want to provide top-quality social housing", but that "years of government under-investment means we're seeing all sorts of problems piling up in the capital's ageing housing stock".

Associations are treated as private bodies and are therefore not subject to the Freedom of Information Act, meaning we were unable to obtain comparable figures on their costs. But Ms Pawlowski tells Inside Housing that the "story is the same across the board".

Housing ombudsman Richard Blakeway says the problem "reinforces the importance of the complaints process" for resolving residents' issues. "If services aren't responding to meet [tenants'] expectations and they are going through the courts to resolve that, that is a real missed opportunity for the complaints process to address because it can do so more comprehensively, potentially more quickly, and less adversarially without the costs to the residents or landlord," he says.

There is also an upcoming change in the law. Lord Justice Jackson wants to reform disrepair claims like he did with personal injury, introducing fixed recoverable costs (FRC), with one level of set fees for fast track claims (those up to a value of £25,000) and another for those valued between £25,000 and £100,000. The legislation is expected in about 12 to 18 months, but Mr Bates has a stark warning for any landlords that support the plans.

Costs of councils disrepair claims



Source: Inside Housing research

He says: "Claims farmers will just find a way of getting the claims out of the fixed-cost rules. And if you restrict the costs recoverable, the only people who are going to stay involved in doing housing disrepair work are claims farmers who will do these things in enormous bulk. They are the only ones who will have the economies of scale to make this work. And given that most social landlords I know detest claims farmers with a passion, I wouldn't have thought they'd want to support a scenario whereby their business model is going to be the only business model that can survive."

So, what is the answer? One could be money. In 2018, Theresa May's government lifted the cap on councils borrowing against their Housing Revenue Accounts. This means there is finally a source of money available to invest in improving the stock – albeit one limited by how much they can afford to borrow.

Lambeth's plan to tackle its issues sets out 16 actions, including creating a new alternative dispute resolution process whereby it would contract two barristers for the north and south of the borough to hear and award cases.

A spokesperson says: "The council is introducing an arbitration scheme for disrepairs, as tenants' rents currently fund rising costs and compensation. An investment of £600,000 into the process will then seek to reduce the overall bill to tenants and redirect funds to deliver frontline services to tenants."

The council estimates that the new process will cost about £3,000 per case, compared with the current average of £6,500 per case. Other actions include developing a planned maintenance programme that targets the prevention of disrepair and allocating additional resources to speed up remedial works.

For Mr Peaker, the bottom line for landlords is that if there are a significant number of claims coming in, then "there are a significant number of cases of disrepair".

He says: "If people are bringing bad claims, fight it. If it's a good claim, get in there, do the work and settle it quickly because otherwise it's going to cost you."

ARCHITECTURAL WRITER OF THE YEAR

Will Ing

Architects' Journal

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

The winning writer's articles were praised by judges for their impact and relevance to their audience. They offered insightful analysis into deeply important topics, in particular the state of the industry's performance across sustainable design, carbon and conservation.

ITEM 1:

Is the boom in green roofs and living walls good for sustainability?

I'd spotted and tracked an emerging trend of ambitious greening projects – and corresponding hyperbolic claims – on commercial building going through planning. The proposals seemed at odds with my first-hand experience of green walls around London, most of which were dead. As well as appealing to architects' interest in new aesthetics and cutting-edge design, the article points to some of the most urgent issues of our time: climate change, biodiversity loss and the need to make cities more habitable. The resulting article is thorough: filled with statistics and facts about the topic, as well as how it is promoted through planning policies. It is also nuanced: it includes several opinions on different types urban greening. And it does not sit on the fence: it concludes that thoughtfully designed living walls, and especially green roofs, are urgently needed in cities – but greenwash and grandiloquent claims are not. My interest in this article eventually inspired 'urban greening' theme for an issue of our magazine, with a green wall on the front cover and another related article by Ella Jessel on why green walls commonly die.

ITEM 2:

The Elizabeth line: Woolwich station by Weston Williamson + Partners

This building study was part of the AJ's wider coverage of the opening of Crossrail: hence a title and sub-heading which gave little away to the reader before they plunge in. While the line's long-overdue opening was a momentous event in London, I found Woolwich Station, the penultimate terminus on the south-east branch of the line, underwhelming. That's a view I tried to get this across to our readers, in this lengthy and in-depth critique. The review is backed up by technical descriptions and an understanding of how a building is designed to work, providing an informed professional readership with plenty of scope to make up their own minds on a project. I decided to start the article at the front of the building even though – unlike most buildings – visitors to a tube station may first enter it from its belly before leaving via its mouth. Ultimately, as I alluded to, a lot of people may never really notice the entrance of this building. But, away from the sparse decoration of the bowels, it was the element given the great consideration during design work.

ITEM 3:

Central Hill: residents challenge architects to rethink demolition

Architecture is the ever-present backdrop to this piece about the social impact which estate demolition – and the threat of demolition – has on residents and communities. It's also a story about how renowned modernist housing from the 1970s is already becoming fodder for bulldozers. But most of all it's a piece about architects' responsibility to the public – and whether the sector is really reassessing its work in the light of climate change. Despite this, and very unusually for an AJ news feature, it does not feature the voice of any architects. That's not entirely by design: all the practices shortlisted to masterplan a replacement development felt unable to comment during a live procurement process. But the relative absence of professional voice provided space for ordinary people to express their views on their built environment. Interestingly, they were much more radical and imaginative about the need for re-use than the architects. Unlike other news features, it also included observations and physical descriptions from the estate to try and bring it to life for readers – an endeavour which was admittedly much-aided by the photographer which accompanied me on my visit.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

Is the boom in green roofs and living walls good for sustainability?

21 Oct 2021

The green building boom

With living walls on skyscrapers and offices sprouting rooftop forests, green buildings have never been so popular. Will Ing examines whether this is the future of sustainable design or just PR greenwash, while Ella Jessel reports on why some green walls fail

Vegetation is returning to our cities. The trend started with rooftop planters on City banks in the 2000s, before spreading to the occasional green wall on a luxury hotel. Now, entire urban blocks are being transformed with ever-more ambitious plant projects.

Heatherwick Studio and BIG's new headquarters for Google at King's Cross promises a grass-laden 'plateau', two 'tree walkways', a 'garden' and even a 'headland' on its roof. Eric Parry's latest City of London skyscraper will have a 26-storey green wall while KPF's 70 Gracechurch Street will have planted terraces on more than 25 storeys.

Not to be outdone, an extension to Blackfriars Crown Court by Studio RHE will be topped with a 100-tree 'forest'. In Salford, construction has started on an 11-storey office building by Make, which will feature a green wall façade around glazing. And another KPF office building in London's Victoria will boast 2,800m² of green space, including a rooftop 'urban farm' with 'community allotments'.

This recent crop of verdant buildings is partly being driven by the demand for blingy – and greener – offices. Even before coronavirus, big companies were looking for offices that offered more than desk space, as well as a base from which to woo clients.

But there is more to the story than office wellness. Plants have a powerful ability to lower temperatures in cities, as well as make buildings more habitable through noise reduction, air filtration and creating attractive places. They are also crucial for improving the UK's biodiversity.



KPF and Henning Larsen's 105 Victoria Street

COMDBOX FOR BENTALLGREENOAK

In June, a report by the Climate Change Committee called for the government to urgently tackle heat-related deaths in homes by specifically encouraging measures such as better shading and green cover in cities.

And a report published by the RSPB and WWF this month said green walls and green roofs should be more widely adopted due to the 'vital role' they play in flood reduction, heating and cooling buildings, improving biodiversity and filtering air pollution.

There is now an array of planning policies and environmental agendas pushing for green elements to be included in most new-build projects.

But as green add-ons become a 'must-have', these big-money commercial projects are coming under increasing scrutiny. Critics argue rooftop gardens can't neutralise the huge carbon emissions of building a new concrete and steel tower. So are claims around sustainability just marketing greenwash? Or are tree-lined luxury terraces and green walls on skyscrapers genuinely helping the planet?

In the UK, the trend towards greening buildings started with green roofs in the 2000s – notably in the City of London. There is now more than 5.8m² of green roof per inhabitant in the Square Mile. Green walls came later, during the early 2010s, initially as luxury showpieces for hotels, shopping centres and high-end offices.

The impetus spread from continental Europe, where countries such as Germany had already begun exploring contemporary roof gardens and green walls – the latter invented in its modern-day form by Parisian botanist Patrick Blanc in the late 1990s. Despite starting as luxury items, they have rapidly become integrated into other buildings to improve spaces.

This has been spurred on in the capital by the mayor of London's provisions for greening in the London Plan – and the creation, in 2019, of the Urban Greening Factor by the Greater London Authority (GLA) to measure the quantity and quality of greening on a development proposal during the planning process.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year



Green wall on the B Bar in Westminster

Climate experts say plants are key to combatting the effects of climate change and making cities more livable. The UK Green Building Council has called for all new buildings and infrastructure to have 'nature-based solutions' by 2030 – to ensure they remain hospitable as cities heat up over the coming decades.

This is because plants absorb heat and cool down their surrounding air. Studies show that green walls can be up to 32°C cooler than conventional walls, and reduce air temperature around them by up to 4°C.

Urban greening is also key to boosting biodiversity, which is important for fighting climate change, making ecosystems resilient to change, and helping protect the 15 per cent of UK species that are threatened with extinction.

A recent example of this was the discovery of a small-flowered tongue orchid – previously believed to be extinct in the UK – on the roof garden of investment bank Nomura, in the City of London. The manager of the garden, who found the plant earlier this year, believes orchid seeds could have reached the bank after flying on the wind from mainland Europe.

Plants also absorb carbon from the atmosphere – a tree absorbs around 5.5kg of carbon dioxide a year, while 1m² of green wall can absorb up to 2kg a year.

And they remove harmful toxins from the air, such as nitrogen dioxide, helping to tackle the UK's air pollution, responsible for around 32,000 deaths every year, according to Public Health England.

Greenery also makes cities nicer to live in. People have an innate connection to nature and are happier when they are around it. Heatherwick Studio founder Thomas Heatherwick says he designs greenery on buildings to 'create a more human experience'.

Heatherwick, whose practice is working on the near-complete 1000 Trees project in China, featuring hundreds of structural planter-like columns, says: 'It's too easy to misinterpret the integration of plants into buildings as only being about trying to solve the climate crisis. The large quantity of plants on our studio's 1000 Trees project in Shanghai certainly do sequester significant amounts of carbon from the atmosphere.'

'However, our starting point was to prioritise the public experience of living in a harsh existing context of soulless buildings.'

He adds: 'As well as breaking up the monotony of endless monolithic buildings, many studies, such as Rachel and Stephen Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory, help us understand the extent to which nature can improve our mental health and ability to focus and concentrate.'

'When developers embrace the power of bringing nature into their projects, there is a generosity that should be recognised as a valuable contribution to long-lasting public enrichment.'



Morris+Company's designs for hanging gardens in Paddington Central

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

There are broadly two types of greenery used on today's buildings: horizontal planting includes roof gardens and planted terraces, which can feature anything from grass to trees; and green walls, which incorporate shrubs, flowers and grasses planted vertically in soil or a hydroponic system.

Maintenance-heavy green walls tend to be less sustainable than roof gardens or other landscaping. 'Rooftop forests have a greater positive impact on air quality and carbon capture than living walls, due to their size, scale, far greater longevity and impact,' argues Clive Nichol, chief executive of developer Fabrix, which is redeveloping the former Blackfriars Crown Court with Studio RHE and Harris Bugg Studio.

The building, including a new rooftop extension, will be topped with 100 trees and a total of 10,000 plants in more than 1,000 tonnes of soil.

'It takes a lot of resources – water, materials and energy – to keep living walls in good condition, which is far less sustainable than a natural ecosystem,' he says. 'Too often, living walls are used as dressings rather than being at the very core of a project.'

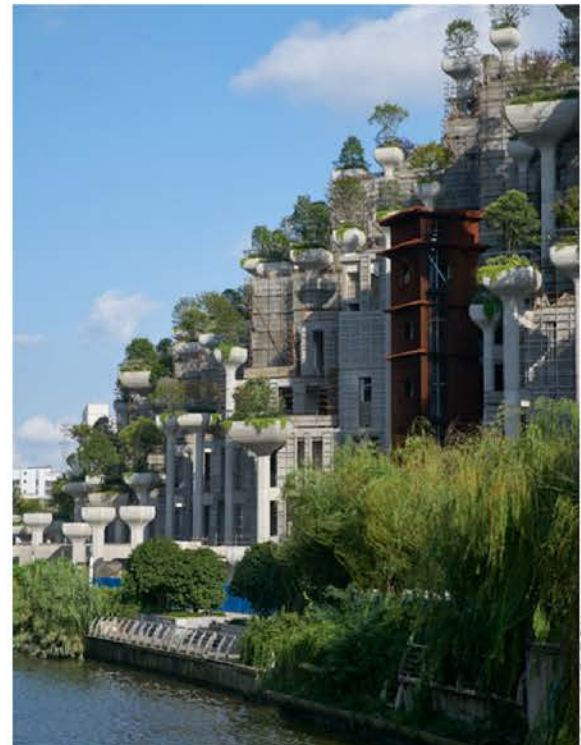
But advocates of green walls argue that all the different types of green infrastructure are needed.

Typically, most plants prefer growing from the ground; an effective irrigation system and careful maintenance is needed to keep most green walls alive. Plants can thrive much more easily in a flat bed of soil.

However, the green walls occupy vertical areas – of which there are an abundance in cities – rather than valuable horizontal space. They are therefore a way of maximising greenery on a site and can be used instead of losing density by landscaping around a building.

Peter Massini, director at Future Nature Consulting and former head of green infrastructure at the GLA – where he spearheaded the creation of the Urban Greening Factor – admits that 'green walls are a poor cousin to green roofs'.

Yet he acknowledges their value – especially the more recent attempts.



1000 Trees project in Shanghai, China by Heatherwick Studio

NOAH SHELDON

'[Though] the early ones all failed,' he says, 'in the last five years, companies have developed systems which are pretty robust and resilient – and they also offer good maintenance contracts. The risk of failure is pretty small now, so green walls have certainly got a role to play.'

The environmental footprint of green walls varies depending on freshwater use, operational carbon use for irrigation and maintenance, and the embodied carbon of plants, parts and – if used – fertiliser.

Ambitious green walls stretching over several floors, such as those planned on some forthcoming skyscrapers, are likely to use a considerable supply of fresh water – as there will not be enough water harvested on the site to look after all the plants. They will also use more operational energy than most green walls to transport water up and down storeys.

Green walls also vary in biodiversity quality. An article in *Landscape*, the journal of the Landscape Institute, studied an abandoned green wall that had a greater biodiversity than most carefully maintained green walls – as nature took its course and insects and birds moved in.

'We have to design more living walls with a different understanding of nature as slightly scruffy,' says Tim Waterman, associate professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture. 'But this is very much at odds with people's vision of good urbanism as tidy.'

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

Alistair Law, an associate façade designer at Arup, agrees. Law has created a green wall system based on seeds. The system requires less maintenance than other green walls and attempts to create an English meadow ecosystem.

'Architects struggle with a lack of control,' he says. 'They like their designs to be manicured and perfect. At the moment they are too keen to stick up plants which barely change over the course of a year – because they are selling renders.'

'A more natural green wall might not look great all the time, but even walls that die back for winter serve a purpose – such as providing a habitat for spiders, which in turn provide something for birds to eat – even if they do not look green.'

Green wall manufacturers say they are focused on reducing embodied carbon by using recycled and recyclable materials, producing systems with a longer lifespan, and reusing rainwater where possible. They point out that green walls also save operational carbon from buildings by improving the thermal efficiency of buildings.

'Depending on the plant choice, approximately one year after installation we offset the carbon generated in the building of the living wall,' says Angus Cunningham, chief executive of green wall manufacturer Scotscape.

Manufacturers also say they are improving the biodiversity of their products by including native plant species and plants that provide nectar or, where clients are amenable, adding in habitat boxes and bug hotels.

But despite the environmental benefits of having plants on buildings, rooftop gardens cannot neutralise vast quantities of operational or embodied carbon. 'The green stuff is quite a clever commercial face-saver, but it's not a game-changer,' says Simon Sturgis, director of Targeting Zero. 'The beneficial carbon emissions impact [from plants] is insignificant.'

'It takes roughly 17 mature trees 10 years to absorb one tonne of CO₂. Big new commercial buildings will cost tens of thousands of CO₂ emissions to build, let alone use, so you can see that the amount of greening shown [on some recent proposals] will make barely any impact.'

'My view is that provided the carbon cost of installing the greening does not outweigh the carbon benefit provided, then it is about health and wellbeing. My concern is that the provision of greening is about image and not content.'

'When green roofs and green walls came to London, they were created where it suited developers. Banks in the Square Mile created rooftop gardens because they could afford to – and it suited them to have nice spaces for their employees. Similarly, some high-end housing and hotels were given greenery as it increased their financial value.'

Although greening has been recognised as a benefit by planners for several years, the GLA is now trying to enforce much stricter demands around it, to reflect the fact that many of the benefits of greening – such as urban cooling and biodiversity increases – are a social gain.

Last month the GLA released a consultation document on the Urban Greening Factor after including provisions for it in its 2021 London Plan. The Urban Greening Factor assigns scores for 16 different types of surfaces ranging from 0 (sealed surfaces) to 1 (semi-natural vegetation or wetland). Other listed surfaces include green walls (0.6), amenity grassland (0.4) and permeable paving (0.1).

Under the London Plan, boroughs can create their own standards for urban greening, but a benchmark set by the GLA demands all commercial developments have an average score of 0.3 across their site, with residential developments scoring an average of 0.4.

Other cities are also catching on. All of the UK's 10 largest cities welcome green roofs in their local development plans and several – such as Nottingham, Birmingham and Liverpool – say green infrastructure, including green walls, should be incorporated into new developments.

Further planning incentives for adding plants to buildings are set to be introduced by the government. The Environment Bill, which has almost worked its way through Parliament, contains a provision to require all planning applications to increase the biodiversity of the site in question by 10 per cent.

The National Model Design Code, which sets out how local designs codes should be created throughout the country, also recognises green roofs as a valuable way in which nature can be woven into developments.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year



Fabrix's Roots in the Sky building with Studio RHE and Harris Bugg

Ben Zion Kotzen, head of the University of Greenwich's Green Roofs and Living Walls Centre, believes there will be more incentives for urban greening in the future. He points out that petrol and diesel cars already have to pay a congestion charge in London while electric cars don't, SMITHand that building owners have to pay for their waste water to be dealt with but not yet for water coming off roofs – even though this can cause flooding.

We are heading for a future where if you are part of an environmental problem – for instance contributing to urban heat island effect or run-off water which causes flooding – you are going to have to pay a price,' he says. 'That will incentivise developers to spend money on mitigation instead.'

Regardless of legislation, architects need to specify more plants on to more buildings. But planting should be done for the right reasons – whether climate resilience, biodiversity or occupier wellbeing. Fulfilling obligations under the Urban Greening Factor should not become a tick-box exercise; and planting cannot become an excuse to build tall, glazed boxes on the site of a recently-demolished building.

'Green walls are a part of the sustainable tool kit, but they are not a panacea,' says Sheppard Robson partner Dan Burr. 'They deal with biodiversity and urban greening but they don't excuse you from [designing a sustainable] superstructure.'

Peter Massini agrees. 'There is certainly a trend where comms and marketing around greening is wildly overblown,' he says. 'This stuff is good, but it's not going to change ecology; the City of London is still glass and concrete. It's better to be honest about it.'



The Warner Stand, Lord's Cricket Ground by Populous

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

The Elizabeth line: Woolwich station by Weston Williamson + Partners

20 May 2022



Will Ing visits the new line's outlying Woolwich station.

Woolwich station only has one entrance, and the plan was to build the Elizabeth line upgrade from brick. Brick would reflect its historic neighbours: Grade I and Grade II*-listed buildings that used to be part of the Royal Arsenal.

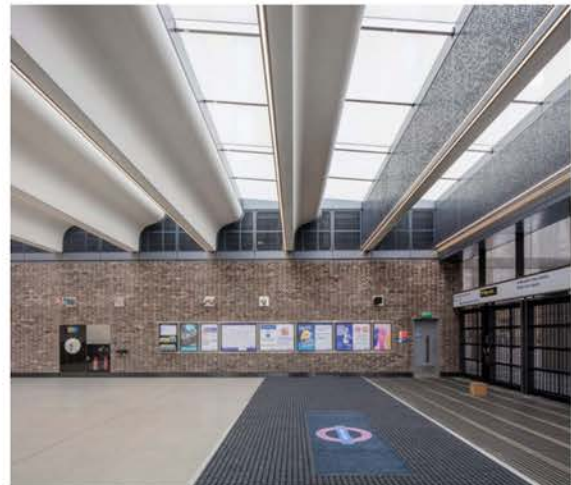
But the design succumbed to 'political interference' – as Rob Naybour, chief executive of Weston Williamson + Partners, puts it. A figure close to a former mayor of London pushed for the station to be more 'resonant'. Now the 30m-span portal that frames the entrance is clad with 350 cast bronze panels.



Elizabeth line Woolwich station external detail

'It's still a contextual material,' says Julian Robinson, Crossrail's head of architecture. The bronze is a reference to the Royal Brass Foundry, one of the listed brick buildings which sits at the other side of a small park. The panels also feature a rifling design, a thankfully abstracted reference to the site's former use as an armaments factory.

'We wanted a big, clear span for robustness,' says Naybour. 'We wanted it to be proud and noticeable.' This is helped by the absence (apart from some ventilation equipment towards the back) of over-development on the above-ground station structure, due to economic and legal problems. However, it is still debatable how 'noticeable' or, indeed, 'contextual' or 'resonant' the portal is.



Woolwich Station ticket hall
Source: Morley von Sternberg

A sizeable amount of the approximately 15 million passengers who will use the station every year may never really see its front face – as the elevation sits perpendicular to the path into Woolwich town centre; and Crossrail is so confident that this is where most passengers will be headed that they didn't see a need for another station entrance. Nevertheless, it is a tasteful addition to the park frontages, albeit concealing more utilitarian designs within and around the station.

The Royal Arsenal site is now home to thousands of new homes masterplanned by Allies and Morrison and built by Berkeley Group, which donated the Crossrail site and built the station box to boost property prices and justify higher densities. Weston Williamson + Partners, which has had no less than three separate clients on the station project, hopes the project will help link the historic riverside area with the existing town centre. The architects first worked with Berkeley on the box in 2007 before working for Crossrail as a tier two contractor under Atkins and Arup, and then as a tier three contractor under Balfour Beatty and Mott MacDonald.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year



Elizabeth line Woolwich station escalators
Source: Morely von Sternberg

Crossrail passengers are only slightly more likely to notice the double-height ticket hall inside the station, as there isn't a whole lot to notice. The space is dissected by ticket machines and features drab, grey-brown brick. A glass roof is held up by long concrete fins, curved in profile, which provide the greatest visual interest in the space.

On entering, the roof appears to undulate, while passengers leaving can view the perforated metal on the back of the fins, which contains acoustic attenuation material. The minimalist approach to station fit-out is not without its benefits, Naybour points out. 'Transit authorities don't much love maintaining stations,' he says. 'So it's better off designing them so they don't need much maintenance.'



Elizabeth line Woolwich platform seating
Source: Morely von Sternberg

The station hall gives way to an escalator flanked by two more grey-brown brick walls. A glazed back wall opposite the escalator offers view beyond, although sadly this is only a view of a social housing block which has been built by Berkeley above the platform. Nevertheless, hefty space above the escalators contains almost-sculptural concrete spans and here one begins to feel a tad smaller, shrunken by engineering prowess and the large volume.

The height and breadth of the station's single platform feel modest: space above the tracks is filled-in with black-clad services, adding to a sense of encroachment. The platform's length is impressive, though the surroundings do not compare to the Brobdingnagian edifices of central London, whether Victorian and above ground (like King's Cross) or 1990s and underground (like Westminster tube).



Elizabeth line Woolwich station platform
Source: Morely von Sternberg

A row of fat columns, each 6m tall, runs along the middle of the platform. They have been got up as soldiers: buffed brass plating in another nod to the arsenal, plus a tile stripe of regimental colours, described as 'the Paul Smith approach' by Naybour.

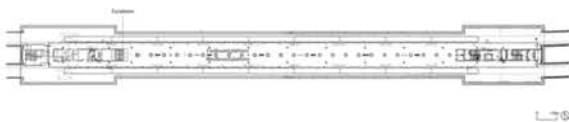
Anyone venturing around the side of the above-ground station building will find the façade wrapped in brick, but with a perforated metal mural of 'Britannia and Lion', a design used on plaques given to families bereaved in the First World War. Naybour describes the back of the station as 'quiet architecture'. The building, which is bulkier here due to a large ventilation stack on the roof, does not give much back to the square that it faces.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

'The whole station is not more complicated than it needs to be,' says Naybour. He adds that his practice pursued 'a robust architecture' which reflected the area's military history through a 'tough yet simple' palette of brick, steel and bronze.

The effect is exactly that. Given the station was handed over more than two years before the opening of the Elizabeth line one wonders if it could have afforded a little more complication or decoration. But the project was – according to Naybour – the most cost-effective of the new Crossrail stations. You can tell; but its nevertheless a pleasant new terminus with its own character.

Woolwich Station platform level plan



Project data

Start on site: Berkeley Homes from 2012 to 2014 (platforms, main box and underground structure), Balfour Beatty from 2014 to 2021 (above-ground structure, competition and fit-out)

Completion: October 2021

Gross internal floor area: Station box: 256 x 26m

Construction cost: Unavailable

Architect: Weston Williamson + Partners

Client: Crossrail

Structural engineer: Arup/Atkins JV (RIBA E-F); Mott MacDonald (RIBA F and blockwork walls construction)

M&E consultant: Arup; Mott MacDonald

Quantity surveyor: Balfour Beatty

Project manage: Balfour Beatty

Principal designer: Crossrail

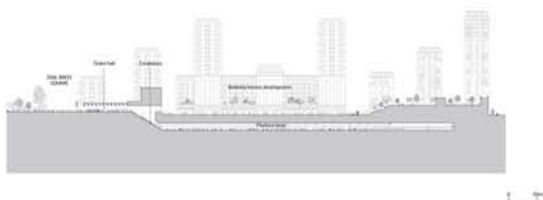
Main contractor: Balfour Beatty

CAD software used: Projectwise, MicroStation

Annual CO2 emissions: Unavailable

Urban realm: Gillespies/Arup (early stage to RIBA E); Mott MacDonald (RIBA F and construction)

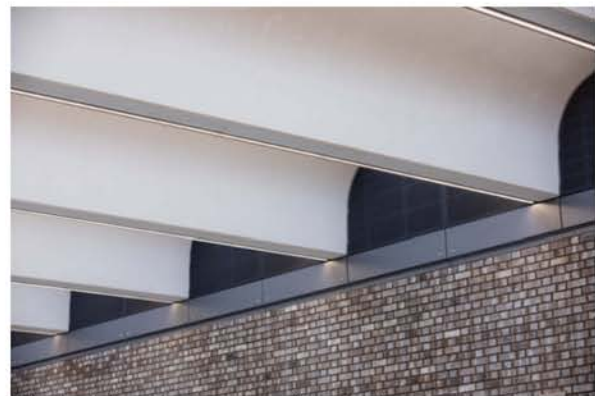
Woolwich Station long section



Working detail

The vision for Woolwich station was for a sensitively designed new station facility, maximising the benefits of its Royal Arsenal heritage setting within the cultural hub of Woolwich, that would also facilitate the growth of the urban precinct.

The station architecture draws upon the military history of the town for inspiration, making reference both to the neighbouring historic buildings with a bold and simple use of brickwork as the primary building material, and integrating military connections and motifs that bed the station into the site. For example, the brick detailing picks up from the surrounding arsenal buildings using brick bond and dimensions that are in common with the listed buildings.



Elizabeth line Woolwich station roof beams
Source: Morely von Sternberg

In the ticket hall, natural light is provided via a rooflight system, which is walkable to facilitate access and maintenance. The entire ticket hall soffit is covered with a parallel precast beam system with high-quality clear finish to one side and anodised aluminium acoustic panels on the back, containing a continuous lighting strip. The beams are shaped as a wave to direct the natural light coming in and to give a sense of movement to the space. The commuter experience is enhanced at the entry and exit: where the soffit becomes a clear, soft concrete open space, changing to perforated anodised panels, a combination which creates two friendly atmospheres within one ticket hall.

Integrating the communication systems behind the cladding allows the walls to preserve their clean vertical appearance without the need to expose large objects and conduits. A containment management system at high level houses all electrical, communications and fire systems. Small items of equipment such as CCTV cameras and antennas are carefully positioned within the brick wall to maintain the station entrance's elegance.

Rob Naybour, chief executive officer, Weston Williamson + Partners

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

Central Hill: residents challenge architects to rethink demolition

24 Feb 2022



Central Hill Estate by Holly-Marie Cato

For the past 10 years, Lambeth Council has been intent on demolishing and rebuilding the 1970s estate. Will Ing visits residents who are urging architects to respect their climate pledges and reject the project

'I'm being socially cleansed,' quips Cliff Grant. The jovial musician and decorator was a child when, in 1973, he became one of the first residents on the new Central Hill estate in south London. Now, aged 60, he is fighting for its survival.

'It's a battle that's been going on so long that I have become numb to it,' he adds, smiling grimly. 'The council are clearing out all the working-class people so they can bring in the rich.'

Central Hill nestles in the southern side of a steep ridge near Crystal Palace. It is strikingly green, even in February. Trees rise with the buildings while patches of lawn are bound by bushes.

Most of the homes on the estate offer sweeping views of London, punctuated by the Shard and the City cluster. On a sunny day the entire hillside is lit up.

For the past decade, however, Central Hill has been under a cloud. Lambeth Council signalled its intention to redevelop the 6.8ha estate in 2012 and formally approved construction of 'hundreds of new, better homes' in 2017.

But years later, a masterplan for the estate has yet to emerge. Now Lambeth is finally set to pick an architect to design 1,200 new homes on the site – and submit a planning application that would see all 450 existing homes demolished. Three practices are shortlisted for the job: Hawkins\Brown, PRP and BPTW.



Central Hill residents are urging the architects to challenge the council on demolition. They argue that whoever wins the job will be contradicting their Architects Declare pledges – and would be 'complicit' in a scheme that compounds both the climate emergency and London's affordable housing crisis.

As calls grow for Lambeth Council and its architects to consider the social and environmental damage of demolition, can either be persuaded to rethink?

Central Hill was completed in 1974 by a team at Lambeth Council's planning office, which was overseen by renowned Modernist Ted Hollamby and included pioneering architect Rosemary Stjernstedt.

'It was all new and shiny,' remembers Grant, looking out over the estate from his third-floor balcony. 'Everyone points their finger at council estates and says they are all crime-ridden but it's never been like that at all.'

Sue Wolfenden, a council tenant, moved to her flat back in 1983. 'It was quite nice when we moved in because we had community heating,' she says as she walks her dog around the estate. While the system is now defunct, a pair of concrete chimneys still hang over the eastern part of the estate, surrounded by shrubs.

Since then, Wolfenden reflects, Central Hill has 'got quieter' – although she concedes this may just be because she has got older.

Today, the housing blocks themselves appear shabby, in need of a thorough wash but not yet decrepit. Residents argue they are fit for purpose but Lambeth says otherwise and is leaving growing number of flats and maisonettes – currently 75 – sitting empty.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year



Sue Wolfenden, a council tenant, has lived on the estate for 39 years

In 2012, just 38 years after Central Hill's completion, it was included in a long list of estates the Labour-run Lambeth Council planned to redevelop. In 2017, the demolition plan was confirmed. Lambeth appointed Mace to oversee development work with architect PRP, although it later dumped the duo having decided to develop the site through its own arms-length housebuilder, Homes for Lambeth.

Residents feel betrayed by the decision to demolish. 'The estate is a lovely place,' says Grant, a leaseholder who has spent years stripping out a wall to create an open-plan living space. The council is offering him a new flat on the redeveloped estate but only on a shared ownership basis, meaning he would no longer fully own his home.

'I'm quite angry at the way they treat people, it's absolutely awful,' he says. '[The experience] has caused me to have a stroke. It has caused a lot of ill health in people.'

Wolfenden complains about being left in limbo. '[In 2012] I didn't know what was going to happen or whether someone would come round one day and say: "You have got to move." There is no timescale. I need carpets downstairs, but I haven't bothered because I don't know how long I have.'

Now Save Central Hill Community, a group of residents and housing campaigners, have said demolition is incompatible with climate commitments made by both the council and the architects. Echoing the AJ's own RetroFirst campaign, they point to the thousands of tonnes of embodied carbon emissions the building of replacement homes will produce.

In 2019, Lambeth became the first London borough to declare a climate emergency, saying that preventing global temperature increase was 'humanity's number-one priority' and vowing to slash its carbon emissions.

Around the same time, Hawkins\Brown, BPTW and PRP – who all declined to comment for this article – declared a climate emergency. They joined Architects Declare and promised to evaluate new work against its 11 pledges.

Save Central Hill Community says it is 'disappointed' that 'all three practices accepted the council's premise that complete demolition and rebuild of the Central Hill estate is the only viable option'.

It has written to each of them, pointing out there is a 'fundamental contradiction' between what the architects believe and agreeing to design 'the comprehensive demolition of Central Hill estate [and] its subsequent and intense market-sale-led densification'.

Housing and heritage campaigners are increasingly highlighting the vast embodied carbon emissions caused by demolition and rebuild. But with more than 100 council estates in London under threat, according to campaign groups Just Space and London Tenants Federation, large-scale 'regeneration' remains a favoured strategy for councils looking to increase their housing stock.



Anna Minton, author of Big Capital and an academic at University of East London, says arguments against estate demolition on environmental grounds are 'something we are starting to hear more of because [concern about climate change] is gaining traction'.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

Minton says environmental arguments are a 'really strong and effective campaigning tool' as they appeal to a wider audience. But she adds that, in the case of Central Hill, it is 'impossible' to change Lambeth's approach as they are 'ideologically committed to [estate demolition] for reasons which are very hard to grasp'.

Central Hill campaigners argue that very few intrusive surveys of the estate have been done, and retrofit and infill have not been properly considered. The council, which is still run by Labour, denies this. Deputy leader and cabinet member for new homes Matthew Bennett says the council 'spent two years going through all possible options – from refurbishment, infill and partial rebuilding – to provide more and better homes for the people of Central Hill'.

He told the AJ that 'families on the Central Hill estate are living in poor-quality homes, facing problems with damp, cold, mould, and poor soundproofing between houses', adding that 'the current design of the overall estate creates significant accessibility problems'.

While residents agree there are problems with the estate, they insist they have more to do with a lack of maintenance than inherent flaws with its design or fabric. Several residents told the AJ that the council acts slowly or not at all on problems they have reported.

'You are always wondering whether the disrepair is incompetence or deliberate,' says Pete Elliott, a housing campaigner and Green Party councillor for the local ward. Earlier this month, the housing ombudsman rebuked Lambeth Council for its record as a landlord after it found 26 cases of service failure and maladministration at unnamed properties.



But like Minton, Elliott believes the disrepair at Central Hill is 'more ideological', with the council allowing the estate to drift into 'managed decline' to incentivise long-term residents to leave. This reduces opposition to demolition and will help the council win a ballot on the regeneration in coming years, he believes. A spokesperson for Lambeth said that maintenance at the estate happens 'to the same standard and schedules' as at other council properties.

Despite complaints about maintenance, residents say the estate could be fixed up. Another leaseholder, Sabine Mairey, says she used to support demolition as she believed the council about most of the flats in the estate having problems – despite considering her own flat to be in good nick.

But, she says, as she chatted to more of her neighbours, and looked around the estate during Open House, the annual London-based festival of architecture, 'it suddenly dawned on me that the estate was alright'. She argues that the council would save money and grief by retrofitting the existing buildings.

Bennett, however, says that funding is a 'key reason' for the demolition and rebuild approach. 'Over the past 12 years we have seen significant cuts in government funding, the withdrawal of Decent Homes grant funding, and enforced rent reductions which have reduced the amount the council is able to borrow to fund refurbishment or retrofit,' he says.

'In Lambeth there are over 30,000 people on our housing waiting list and almost 3,000 homeless families living in temporary accommodation. The only solution to homelessness is to build more homes,' he adds.

Sceptics say that the Central Hill redevelopment, as currently proposed, will not do much to reduce homelessness in the borough. While the exact tenure split on new homes is yet to be decided, campaigners argue that the joint delivery plan by Lambeth Council and Homes for Lambeth show its estates programme will only provide a 3 per cent increase in homes with council-level rent.



Minton is sympathetic to campaigners. 'Lambeth behave as a developer and their argument is that this is the only way they can provide services and provide affordable homes,' she says. 'But I don't agree with that. There are many arguments about the numbers, but the trajectory of the rents tells a different story.'

Campaigners also point out that leaseholder flats bought by Homes for Lambeth are being rented out on the private market. 'That is not housing the homeless at all,' says Wolfenden. According to Elliott, the council also declines to inspect the many empty properties or invest in making them habitable – even though they could be housing people.

Will Ing - Architectural Writer of the Year

Residents mourn the loss of community that demolition would cause. Clive lives on Hawke Road, in a house directly opposite the estate. 'I have been walking through Central Hill for 31 years now and the community has always been so important,' he says. 'The estate is still clean, but they are going to knock it down and build some tower blocks, and the community will be gone.'

Save Central Hill Community insists demolition is not inevitable. The group points out that deputy council leader Bennett, the driving force behind the estates regeneration programme, is not standing for re-election to the council in May. And they point out that Lambeth's own recent risk assessment deemed the failure of the estate regeneration programme 'likely' – with Homes for Lambeth having made an £8.5 million loss in its last financial year.

But they are frustrated that architects are willing to get involved and have urged those involved to challenge the 'business as usual' mentality on projects like Central Hill, writing: 'We ask that you use your position, your expertise, your resource and your voices to effect positive change with action and not limit yourselves to rhetoric.'



BUSINESS / FINANCIAL JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

Joshua Stein

Construction News

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

The winning entry was consistently excellent, with a genuine scoop and two other highly relevant news features. The scoop, which revealed that work had ground to a halt at the £900m One Nine Elms development, was picked up by other outlets including rival trade press, Bloomberg, and the Financial Times. Meanwhile, an impressive investigation into the wide-ranging impacts caused by the rocketing cost of professional indemnity insurance explored a new angle on the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

ITEM 1:

Workers walk off Multiplex's £900m One Nine Elms job

In January, Joshua broke the news that work had ground to a halt at a high-profile central London regeneration site. He received a tip-off that workers had been told by bosses to leave the £900m One Nine Elms job, a scheme consisting of two mixed-use skyscrapers. Joshua decided to visit the site to establish what was going on, and spoke to workers he found there carrying materials and belongings off site. By speaking to workers at the site to corroborate the first tip-off he got, Joshua discovered that the reason for the shutdown was due to a contractual dispute between the site's developer and the main contractor. The article was published in January and was picked up by other outlets including rival trade press, Bloomberg, and the Financial Times also subsequently reported around the subject. In August, it remained the third most read story on Construction News in 2022, with more than 17,000 views. Joshua followed up the story with visits to the site to confirm workers had not returned within three months of the clear out, as had been promised. He wrote up this story and has continued to follow up regularly on developments at the site.

ITEM 2:

Has furlough paid dividends for CN100 firms?

In this feature-length investigation, Joshua probed the use made by the construction industry of furlough payments from government at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme undoubtedly prevented a large-scale collapse of the construction sector, but many firms ended up with money they did not have any use for. Joshua spent several weeks collecting information on furlough payments made to firms appearing on the CN100, CN's annual and respected table of the top 100 UK contractors. In a carefully crafted article, Joshua examined the question of whether the sector's use of furlough money was in line with the Financial Conduct Authority's 'Wates Principles' guidance on corporate governance. Building on a colleague's previous revelation that Skanska claimed furlough cash and paid dividends to its shareholders, he also revealed that this was the case for others including Wates and Bowmer & Kirkland. Overall, he established that millions had been claimed under the scheme by firms which had paid substantial dividends to shareholders. The skill and care with which Joshua collected and organised the data he collected, as well as his ability to craft a hard-hitting narrative from the numbers, led to Joshua being appointed to run this year's main CN100 project.

ITEM 3:

PI Insurance: how indemnity is still burdening the sector

In another feature-length investigation, Joshua examined another of the biggest issues affecting the construction sector, and revealed wide-ranging impacts caused by the rocketing cost of professional indemnity insurance (PII). Through more than a dozen calls and interviews with chief executives, insurance executives and industry bodies, he revealed that PII premiums, triggered by alarm in the insurance sector following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, are actually holding back the construction industry from addressing the huge remediation job it is facing. Speaking to representatives of businesses large and small, he discovered that costs are making fire safety work untenable for large swathes of the sector. Joshua once more demonstrated his determination and ability to craft a compelling narrative through identifying and collecting key data on the rocketing PII prices. He also scoured reports by administrators, revealing that many smaller firms cited soaring PII costs as a reason for their demise. The hard-hitting article included outspoken and honest assessments from figures in construction and property insurance about the economics of fire safety and the extent to which behaviour in the industry is changing.

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Workers walk off Multiplex's £900m One Nine Elms job

31 Jan 2022



Exclusive: Contractors have started leaving the £900m One Nine Elms site in London as Multiplex chases the developer for payment.

Construction workers started to leave the site today after being told work was being paused. Workers were seen leaving throughout Monday morning, with some telling Construction News their work at the site was over for now.

One worker who was leaving the site said: "The builders will all be gone by Friday. We are heading off now. It could be up to three months they said, but who knows."

A security guard said he expected more information on the plans to come out later today in the form of a letter to subcontractors, but said he expected the site would be closing soon. He added that it was unclear when work would start again.

CN understands all the subcontractors will be off the site by Friday and that work is stopping after the developer, China-based R&F Properties UK, failed to pay the principal contractor, Multiplex. R&F acquired the site in January 2018 from Chinese firm Wanda after it ran into financial difficulties. But earlier this month, R&F's Hong Kong subsidiary was put in "selective default" after it agreed with its lenders to delay a \$725m (£539m) debt repayment, according to Reuters. At the time, the parent company's credit rating was not changed, but credit rating agency S&P Global said it could still be cut.

A spokesperson for R&F said: "Work is continuing at One Nine Elms while we discuss a set of issues with Multiplex to ensure a successful completion of the development."

Multiplex was appointed as main contractor on the 1.14m square feet residential-led mixed-use project in January 2017 by the original developer, Wanda, after attempts to appoint an Interserve-led JV and Balfour Beatty fell through.

The One Nine Elms scheme near Vauxhall consists of two towers of 56 storeys and 42 storeys, alongside a 173-room luxury hotel. In total, it is set to consist of 730,000 square feet of residential apartments, 267,000 square feet of hotel accommodation, and 1,000 square feet of retail outlets.

Multiplex has been contacted for comment.

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Has Furlough paid dividends for CN100 firms?

21 Sep 2022

THE FAVOUR OF FURLOUGH

Construction has been among the largest beneficiaries of the furlough scheme, but questions have been raised about companies – in good financial shape – that have paid out large dividends at the same time. Josh Stein reports

In March 2020, industries across the country were facing a crisis, as the government ordered people to avoid unnecessary travel and told many others to isolate at home.

Early cases of construction workers testing positive for COVID-19 led to entire sites being shut down. Work was slowing rapidly and, amid the uncertainty of how bad the pandemic could get, there was a fear that payments, up and down the supply chain, would stop.

With less work and less cash, companies would have no choice but to cut costs to survive. And that would mean mass redundancies.

But on 20 March, a new scheme marking unprecedented taxpayer support for private industry was launched in a bid to avoid mass layoffs. "For the first time in our history, the government is going to step in and help to pay people's wages," chancellor of the exchequer Rishi Sunak said, announcing the formation of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

Businesses would be able to furlough staff whose jobs were affected by the pandemic and could not work, with the government paying 80 per cent of their salary, up to a cap of £2,500 per month per worker. It was designed to help companies ride out the economic slowdown, avoiding the economic disruption of mass layoffs. When the pandemic eased and activity picked up, businesses would be able to bring people back to work quickly.

The Confederation of British Industry said the furlough scheme played a key role in enabling the construction industry to "operate during the historic collapse in output and demand last year, keeping lights on and delivering critical infrastructure for the country".

At its peak in April 2020, 723,600 construction employees were furloughed, according to data from the Treasury. As the first lockdown eased, the number fell. But, throughout 2020, it did not drop below 130,000.

Clearly, the scheme had a huge effect.

Claims among the CN100

Applications for the scheme opened in April 2020, and of the 60 firms in this year's CN100 whose most recent accounting dates ended from April 2020 onwards, 51 are known to have claimed from the scheme.

Analysis of these businesses reveals they claimed at least £140.3m combined from the furlough scheme during their most recently filed financial year.

The biggest claimant across the construction sector was Balfour Beatty, which employed, on average, 19,113 people in 2020 and claimed £19m in furlough cash initially, according to its accounts. Carey Group, which has 1,462 staff, claimed the second-highest total in the industry: £9.1m. It was followed by Kier, Wates and Sir Robert McAlpine.

Willmott Dixon, with 2,185 employees, claimed £5.7m from the scheme. The company's chief financial officer, Graham Dundas, says the furlough scheme "provided an important element of stability" during the uncertainty of the crisis. "It ensured we could continue to retain people when the reduced activity levels of certain roles, especially during lockdown, would have made it difficult to sustain those roles over a period of time," he adds.

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Private profit from public help

As 2020 progressed, the economy started to recover and many firms found they were in good financial shape. Such good shape, in fact, that they could resume rewarding their shareholders with dividends. This raised the question: should companies that used the furlough scheme repay the taxpayer-funded cash before paying out to private investors?

No requirement to restrict dividends or repay furlough cash was ever built into the scheme. The only obligation was a moral one. A Treasury spokesperson says: "We expect [companies that claim furlough cash] to abide by the spirit of the scheme and they can voluntarily pay back money claimed if they no longer need the support."

In August 2020, Morgan Sindall became the first major contractor to announce it would repay money claimed from the scheme, ahead of reinstating dividends. It said it could make the repayment because its finances had remained "robust and resilient" through the pandemic.

Other companies followed suit, including Watkin Jones and Galliford Try. Balfour Beatty confirmed in March that it would repay the £19m it had claimed. This was three months after the firm announced it would reinstate dividends.

Others opted to keep the taxpayer-funded cash and reward shareholders, however. Skanska was one example, as it decided to keep hold of £4m worth of furlough cash after paying out a £32m dividend. A spokesperson said the company had spent a significant amount topping up salaries and supporting staff through the pandemic.

Listed contractor NMCN announced in August 2020 that it would pay a £1m dividend and not return furlough cash. Its then-CEO, John Homer, insisted the furlough payments had not been used to fund the dividend, and that it was "right to pay the shareholders".

"That's the reason they're invested in the company," he said at the time.

NMCN is not featured in our list, however, as its 2020 accounts have yet to be published.

TClarke followed suit. Company chief executive Mark Lawrence said it had used the furlough scheme as intended and that, as lockdown was imposed, "it would have been a choice of having mass layoffs or utilising the furlough scheme".

Bam Nuttall, which paid a £4.5m dividend to its parent, claimed its furlough cash had been "substantially credited back" through the cost reimbursable contracts it carries out for public sector clients. More examples of contractors paying dividends in the same year as they claimed furlough cash have emerged from CN's analysis of accounts for the CN100.

Vinci paid the largest dividend in this year's CN100, with £41.5m going to its UK parent holding company in October 2020, based on its reserves from 2019. The holding firm in turn paid a £17.5m dividend to its owners in France. The contractor furloughed 545 staff at the peak of the pandemic, although it has refused to disclose how much cash it received from the UK Government's furlough scheme. There is no indication that the company has repaid what it claimed and Vinci has declined to comment on the issue.

Principles in the spotlight

On 27 March, days after the furlough scheme was launched, Wates paid out a £7.4m dividend to shareholders. The business went on to claim £7.7m of furlough cash, which it has not paid back, a spokesperson for the company confirms. They add that the dividend was in respect of the 2019 financial year, and that no dividends or bonuses were paid on the basis of the company's 2020 performance.

In addition, the company says that topping up the salaries of furloughed staff cost it £12.5m. "These costs were significantly greater than the grant income of £7.7m we received through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme," the spokesperson says.

CN asks whether this approach is in line with the 'Wates Principles', government-backed guidelines for responsible corporate governance, named after Wates Group chair Sir James Wates, who oversaw their development. The spokesperson responds: "The money provided by the UK Government was intended to prevent the economy from collapsing.

"We used the money for a short period of time and only for the purpose for which it was intended. It has enabled us to continue our work tackling the UK's housing shortage and supporting the public sector to build back better."

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Life after furlough



Companies will no longer receive money from the CJRS for furloughed staff after 30 September. While the industry has recovered well, the CJRS has remained widely used. As of 31 July 2021, more than 114,000 construction employees were still furloughed.

CN100 firms have also continued to make significant claims, with between £7.6m and £18.3m received between December 2020 and May 2021. Many of those still making significant use of the scheme have large facilities management operations. This work has taken longer to recover as it relies on offices, shops and other buildings being open and operational.

There are concerns about the end of the scheme. Companies still furloughing staff whose jobs are affected will choose between paying their salaries in full, or making them redundant. EY UK and Ireland construction lead Ian Marson warns the extra financial obligation could cause problems: "We can probably expect, as the furlough scheme [ends] and some of that debt is having to be repaid, we will see some of these firms starting to go," he says.

Bowmer & Kirkland's accounts for the year ending 31 August 2021 show a £28.4m dividend was paid. The same accounts detail a £1.1m claim for government grants, split between R&D grants and money from the furlough scheme, although the company declined to reveal how much related to each element. A spokesperson says the £28.4m dividend was paid in December 2019, before the pandemic struck, though adds that the business also declared a £5.8m dividend for its 2020 year, when it made the claims.

The spokesperson says its use of the furlough scheme was largely to cover staff that could not work in Scotland, where lockdown restrictions were tougher. Liberal Democrat business spokesperson Sarah Olney tells CN companies that would have been "fine without taxpayer help" should "do the right thing by returning money they didn't need".

"Furlough was intended to support those who couldn't make it without taxpayer help," she says. "Big businesses doing well enough to give their shareholders hefty payouts are in better shape than most, and it is only fair that they use more of their own money to make it through the pandemic."

That the furlough scheme saved jobs is beyond question at this point. It also helped boost liquidity for contractors, giving them extra confidence to make sure suppliers were paid promptly so the industry could continue to operate.

The furlough scheme was unprecedented in the size of its support and accessibility, but it has cost the UK taxpayer £66bn to date, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility. And while those who have chosen to take and keep the publicly funded grants and pay millions to shareholders have not broken any rules, they may face further scrutiny as the public begins to reckon with the enormous debts built up to keep the country going through the pandemic.

Ardmore, Buckingham Group, Erith, Forth Holdings, HG Construction, Keltbray, Lindum, Masterson, McLaughlin & Harvey, and Michael J Lonsdale did not respond to CN's request for comment on their dividend payments and furlough claims. Hill Holdings and Murphy declined to comment.

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

PI insurance: how indemnity is still burdening the sector

21 Feb 2022



Illustration: CN/AJAY/ALAMY

The cost of professional indemnity insurance has soared in recent years by as much as 1,500 per cent for some firms, resulting in squeezed margins, supply chain pressure and business failures, as Joshua Stein reports

"Without PI insurance, the industry cannot survive or operate."

That is the blunt reality of the construction trade, as described by Metal Cladding and Roofing Manufacturers Association director Carlton Jones. Despite this, problems with obtaining professional indemnity (PI) insurance have plagued construction companies in recent years. PI costs have soared and, for some firms, it hasn't been possible to obtain cover at all.

PI insurance provides protection for businesses in the event they are sued by a client. While it is used in many industries, the risks inherent in construction make it a vital tool, especially among envelope contractors in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy.

For Jones, the implications of this worrying trend are stark: "We are in a situation where, for those who have been working on anything which might touch on the subject of fire or cladding, their insurers have said: 'Sorry, we are not in that game.'"

Construction News explores the problems caused by spiralling costs and the unavailability of insurance cover, and asks what it will take for the situation to change.

Supply and demand

A director of one subcontractor based in southern England tells CN that his firm has stopped carrying out cladding jobs as a direct result of the insurance hike. "Cladding work was worth a quarter of our turnover," he says. "But they excluded cladding from our insurance, so we've washed our hands of it." The company now focuses on groundworks and civils jobs instead. And it is not the only one. A survey by the Construction Leadership Council (CLC) last year found that nearly one in four firms have changed the nature of the work they do because of inadequate PI cover.

After the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, insurance premiums skyrocketed, as underwriters began to view all types of envelope work as high-risk, whether the jobs involved combustible cladding or not. At the same time, demand for remediation work rose greatly, leaving a shrinking pool of firms to do a greater number of jobs, slowing the process of fixing buildings and leaving many residents trapped in unsafe buildings.

The aforementioned specialist found work elsewhere, but the director, who asked not to be named, warns that others might not be so fortunate. "Will companies end up folding because they cannot get PI for cladding work? Without a shadow of a doubt," he says.

In March 2020, contractor Ardmore said in its financial results for 2018/19 that the rising cost of PI insurance had contributed to its pre-tax profit tumbling from £25.1m to £11.1m, on turnover of £211m. At around the same time, the £14m-turnover facade and insulation specialist InBuild Solutions went into administration, citing soaring PI prices and material cost increases. The closure of the company in Basildon, Essex, led to 56 redundancies. The CLC's 2021 survey found that a quarter of companies of all sizes had not been able to work on jobs because of inadequate PI cover.

Before Grenfell, expenditure on fire-safety measures by contractors was a "grudge purchase", according to Institution of Fire Engineers technical director Peter Wilkinson. "It was only for very complex buildings that a competent professional or specialist fire-risk assessor would necessarily be engaged. And even then, there was a knock-down in price," he says.

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Rob Mayo, chief executive of property insurance firm Insurety, explains that, as demand was low, premiums were cheap. "If you've got loads of capacity, you're only ever going to have a finite amount of opportunity," he says. "So there was loads of fighting over this finite number of jobs and, as such, the premiums went through the floor." When demand for cladding-related PI skyrocketed following the Grenfell fire, there was not enough supply to meet it.

Price hikes

Envelope specialist Stanmore, which turned over £96m last year, has seen its PI premiums jump by 1,571 per cent between 2017 and 2021. "Anything related to combustibility and fire is completely excluded from our PI cover," managing director Raj Manak says. The effect of that increase reverberates through the supply chain, with the company wary of taking the full brunt of the hike on top of the material and labour price increases that have plagued the industry over the past year.

Even with those exclusions in place, the business forked out £360,890 for PI insurance in 2021, having only spent £21,587 on it in 2017. Tender prices have had to increase as a result. "Clients are still expecting their costs not to go up, and we have to throw part of the cost overload somewhere," Manak says. "When we were already working on jobs, that actually took a hit on our margins."

Fixed-price contracts, as popular in the industry as ever, have dealt an additional blow as insurance prices have skyrocketed. "It risks both significant insolvencies in the construction market, and consumers being left unable to recover the value of their losses," Manak says

Major M&E specialist NG Bailey has seen its insurance costs more than double since 2017, and says it takes action to protect its subcontractors, which are even more vulnerable to the effects. Its chief financial officer, Jonathan Stockton, says: "Supply chain management is critical. It's important subcontractors are not getting hit with late payment and PI increases. If you pay them on time, that allows them to absorb some of the cost pressures - you want your supply chain to be healthy and well-looked-after so they can continue to perform."

Manak says that "everyone is trying to throw costs on each other", adding that "if insurance companies had actually offered PI, they could have helped companies avoid those legal costs, and a real working solution could have been found between the parties to resolve the situation quicker". He wants insurers to take more action to support the industry, feeling that contractors have stepped up to take on much-needed remediation jobs, while insurers are focused on protecting their own interests.

But Roger Flaxman, head of insurance advisory firm Flaxmans, believes the construction industry needs to change if it wants to see premiums come down. "The way the building industry operates lends itself to being sued," he states.

"When something goes wrong [on a project], the first thing that happens is the lawyers get involved, fighting each other for who's responsible. There are no principles in contracts of apportioning liability in advance."



The tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 prompted a major shift in insurers' approach to PI. Picture: Alamy

Cutting corners

The fire at Grenfell Tower exposed a construction sector that did not properly risk-assess its work because it could fall back on insurance companies, according to Flaxman. "You start from a position where the competition on price within construction means cutting corners, and cutting corners led us straight to Grenfell," he says. "Everybody turned a blind eye to it because they could afford it, because there was insurance to pick up the pieces."

Joshua Stein - Business / Financial Journalist of the Year

Insurance experts say prices generally have a cycle of going up and then softening every seven-to-eight years. But the picture looks different with PI. "I think this time around, the cuts are too deep," Insurety's Mayo says. "There will be more capacity coming into the market, but I don't see that happening within the next year or two. Even when it does, I still think that the premiums will be significant because the insurers have had their fingers burnt."

He adds that the government should indemnify insurers against their losses if it wants to speed up the process of remediating the hundreds of buildings in need of work in the post-Grenfell era, when companies are struggling to get cover.

"I think the government needs to start to indemnify insurers against their losses with regards to these particular buildings," he says.

In the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, Dame Judith Hackitt's independent review of building-safety regulations called for construction procurement to focus on "best value, rather than lowest cost", with the focus being on constructing buildings that have a long lifecycle. Flaxman says that if the sector can show it has changed and is driven by best value, insurance companies may shift their position. But, until it does, the market is not likely to change. However, with margins stretched and many clients unwilling to increase their costs, the problems of PI might be around for some time to come.

The knock-on effect on the struggle to recruit fire engineers

Fire engineering consultants have been hit particularly hard by the PI insurance cost increases. While the demand for their advisory expertise has soared as the need for remediation work has grown, on top of new building-safety regulations for new, 'high-risk' buildings, efforts to boost consultant numbers are failing in the face of increased costs.

Gary Strong, global director of building standards at the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), says: "The reality is there are probably less than 100 qualified fire engineers who are actually able and willing to do this work with PI and the right experience and competence."

Despite government attempts to increase the number of fire engineers, the total is small and may be decreasing due to problems obtaining PI. Early last year, the government gave RICS £700,000 to establish an initiative to train up to 2,000 fire assessors. But the course has been vastly undersubscribed, with just 50 people completing it by November.

"The biggest driver for people not enrolling on the course is the lack of PI," Strong says. "Because the PI market has hardened so much, people are really nervous about spending a lot of time training to do a rigorous course, particularly if they're working full-time, only to find they can't get PI to do the work."

"It's almost like: it's not worth my effort until PI is going to be available to do the work."

At the same time, the pool is being drained, with some fire engineers considering their career options as they battle to get the required insurance. Insurety's Rob Mayo says: "I had a call, only last week, from an existing fire-risk assessor about PI. He said 'I'm 60 years old, I'm five years off retirement. If this is the premium that I've got to pay, I'm going to shut up shop and retire now.' There was a guarantee by the government that they were going to train up and bring in all these fire assessors. Well, fantastic. We will welcome them with open arms, but if they can't get insurance, they can't work."

A Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities spokesperson says the government is taking "decisive action" over excessive risk aversion among insurers. "New guidance from the British Standard Institution and our indemnity scheme will give fire-risk assessors greater confidence to exercise professional judgement and take a more proportionate approach to fire-risk assessments," they said.

"This is on top of nearly £700,000 in funding to train more assessors to speed up valuations where they are needed, with 1,009 enrolled in training so far."

CONSTRUCTION / INFRASTRUCTURE WRITER OF THE YEAR

Rob Horgan

New Civil Engineer

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

The judges praised all the entries in this category for demonstrating good quality journalism conveying useful information and being interesting and entertaining reads. But the winning entrant went beyond that, leading to a change in industry practice – they really set the agenda. This was particularly the case in their work on bridge infilling, where a dogged investigation led to a reversal of approach, follow-ups in the nationals and debate in parliament.

ITEM 1:

How National Highways bridge infilling saga played out

This story brings together dozens of articles I have written on National Highways' bridge infilling saga over an 18 month period. From the outset I felt strongly that the decision to infill the Great Musgrave bridge needed to be reviewed and as a magazine we campaigned for that. At first we ran articles in response from engineers who expressed 'shame' in their profession. This led to the ICE also slamming National Highways for their actions and the DfT launching an investigation. My FOI campaign into the infilling revealed the cost of works at Great Musgrave and the predicted cost to reverse the work, which were debated in the House of Commons. National Highways then agreed to an interview in which they shared an internal report with me justifying the work. My coverage was picked up by national media outlets including the Guardian and the Daily Mail and I appeared on BBC radio to discuss the case. As the council's verdict neared, National Highways approached me for another interview in which they revealed a new way of assessing their structures. This was a massive victory for NCE and justification for my persistent coverage. When the council finally called for the infilling to be reversed, local campaign group HRE Group publicly thanked NCE and myself for our coverage. This is probably the first time in 10 years of journalism where articles I have written have resulted in such a satisfying conclusion.

ITEM 2:

Cost of patching up TfL's bridges and tunnels to top £35M

This story is the culmination of years of work looking into TfL's spending on its asset renewals programme. The breakdown of figures comes from publicly available information buried within a 600- page board agenda document. I spend every month going through these documents in order to find discrepancies in spending. Bridge and tunnel maintenance is as important now as ever before and this story (along with other stories) presents the worries of the industry (and NCE readers) that its importance is being ignored. My stories on the state of TfL's structures have been reference in London Assembly meetings and were used as the backbone of a London Assembly Transport Committee report on London River Crossings last year. Subsequently the figures presented in this story have been used as justification by the GLA to launch a full investigation into bridge and tunnel ownership in the Capital.

ITEM 3:

Future of Bridges | Hammersmith Bridge reopening presents enormous engineering challenge

Having spent much of the last three years reporting on the political fallout of the Hammersmith Bridge closure, I decided it was time to do a more in depth piece on the engineering challenge of repairing the structure. Due to 'matters of national security' it is actually very difficult to get the latest reports into the bridge's condition. However, I was able to access reports from Aecom and Mott MacDonald into potential repair plans – picking through hundreds of pages of technical details to find out what was most important to our readers. Hammersmith Bridge is an important story and the engineering problems need to be explained so that a repeat does not happen again.

Rob Horgan - Construction / Infrastructure Writer of the Year

How National Highways bridge infilling saga played out

20 Jun 2022



National Highways bridge infilling saga reached a dramatic climax last week, when Eden District Council voted unanimously to reject the retrospective planning application for the work.

The verdict came more than a year after the infilling was carried out by Amco Giffen on behalf of the roads operator. In which time the strength of feeling against the infill has grown, engineers have expressed their anger and 'shame' at the work and MPs have called for a rethink.

Despite that National Highways has remained steadfast throughout and doubled-down repeatedly on their conclusion that the infilling was "necessary".

National Highways Historical Railways Estate first hit the news at the start of 2021, after a group of transport campaigners and engineers wrote to the DfT to warn them that hundreds of historic railway bridges and tunnels faced infill and demolition under National Highways plans.

With no intervention from the DfT, National Highways continued with its plans and the infilling of Great Musgrave bridge was complete in June 2021.

It led to engineers expressing 'shame' in their profession. ICE fellow Judith Skykes also labelled it as "shocking" and called for better solutions to be implemented.

MPs then called an urgent meeting which led to an immediate pause being put in place on National Highways Historical Railway Estate programme.

Eden District Council then informed National Highways (then still Highways England) that it would need to apply for retrospective planning permission to retain the infill at Great Musgrave and that it had a year to put in the application.

National Highways then confirmed to NCE that the cost of reversing the infilling alone will come in between £80,000 to £90,000. The roads body also estimated that it would cost between £316,000 and £431,000 to bring the route under the structure back into full use; that includes the cost of infill reversal, repair costs, masonry repairs to the bridge, strengthening, maintenance and examinations.

Despite the widespread criticism, National Highways internal review concluded that "works to the bridge were necessary to ensure public safety and to preserve the structure until a long term purpose is found".

However, as part of the review National Highways drew up five strengthening options that could be applied should it be ordered to remove the infill.

However, as part of the review National Highways drew up five strengthening options that could be applied should it be ordered to remove the infill.

National Highways hopes were all but extinguished a week before the planning meeting when the council's planning official recommended the application be thrown out. In his formal report, the council's assistant development director Fergus McMorrow concludes the "proposal results in considerable harm to the visual appearance of the bridge as a single span arch structure and fails to complement or enhance the area or protect features or characteristics of local importance, as such the works cause less than substantial harm to a non designated heritage asset".

His report also reveals that 913 representations were received in response to the planning application's consultation. Of those, 911 objected to the infill with just two in support.

And then last week, Eden District Council voted unanimously against the application - bringing a year of twists and turns to an end.

Following the decision, National Highways confirmed that it wouldn't be seeking to appeal the decision.

Rob Horgan - Construction / Infrastructure Writer of the Year

National Highways head of Historical Railways Estate programme Hélène Rossiter said National Highways would “no longer consider infilling of any structures as part of our future plans, unless there is absolutely no alternative”.

An Eden District Council spokesperson told NCE that the council will now “look to serve an enforcement order for the removal of the infill, at the earliest opportunity”.

Following the Great Musgrave fallout, National Highways has drawn up a new way of assessing abandoned rail bridges and tunnels within its control. The new way of working will see decisions on major works planned for the Historical Railways Estate reviewed in collaboration with experts from across the heritage, environmental and active travel sector who have been selected to form a stakeholder advisory forum.

The forum includes the Department for Transport (DfT), Sustrans, Railway Paths Ltd, Railway Heritage Trust, The HRE Group, Heritage Railway Association, Natural England, Historic England (also representing Cadw), Historic Scotland and ADEPT.

Rob Horgan - Construction / Infrastructure Writer of the Year

Cost of patching up TfL's bridges and tunnels to top £35M

17 May 2022



Transport for London (TfL) has forecast further cost increases related to patching up the Capital's ageing surface transport assets.

In total, TfL spent a record £2.9M on implementing interim measures for its road tunnels and bridges during the last year, with a further £3.3M spent on reactive safety measures, agenda papers released ahead of this week's TfL programmes and investment committee meeting reveal. That is up by almost £1.4M compared to the previous year and represents a 995% increase in spending since 2016/17. (See table below for year-by-year breakdown.)

The number of assets with interim measures in place has also more than doubled in the last six years, with an additional six structures requiring interim action within the past year. In total, 54 TfL road tunnels and bridges currently have interim safety measures in places. An additional six structures are forecast to need interim measures during the next year, with £6.8M put aside for interim and reactive safety measures during 2022/23.

Interim measures include speed restrictions, weight or width restrictions, lane closures or even carriageway or road closures. Noteworthy examples include weight limits at Rotherhithe Tunnel, speed restrictions on the A40 Westway and the closure of Hammersmith Bridge to all motorised traffic.

TfL attributes this increase to delays and budget cuts to its surface transport assets renewal programme, which includes major repair work to structures including the Rotherhithe Tunnel, A40 Westway, Vauxhall Bridge and Hammersmith Bridge.

In total, TfL estimates the total cost of delays to its renewal programme will exceed £35M in the coming financial year.

Year	Assets with Interim Measures	Annual Cost of Interim Measures	Cost of Reactive Safety works	Total Cost	Estimated delay cost
2016/17	24	£451k	£115k	£566k	Not measured
2017/18	26	£556k	£410k	£966k	
2018/19	39	£702k	£1,369k	£2,071k	
2019/20	43	£2,496k	£1,440k	£3,936k	
2020/21	48	£2,500k	£2,381k	£4,881k	
2021/22	54	£2,900k	£3,330k	£6,200k	
2022/23*	60	£3,200k	£3,660k	£6,860k	£35,890k

Interim Measures and Associated Costs, TfL

The total renewals expenditure across 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 was £374M, equivalent of £93M per annum. For comparison, typical steady state investment per annum prior to 2018/19 was around £150M to £200M.

The report adds: "The pause in asset renewals for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and continued reduced investment since has resulted in a decline in asset condition, in particular for carriageways."

TfL is currently working under a less than 'Do minimum' scenario in line with the transport operator's "managed decline" status agreed with government during the latest funding negotiations.

TfL papers add: "Under this scenario, asset condition will deteriorate more rapidly than the 'do minimum', resulting in increased likelihood of restrictions and asset closures in order to keep the network safe.

"This will result in increased operational expenditure [...] to install and maintain increasing numbers of temporary restrictions as well as increased network impacts and delays to road users including increased journey times for buses.

"The backlog of renewals will increase in both scale and time to address it, and renewals schemes are likely to need more extensive, and therefore costly, interventions as works are no longer optimised."

Rob Horgan - Construction / Infrastructure Writer of the Year

It adds: "As the proposed programme of renewals is below the Do Minimum investment required, the burden on maintenance and operational budgets will increase, and network operability and reliability will decrease. Furthermore, there are increasing risks of accelerating asset deterioration that will require difficult decisions to be made on how we prioritise the assets most in need of renewal, recognising factors such as the financial constraints, safety, operability, cost recovery, people and supply chain resources, as well as road space access issues."

TfL has previously warned that key routes such as the A40 Westway, Rotherhithe Tunnel and Gallows Corner Flyover face being closed without the proper investment for major repairs.

The capital's transport operator has previously estimated that it needs a £2bn investment in its entire road network during the next 10 years to prevent key road bridges and tunnels from shutting.

The agenda papers add: "The two-year reduction in asset renewals in 2018/19 and 2019/20 and continued reduced investment has increased the number of temporary closures and interim measures on the network to ensure we maintain safety. This has placed substantial pressure on maintenance budgets and increased the risk of reputational damage to TfL and customer dissatisfaction."

The deteriorating condition of TfL's road structures has been a long time coming. In July 2021, the London Assembly called for a full investigation into the ownership of London's tunnels and bridges.

As previously revealed by NCE, more money was spent developing plans for the failed Garden Bridge project than TfL has spent on maintaining 25 River Thames crossings during the last 10 years.

MP for Richmond Park and the Liberal Democrats transport spokesperson Sarah Olney warned that failing to properly invest in London's existing infrastructure could result in more "Hammersmith-Bridge type sagas".

"This is a clear and uncomfortable reminder that at the heart of the Hammersmith Bridge fiasco lies a matter of priorities," Olney told NCE.

"As Mayor of London, Boris Johnson was happy to waste money on a failed vanity project in order to elevate himself into higher office. Now he's arrived at Number 10, his interest in London's major infrastructure appears to have vanished and his Department for Transport's concentration directed elsewhere."

She added: "If the government's reluctance to properly invest in London's bridges continues, who is to say we can't expect to see another Hammersmith Bridge-type saga every few years?"

"The economic, health and environmental cost of this would be profound. The government has to step up and take action now by committing the necessary money to keep London moving."

Work planned for 2022/23:

- A40 Westway – major expansion joint on westbound carriageway replaced mitigating a key asset risk, concept design work on work package two (comb joints, parapets, concrete deterioration) completed to allow prioritisation of future activity
- Kingston Cromwell Road bus station – Detailed design completed for the renewal of the bus station
- Brent Cross Structures – Feasibility completed and single option identified
- Croydon Flyover – surveys and investigations complete
- Gallows Corner – single option selected and submission of business case to Department for Transport
- Protective measures on bridges – works complete on Westminster bridge
- Hammersmith Bridge – completion of stabilisation works to make the bridge safe and allow its continued use by pedestrians and cyclists
- Other works including: 150,000sqm of carriageway resurfacing; 350 new bus shelters; 157 lighting columns and 2400 LED replacements to be installed on the network; 45 traffic signal controllers renewed; five bridge and structure renewals

Planned projects which will not progress include:

- The procurement for detailed design and build for the major renewal of Rotherhithe Tunnel. A series of short-term targeted interventions will be progressed to keep the asset safe and operable in the interim
- TfL will complete the Hostile Vehicle Mitigation (HVM) work on Westminster Bridge, but no permanent measures will be progressed on other bridges
- 98,000sqm of carriageway renewals
- Borough Roads and Bridges investment priorities outside those already committed

Rob Horgan - Construction / Infrastructure Writer of the Year

Future of Bridges | Hammersmith Bridge reopening presents enormous engineering challenge

29 Nov 2021



The political wrangle which has held up repairs to Hammersmith Bridge pales in comparison to the enormous engineering challenge of repairing one of London's most iconic Thames crossings.

With the river lapping below Hammersmith Bridge and autumn leaves beginning to fall on the banks either side of the crossing, it is easy to forget that the Victorian structure has been front and centre of an ongoing political wrangle.

This crossing of the Thames between Barnes on its south bank and Hammersmith to the north was closed to motor vehicles in April 2019 due to concerns about the integrity of the structure, which is owned by Hammersmith & Fulham Council. It was also closed to pedestrians and cyclists in August 2020.

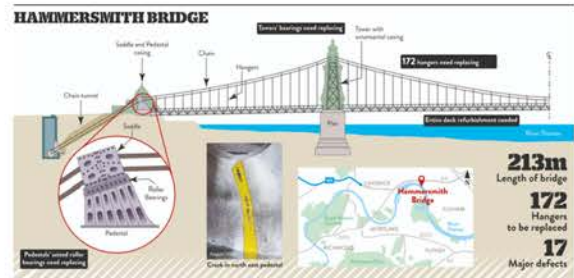
Partial reopening

Now, pedestrians and cyclists are once again crossing the 134 year old structure after consultant Mott MacDonald deemed a partial reopening safe in July. River traffic beneath the bridge has also resumed, having been halted last summer because of fears that the structure could suffer a catastrophic collapse.

Funding arguments between the government, the local council and Transport for London (TfL) have held up efforts to fully reopen the bridge. The Department for Transport's (DfT's) Hammersmith Bridge Taskforce has committed the government to stump up a third of the repair bill; with cash-strapped TfL and Hammersmith & Fulham Council responsible for finding the rest of the £141M to £163M needed to fully restore the structure.

Returning Hammersmith Bridge to its former glory will be a huge feat of engineering, says the taskforce's project manager Dana Skelly.

Hammersmith Bridge was designed by Sir Joseph Bazalgette and opened in 1887. It was constructed on the foundations of an earlier suspension bridge. The existing structure comprises a timber deck bolted to cross girders, supported by longitudinal stiffening girders.



The footway is a timber deck supported by wrought iron cantilever beams that connect to the main cross girders and the stiffening girders. The deck structure is suspended from 172 wrought iron hangers connected to parallel suspension chains.

The chains are connected to saddles, which are designed to slide on bearings at the top of the wrought iron towers. At each end, the chains pass over abutment saddles supported on cast iron pedestals and housed in ornamental cast iron casings before passing down sub-surface tunnels to the anchorages.

Skelly and DfT engineering director David Coles outline the challenges of repairing the bridge, including replacing the hangers along with the seized bearings on all four pedestals and on both towers.

The bridge deck must also be refurbished, the pedestals require strengthening and the pedestal casings must be overhauled.

Rob Horgan - Construction / Infrastructure Writer of the Year

Coles says that in total "17 major defective elements need addressing before the bridge can be fully opened", with almost every part of the structure in need attention. The exact list of defects is a closely guarded secret, with the council refusing to release engineering evaluations on the grounds of national security.

What we do know is that the main problem is that steel roller bearings between each of the four saddles and pedestals at each end of the bridge have seized up.

As a result there are unbalanced thermally induced cable forces on either side of the saddles, which have caused the pedestals to crack.

Concerns that the bridge could collapse were raised after cracks were found in three of the four pedestals that support the suspension cable saddles at the abutments.

The discovery that one of these cracks had widened led to the full closure of the bridge in August 2020.

A report compiled by consultant Aecom for the DfT taskforce reveals that the crack in question was within the north east pedestal and was approximately 160mm to 240mm long. Further investigations by Mott MacDonald for the council found 17 cracks within three of the four pedestals; seven within the south west pedestal, six in the north east pedestal and four in the north west pedestal.

The Aecom report, commissioned by the DfT after the bridge closed in August 2020, concludes that the "cause of the cracks was related to the rollers between the pedestal tops and the underside of the chain saddles being seized".

It adds: "In the original design of the bridge, the roller bearings accommodate temperature changes by movement along the top of the pedestals. The pedestals were designed to withstand a force normal to the top surface applied via the rollers from the saddle. However, as the roller bearings have seized, this results in a restraining force being applied to the top of the pedestal, leading to high shear and bending stresses in the pedestal castings for which they were not designed."

Mott MacDonald's short term stabilisation plan has recently been approved by Hammersmith & Fulham Council. The initial plan is a short term strengthening programme to get the bridge open. It centres on replacing the seized roller bearings on the abutment pedestals.

Seized bearing replacement

Work to remove the architectural casings around the pedestals is now underway. Once they are removed, contractors will fit temporary frames to provide restraint while the seized bearings are replaced. The deviation saddles over which the chains pass at the pedestals will then be jacked up from the pedestals to facilitate replacement of the roller bearings with laminated elastomeric bearings. Mott MacDonald's stabilisation plan is earmarked to cost £6M and is due to be completed in under a year.

Strengthening the Victorian structure's pedestals is an equally tricky job, especially considering its Grade II status. The pedestals were cast to form hollow cellular boxes. Each comprises three longitudinal webs with linking end plates and two intermediate diaphragms. The webs have full-height stiffeners. The upper plate has a machined top surface for the rollers and the bottom plate is fixed to foundation stones via 12 vertical bolts.

The pedestals are made from grey cast iron using sand moulds. There are elongated openings in each of the faces except the upper plate, largely to facilitate the casting process and permit the sand mould to be removed after casting.

Aecom's report adds that "these would have been large complex castings for the time and it is evident that defects and discontinuities were formed in the material during the casting process."

When stabilisation work is complete, longer term – more expensive – repairs will become the priority. While the council is unable to release a complete list of work that needs to be carried out yet, it is keen to stress that permanent repairs must not be put on the back burner after the initial stabilisation.

FEATURE WRITER OF THE YEAR

Peter Apps

Inside Housing

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

Directly relevant to their publication's readers yet compelling for a wider audience, the winning entry set the bar for what great feature writing should be. Seamlessly blending hard-earned technical knowledge, others' expertise and the human stories of people affected by the cladding scandal, the winner's features were both informative and touching. Their impressive ongoing coverage of building safety, including deft handling of a whistleblower's testimony, resulted in three thought-provoking features that left a lasting impression.

ITEM 1:

End Our Cladding Scandal: the story of the campaign so far

The story of residents trapped in dangerous flats, unable to sell and unable to pay to fix them has become a sad fixture in the reporting of the UK's built environment over the last five years. Inside Housing has not only contributed to this vital reporting, but has been an active participant in the campaign for change. Pete Apps has led this work at the magazine, becoming embedded with the various residents groups in the process. As a result, in March, he was able to draw them together to sit down and tell the inside story of how their campaign had grown from a couple of Facebook messages to a national campaign which has extracted £9bn from government. The result is a compelling, inspiring and enraging insider account of the effort and determination put in by everyday people to fight for change and the reluctance of government to meet their demands. Pete was able to secure the access to write this story because of the trust he has built up with these groups over the years. The copy demonstrates his unrivalled knowledge of the genesis of a national scandal.

ITEM 2:

The secret life of a fire risk assessor: whistleblower warns of culture of cover-up

What do fire risk assessments really tell us about the safety of a block of flats? Pete's expose in March unveiled a worrying culture of cover-up where inconvenient truths simply go untold. That a whistleblower was willing to speak to him – and sought him out – is testament to the work he has put in over many years to make himself a public authority and source of information on this vital issue. The result is a story which many would not want told: how risk assessors are treated when they try to raise concern about the safety of buildings with their owners. Pete was able to persuade the source to speak to him candidly and verified their claims by viewing documents they provided. The result is a piece which merits close reading for any building owner or social landlord in the UK who genuinely cares about safety. The piece challenges his readers to ask: how sure are you that this culture doesn't exist at your organisation? Raising awkward questions like this is the true value of a fierce and independent trade press – embedded in a sector but willing to challenge it.

ITEM 3:

Grenfell five years on: could it happen again?

After years reporting on the Grenfell Tower fire, its causes and its aftermath Pete found himself in a unique position to ask the most important question come the fifth anniversary and the national attention which resulted from it: could it happen again? His long-read analyses the key failures which led to the Grenfell disaster and presents the damning conclusion that sufficient change has not yet come. The piece shows Pete's key attributes as a specialist reporter: technically astute, able to turn complicated issues into a readable and accessible report and plugged in to a range of contacts who can talk intelligently on the issue. Ranging from globally respected academics to German firefighters the report presents a comprehensive and authoritative assessment of how the country has responded to the once-in-a-generation disaster at Grenfell Tower and marks a clear and uncompromising call for change to prevent a repeat.

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

End Our Cladding Scandal: the story of the campaign so far

29 Mar 2022



The government's progress on cladding remediation has been driven by the actions of residents putting ministers under pressure behind the scenes. Peter Apps catches up with the key players.

In February 2019, a medical student called William Martin was reaching the end of his tether. He had bought a flat in a Sheffield block, and it was one of the few hundred identified as having the same combustible cladding as Grenfell Tower.

With no government money for remediation, he and his neighbours were being asked to pay £52,000 each for its remediation.

A rising number of residents around the country were in the same boat, but as yet there was no unified campaign. Will saw a picture of a woman called Ritu Saha in the newspaper, describing the same situation at her block in Bromley, south London.

"I thought 'this woman looks really angry', which was also how I felt," he recalls. "So I Facebook-stalked her and tried to get a conversation."

She gave him her mobile number and he called.

"I was standing outside Gloucester Road Underground Station trying to get home when this ass called," says Ritu, jokingly. It would be the start of a long journey.

Along with some other leaseholders, they had been in touch with a Guardian journalist who had already covered their stories. He suggested to them that they would have more success penetrating the media if they had a formal campaign group with a title. He suggested setting one up and launching it in the paper.

Will, Ritu and a handful of other affected residents agreed. They set up a Gmail account, called themselves the UK Cladding Action Group (UKCAG) and posed for some photos, which were printed in The Guardian.

"The inbox has never stopped pinging since," says Will. "We had no idea what we were taking on."

At around the same time in Manchester, residents from five impacted blocks connected over social media and agreed to meet up at Banyan Tree pub in Castlefield. Among them were residents of the Green Quarter, who has recently lost a high-profile tribunal against their freeholder and now knew beyond doubt that the solution they needed was political, not legal.

They too decided to launch a campaign. One of the residents jokingly suggested 'Cladiators', but the name struck a chord. The Manchester Cladiators launched on social media the next day.

These were the beginnings of a campaign that would go on to attract thousands of supporters, highlight an injustice affecting the lives of millions and twist the arm of government to release £9bn to fix it.

Here, Inside Housing, which has helped their work from an early stage, tells the story of how the campaign has developed.

Ritu says that the campaign really began when Grenfell United - a group set up by bereaved and survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire - got in touch and helped UKCAG get its first meeting with ministers. "Without them, I don't think I would have been able to make those first meetings happen," she recalls.

Ritu met with then-housing minister Kit Malthouse during her lunch break from work. "I only had an hour," she says. "So I had to literally run out of the office, have the meeting and then come back."

This meeting was when it first came home to Will and Ritu that the government would not have a swift solution to offer. Officials asked them if they could provide a spreadsheet of affected blocks, so they could understand the size of the crisis.

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

"My jaw hit the ground when he said that," Will recalls. "I was like, 'Are you joking me?' This was almost two years after Grenfell and I thought they would have collated that data themselves, but instead they wanted to get it from a few volunteers who had only been doing this for a couple of months."

In March 2019, the new representatives of UKCAG and the Manchester Cladators met up in the Canary Wharf offices of Inside Housing to discuss the launch of a shared campaign.

It was branded End Our Cladding Scandal and set out three primary objectives: that the government should cover the cost of safety works; set a timescale for its completion; and reimburse residents for the bills they had already expended on interim measures.

Over the next fortnight, the campaign received backing from a huge range of industry bodies, celebrities and politicians from across the political spectrum. It launched with research, carried out by Will, showing the startling mental health toll of dangerous cladding on residents.

Just a fortnight later, the government announced £200m to pay for the removal of aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding from private buildings. This was the first cash the government had allocated to private sector blocks following £400m for the social housing sector a year earlier.

But it did not go down well the growing number of leaseholders involved in the campaign.

The problem was that the funding only covered ACM. And thanks to the latest government advice notes, remediation demands were piling up in buildings with all kinds of other materials. Campaigners branded the announcement "a cladding lottery".

"I can remember we held a meeting in parliament the day before the ACM fund was announced, and Kit Malthouse his team came into the room and said, 'You're going to be really happy with the announcement tomorrow, guys. It's really good news,' Will recalls. "There's always this expectation that we should be grateful for this, and that really gets my goat. I shouldn't be graceful for anything - I should never have been put in this situation."

As the months rolled forward, the campaign continued to gather backers from affected blocks around the country - increasingly those who were in buildings with other types of combustible cladding and insulation than what was first identified.

People were discovering that they were unable to sell due to the refusal of lenders to offer a mortgage on their flat. By November, it was estimated that the entire flat resale market in England was grinding to a standstill amid struggles to identify the cladding material on the external walls.

Against this backdrop, and with a general election looming, the campaign relaunched with a call to all political parties to provide a Building Safety Fund that extended beyond ACM and to take political leadership of the mounting crisis. The campaign asks were incorporated wholesale into the Labour Party's manifesto but were largely ignored by others. The Conservatives, who won a large majority, barely referenced the issue.

But the issue was only continuing to grow as residents of blocks all over the country were suddenly receiving the shattering news that their homes had dangerous materials on their walls and they were on the hook for unpayable bills to cover the cost of repair.

Tash Letchford had bought a 35% share in a shared ownership flat in Southampton owned by housing association Vivid in 2016. In February 2020, she was told that the building had combustible high-pressure laminate cladding, combustible insulation and issues with missing fire breaks. She was told that the terms of her lease meant she would have to pay the full costs of remediation.

"We got together with our neighbours and started campaigning, and then we connected with some other blocks in Southampton," Tash recalls... "We got in touch with Ritu and Will to ask about joining a national campaign".

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

Similarly in Birmingham, Jennifer Reid and her neighbours at Islington Court discovered that they were also caught up in the scandal. "In February 2020, we had this hammer blow saying we were facing bills of £40,000 to £50,000 each. I think the world sort of dropped out because obviously I've got a huge mortgage on this place and I'd never have been able to pay," she says.

Jennifer and her neighbours were among the first to experience a secondary devastating financial cost of the crisis: insurance. Their premiums were hiked 390% meaning they totalled around £1,300 a year for each flat.

Julie, a 59-year-old grandmother who lived at The Decks in Runcorn, was caught by the same issue. Her insurance shot up to £719 a quarter due to the fire safety issues. After speaking to the media, she was contacted by one of the Manchester Cladiators team, who persuaded her to set up Liverpool Cladiators.

These disparate campaign groups came together for a rally outside parliament in February 2020. The increasing media attention they were driving helped to pile pressure on the new government to act.

A month later, £1bn was announced - the first government funding to cover blocks without ACM. But this was still a lottery - it would cover an estimated third of the affected buildings, was to be allocated "first come, first served" and excluded blocks below 18 metres entirely.

And the number of people impacted was growing. The new government had elected to consolidate its prior advice notes into a single document, with the inadvertent effect of applying the requirement to remove combustible cladding to blocks of all heights.

Around the country, tens of thousands of leaseholders seeking to sell were being told they could not, unless they could provide a form demonstrating the safety of the external facade.

But this was suddenly no longer a pressing agenda. Just weeks after the announcement of the Building Safety Fund, the country plunged into its first lockdown. For those in blocks with dangerous cladding, the impact of this was magnified: they were stuck 24/7 in buildings with combustible cladding. Any who lost their earnings as a result of the pandemic still had to meet the costs of insurance and a waking watch.

As work did get under way, residents increasingly lived inside building sites. "I've had to do some really high-level management meetings from my car during the height of the pandemic because you open Zoom and you see someone rolling by your window with a huge drill," says Jennifer. For others, their buildings were covered in weather-proof tarpaulin as the cladding was removed, blocking out all daylight.

Steadily, more and more groups from around the country joined what was becoming a national movement. In September 2020, the campaign relaunched - this time with dozens of groups from most of the UK's major cities, the editorial support of The Sunday Times as well as Inside Housing, and a new '10-point plan' to fix the crisis.

Mammoth WhatsApp groups were set up to coordinate media efforts, political engagement and general discussion among dozens of members.

The campaigners began a seemingly endless series of Zoom summits with government officials and trade associations ranging from UK Finance to the National Housing Federation. This was on top of enquiries from other leaseholders seeking help and a steady drum beat of media requests. The work snowballed into something like an additional full-time job.

"The WhatsApp messages are just relentless," says Tash. "I just sometimes want to switch my phone off and chuck it off the scaffolding."

"I've spent at least five hours every single day of my life working on cladding - and that includes every Saturday and Sunday," says Rim. "It is unending."

"You're just constantly doing this week in, week out. It never really drops away," says Julie. "One of the worst experiences for me was when a guy emailed to me on Christmas Day. It was heartbreaking to read, he was just so desperate and didn't know where to turn."

"But I just thought, 'It's Christmas Day - I'm having a day off. But then on Boxing Day I had a really snotty email from him complaining that I didn't respond.'"

The slow pace of government action has also been immensely frustrating. "It felt like smashing my head against a brick wall," says Ritu bluntly. "I was like, 'how do I know this as a lay person and you don't?' And that has actually been a consistent theme throughout really."

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

"In some of the meetings they make you feel like a minion," says Julie. "I'll look at them sometimes and think, 'How dare you make me feel like that?' I'm a grandmother of 59 years of age. Especially the meeting with [former housing secretary] Robert Jenrick. That was a waste of time. He was arrogant. He didn't look at anybody. He just didn't want to be there. It felt like they were looking down on the peasants and they have no right to make me feel that way."

There was also a noticeable change in language from ministers around this time...The language changed from protecting leaseholders to also protecting the taxpayer, and they started referring to protecting us from unaffordable costs," recalls Giles Grover, a member of the Manchester Cladiators.

Rumours mounted of a plan to set up a loan scheme that would see residents forced to take on long-term loans through their service charges. "That was when it was when we realised it was getting real, and we really thought there was the possibility that we were going to get completely screwed over," says Giles.

In late 2020, the campaigners joined forces with Conservative backbenchers Stephen McParland and Royston Smith, with the objective of tabling amendments to forthcoming fire safety legislation to protect leaseholders from costs.

Lawyers impacted by the crisis drafted the motion and they were able to help round up a substantial rebellion: 32 Tory MPs at one stage, including former leader Iain Duncan Smith. But with Scottish National Party MPs abstaining on English legislation, they were well off the numbers required for a defeat.

The pressure helped to drive the government to release an extra £3.5bn for cladding funding in February 2021. Now cladding works on all blocks above 18 metres would get funding.

But leaseholders were still stuck with the costs for additional work and those in buildings below 18 metres were told they would be forced to take on loans to cover the bill under a plan developed by insurance specialist Michael Wade. The campaign described the announcement as a betrayal".

This is a regular theme: each of the many announcements on the crisis is packaged by ministers as a full solution to the issue, but leaves many of those affected behind.

"I don't think we'll ever be able to say we've won," says Will. "That's what's so unsatisfying. Eventually we'll be left with a small pocket of people who are screwed, and most other people will have drifted off or died. And the government is aware of that. It feels like a deliberate strategy."

The campaign did not go away. Campaigners from another group had drafted a 'Polluter Pays amendment' that sought to fasten legal responsibility to the companies responsible for the crisis. This measure attracted the backing of some MPs and peers and the attention of the ministerial team.

The passionate campaigning for it undoubtedly helped to shift ministerial language towards the scandal's 'polluters' - a phrase that is now frequently used in government statements and at least partially reflected in policy.



Picture: Lucie Heath

There was a hope that when the government's flagship Building Safety Bill returned to parliament in the spring, one or both of the rebel amendments might attract enough support to force a U-turn from ministers.

Ultimately, this has delivered at least partial success. Housing secretary Michael Gove last month announced plans to include statutory protection for residents from costs associated with cladding in a new Building Safety Bill - which on its first draft was designed to make it easier for freeholders to recover costs from residents.

Costs for other works will be capped (at £10,000 nationally and £15,000 in London for most) and tough new measures will be brought in to extract remediation funding from the companies responsible for the crisis.

These announcements were on top of plans for £4bn in additional funding for buildings between 11 and 18 metres tall, which Mr Gove says will be provided by the housebuilding industry.

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

This has brought the total pot to £9bn, which is precisely £9bn more than there was on the table when Ritu and Will had their first phone conversation and the Cladiacors sat down for their first drink in Manchester in early 2019.

But these measures remain partial: there will still be years to wait for the funding to deliver and the capped costs are hardly insubstantial for those who will face them. For buildings below 11 metres tall, there is still no financial support.

How do the campaigners feel about what they've achieved? There is some positivity.

"I've seen a side in myself I've never seen before," says Julie. "It's made me a fighter. If this is ever over, I'll be looking for the next political cause to go. Because once you start looking, there is so much to be angry about."

"I know all my neighbours as a result of this," Jennifer says. "There are 110 blocks impacted in the city and you walk down the street and bump into people you know from them. It's sort of made a city feel like a village, which is a nice thing that's come out of this shitty situation."

But there remains an overwhelming sense of anger. Now a doctor, Will has spent the pandemic working for the NHS. "At the height of the pandemic particularly, it was really tough," he says. "I just actually wanted to say, 'Well, you know what, sod you. I don't want to work for your NHS and I don't even want to live in this country anymore because of the way you've handled this.'"

"People have really suffered," says Tash. The costs in her building will now be covered by a combination of Vivid and the Building Safety Fund, but the stress has still inflicted harm. "We went for a drink with one of our neighbours the other day who has gone through a divorce and the stress of all this was definitely a factor. All of us have had our lives on hold, haven't taken jobs, haven't had children. That's all a result of this taking so long to solve."

"Whenever I look back, it's the personal stories that make me think, 'What the hell is going on in this world? We've got to do something about it,'" Giles adds.

"This was always about political will," says Ritu. "The government could have made these announcements five days after Grenfell:-"

Does she feel proud of her role in forcing that political will? She pauses. "No," she says. "For me, it is just anger."

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

The secret life of a fire risk assessor: whistleblower warns of culture of cover up

21 Mar 2022



Fire risk assessors are being put under pressure to play down risks, with major issues being covered up as a result, a whistleblower tells Peter Apps. Illustration by Joe Wilson

Jonathan* wants to talk. He phones Inside Housing out of the blue and almost immediately launches into a monologue.

What concerns him is fire risk assessments. He has worked in the sector as an assessor for more than a decade and believes the system is failing.

What he says is concerning, revealing and plainly in the public interest. But there are problems. Simply put, Jonathan doesn't want to be identified. And listing the full details of what he describes would make it obvious within the small world of risk assessment who he is.

Therefore, Inside Housing has decided to take the unusual step of publishing his views anonymously. We have verified that he worked at the places he says he did, at the times he says he did. We have tested his evidence with others familiar with the industry, who say it rings true. But we cannot completely verify his claims without identifying him.

Nonetheless, the picture he paints is of a system that is broken and placing residents at risk. It is one on which much reliance is placed and could not be of more importance to the social housing sector, so we have decided to tell his story.

Jonathan began his career at a large local authority as part of a five-person in-house team. He began by shadowing a more senior assessor for a year - something he describes as "good", because it allowed someone to double-check the work.

But he quickly began to realise the system was not working as it should.

"There were numerous times when the fire safety team would be placed under huge amounts of pressure to change reports," he says.

'You're not independent'

A significant example was when the authority procured a new contractor to replace fire doors. When the safety team checked the doors, they were not up to standard: failing to shut and poorly installed. But nothing was done. "We were ignored because it was too much trouble to deal with a contractor that wasn't performing," he says. That would happen numerous times.

"We had a disastrous roll-out of sprinklers, when the contractor literally damaged every single compartment wall in every single old person's home at that time," he says. "But one of the problems that you've got is you're not independent, you're working within a hierarchy and, quite often, you don't have any authority."

This really hit home for Jonathan when he assessed a supported living facility for adults with learning difficulties

"The manager had already been in touch with me to say she had real concerns that she had inadequate staff to safely evacuate people," he says. "But when I assessed the building, it transpired that, over time, it had been changed from the original design. There was an escape route corridor which wasn't protected.

"There were lots of other things: locks on individual bedroom doors, so that people wouldn't have been able to get out if there had been a fire at night. The idea was that the manager would come along and unlock all of these doors.

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"There were residents who had wheelchairs and had no means to get out, or there was a ramp that finished in steps, so they would have only been able to get so far.

"The report was duly completed and it was marked as high, high risk."

Jonathan felt he had done a thorough job. He expected the issues to be addressed promptly, even perhaps to be praised for his vigilance. He was to be disappointed.

"I was called to a meeting with the director of adult social services," Jonathan recalls. "The director of property, my manager, got wind of the fact that this wasn't going to be a great meeting and came to support me.

"I was expecting them to be talking to me about a programme of how they could best approach this so that they could mitigate the risk, but actually they started shouting at me, literally shouting, saying, how dare I produce this report."

The experience startled him. "I was gobsmacked, really. I just didn't know what I'd done wrong here. This is what I should be saying. If someone can't get out of a building, they can't get out of the building."

"They said some of the language was inflammatory, but it was just the truth," he says. "I'm saying this person can't get out because you've got a lock on their door."

The manager who had raised concerns was moved out of the home. "It's frightening, because that's basically what happens. People aren't protected for whistleblowing at all," says Jonathan.

The facility remained open, with the concerns unaddressed, for five years before closing for other reasons.

Eventually, Jonathan left the local authority's team and went freelance, picking up contracts with local authorities and housing associations. The problems did not go away.

At one large London borough, a key performance indicator was in place to reduce the number of buildings found to be subject to 'high-risk' issues. However, this created a perverse incentive to downgrade important issues.

"They would say to the assessors, 'We have got however many high risks, can you downgrade any of those?' Because they didn't want to go to board meetings and say, 'we've got 36 buildings that have got high risk,'" says Jonathan.

He worked as part of a fire safety team, under a fire safety manager who reported to a director. "There was an absolute bullying culture in there," he recalls. "There was this sort of fear culture. They [managers] would slate particular risk assessors for raising too many issues.

"You would go into a meeting and [the manager] would have one of your reports and they would say, 'You submitted a high risk, I need you to reduce that.'"

Boards were keen to reduce the number of actions from risk assessments, and this was passed down to the managers, who would pressure their staff to find less to report. "That's completely the wrong approach," says Jonathan. "You should be celebrating the amount of information you've got, because it means you've got risk assessors doing a thorough job."

Managers control the process and are responsible for the career progression of those on their team, if the service is being provided in-house. "There's a whole load of things that people can do to make your career end or make your life miserable," he says. "So you keep your head under the parapet, choose an easy life and stop raising things."

He says that senior managers in an organisation may not even be aware this is going on. "In a local authority, you never get to speak to the people higher up. Your manager is sort of a gatekeeper," he says. "People at the top or on the board may or may not know what's going on because, half of the time, the gatekeepers don't want to present bad news."

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What is a fire risk assessment?

Fire safety legislation passed in 2005 requires building owners to "make a suitable and sufficient assessment" of the fire risk in their buildings.

The legislation was primarily intended for places of work, but buildings with multiple dwellings were covered, because the communal parts are workplaces for employees of the landlord.

Nonetheless, assessments have become a cornerstone of residential firesafety. They are the primary means for enforcing authorities (primarily fireservices) to identify shortcomings and the only statutory assurance that the protections necessary to maintain life during a fire are in place. This is particularly crucial, given the continuing reliance on the 'stay put' policy for most blocks of flats.

The legislation set no rules on how frequently assessments should be done and who should do it, although guidance suggests they should be completed annually and done by competent, qualified professionals.

'Fear culture'

What sort of issues are being missed as a result? "It's so prolific," says Jonathan. "I've seen things like new build properties being built with a refuge area [a space for those who cannot escape to await rescue] which has a communication button that has never been wired up to anything. We had one door company where all their doors hadn't been fitted correctly. They had holes hidden under the architraves [meaning smoke could seep through during a fire]."

Have matters improved since Grenfell demonstrated the consequences of sidelining fire safety? "I anything, it's become even more of a fear culture, he says. "People are so reluctant to hear that things might not be right."

All of this should be immensely worrying to boards and senior leaders at social landlords.

The fire risk assessment process is already weak. Most assessments only cover the 'common parts' of a building and do not involve any 'intrusive' works. So problems hidden by a panel or inside flats will not be found. There is no mandatory qualification for assessors or a professional body overseeing their work.

And yet the fire safety system places enormous weight on their reports. They remain the only legally mandated check to ensure buildings are safe. They are relied upon to maintain the 'compartmentation' vital to preserving life in a fire, thanks to the ongoing reliance on the 'stay put' policy.

How common are the problems our source describes? One other senior fire risk assessor says building owners can "try to affect outcomes", but adds that this should not affect the assessment. Another says that he has experienced similar efforts to pressure the outcomes of his report.

Dr Peter Wilkinson, technical director of the Institution of Fire Engineers, which has a register of fire risk assessors, says it is not something he has come across in his own career.

"I have every sympathy with people being put in a difficult situation," he says. "I'm sure that happens in lots of walks of life, but, as a competent risk assessor, your duty is to communicate your findings honestly. Pressure from the client is not something you should allow to influence your work."

He notes that working as a freelance client is different from being an employee, when a manager has more power to pressure the work you produce. But even for freelancers, isn't there an incentive to keep the client happy to retain their business?

"If it means you are not going to receive the contract next year, then, ultimately, that is what you have to accept," he says.

There is a clear risk here, though, of a race to the bottom, with the work going to the least scrupulous.

Leaving that to one side, there is some evidence of the sort of pressure our source describes that has emerged from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry

Carl Stokes, the freelance risk assessor who assessed the tower, accepted that he had downgraded a finding that missing self-closers on flat entrance doors were "high risk" to merely "strong advice" after being put "under pressure" to do so by Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), the building manager (although KCTMO managers denied applying such pressure).

What needs to change? One argument would be to put assessment in the hands of the fire services, particularly for the most at-risk buildings.

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This would require a good deal of additional funding, but would remove the obvious conflict of interest in the current law, which leaves building owners responsible for assessing the risk in their own properties.

Dr Wilkinson adds that, under the current system, risk assessors can notify the fireservice anonymously if they have concerns about a building.

"That would bump it right up to the top of their list, in terms of enforcement," he says. A whistleblowing service for the construction sector - accessible at cross-safety.org - can also be used.

But those placed in the position of our source may be reluctant to do so for fear of being identified.

Lives are on the line. And if the way fire risk is assessed is preventing the free reporting of risks, then that needs to change.

*Name and some identifying details have been changed

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Grenfell five years on: could it happen again?

13 Jun 2022



Picture: Alamy

After the Grenfell Tower fire, politicians of all colours committed to ensuring such a disaster would never happen again. But, five years on, has this promise been kept? Peter Apps investigates

Five years ago this week, the country awoke to heart-stopping images of Grenfell Tower on fire.

As 24-hour news footage showed live pictures of the wrecked tower and devastating images of residents waving white T-shirts from windows, it felt like there was a rare moment of national consensus: this could never be allowed to happen again.

But, five years on, the urgency which followed the disaster has waned. Updates from the public inquiry have long since dropped out of the mainstream media and, at least for those not impacted by its aftermath, the fire feels like a long time ago.

When I speak to people who are not following the detail of the building safety crisis that has gripped Britain in the five years since the blaze, there is an automatic assumption that the problems have been dealt with; that whatever it was that caused a tower block to be engulfed in flame with a quarter of its population trapped inside has been fixed. Surely we would not gamble with a repeat?

The truth is more disturbing. Many of the defects which led to the Grenfell fire still exist in other buildings. And our overall fire strategy has not shifted sufficiently from the total faith placed in telling residents to "stay put", a tactic that came apart with devastating consequences in west London in 2017.

As the five-year anniversary of that terrible night approaches, Inside Housing asked a selection of experts a simple question: could it happen again?

For some, particularly those in government, comfort is taken in statistics. The number of fires and fire deaths in the UK are at a historic low, and continue to fall. Fire services attended 48,664 fires with 237 fatalities in England in 2020-21, down from 115,176 fires and 755 deaths in 1981-82. The trend has been one of almost uninterrupted decline, with the exception of 2017, which included the deaths at Grenfell. Surely this shows we are getting something right?

But these figures can be misconstrued. They tell us a lot about low-consequence, high-probability incidents, and nothing about the threat of a low-probability disaster with catastrophic consequences.

To learn about events like Grenfell, there is little we can do other than look at the event itself and ask if it could be repeated.

Thanks to the diligent work of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, it is now possible to do that with some clarity.

We know that a normal kitchen fire on the fourth floor of the tower was able to escape the flat in which it started through a newly installed window with major defects, which meant it offered little resistance to the flames.

These flames then ignited an external cladding system made of violently combustible plastic products, spreading fire first up the building and then progressively down and around it.

As the blaze broke back into flats through windows, it started a series of flat fires. Internal failures in the building allowed smoke and flame to travel through lobbies and eventually the single staircase – trapping residents inside and hindering efforts to save them.

This was due to numerous issues, but, most importantly, a staggering number of flat entrance doors were missing legally required 'self-closing' devices. This meant that when they were opened as residents fled their burning flats, they did not swing closed.

Finally, there was a critical failure to attempt to evacuate the building once the fire started to get out of control. Residents were told to stay put for more than an hour-and-a-half after the fire started. By the time this advice was changed, the conditions were too severe for many to escape. This made Grenfell an outlier in building fires around the world, with its death toll of 72 far exceeding similar blazes from Milan and Chechnya, to Dubai.

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Putting all of this together, we have a list of basic flaws: dangerous cladding, broken fire doors and the lack of an evacuation plan. What, then, has been done to address these at other buildings?

Cladding

Cladding is where the majority of political and media attention has been focused – with good reason. It is also the only area which has attracted significant public funding, with around £9bn committed to various programmes of cladding removal.

The results, however, are mixed. Immediately after the fire, in spite of independent advice that there was a range of dangerous products on other buildings, the government's remediation efforts focused solely on aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding systems, the type used on Grenfell Tower.

It also limited its initial focus to buildings above 18 metres in height, a relatively arbitrary threshold that has a historical link with the length of firefighters' ladders.

In this narrow area, it has made progress. The latest in a series of monthly updates shows 94% of the 486 buildings over 18 metres in height with dangerous ACM systems have either started or completed the remediation work.

Among these, 318 have fully completed the process and 428 (88%) have had the cladding stripped from their walls. Only one still has no clear plan for remediation.

While it has taken a long time – with two government pledges to complete the work (first June 2020 and then the end of 2021) missed – the fact that so many blocks have had this cladding removed is undoubtedly welcome news.

Tests shown to the public inquiry – including one held secretly by central government since 2002 and those held by the manufacturers of the ACM used on Grenfell since 2004 – speak to the devastating fire performance of this material.

But tall buildings with ACM cladding have only ever been the tip of the iceberg when it comes to building safety in the UK.

What about other types of material? Testing shows a seriously poor performance for high-pressure laminate (HPL) (thin wooden boards bonded together with glue), which failed the UK's official test almost as quickly as ACM in one widely used combination. There have been numerous fires which demonstrated this risk outside of the laboratory.

Systems which use various forms of polystyrene as insulation are also common on high-rise buildings, with tests from Australia suggesting a fire performance comparable to ACM (pictured below). The government has refused requests to run an official test on this material in the UK, despite the fact that it has been linked to deadly fires globally.

Progress identifying and remediating buildings with dangerous cladding materials of this and other forms has been notoriously slow, amid disputes about whether the residents of the buildings, the owners, developers, or the government should pay for it.

A programme to fund remediation of these blocks, now worth £3.5bn, was launched in spring 2020.

So far, registrations have been made for funding to remove cladding from 3,448 buildings, which probably accounts for almost 200,000 individual homes and nearly half a million residents.

Not all of these buildings are progressing with applications for funding, but this is not always because they are safe. Sometimes it is merely because the building owner has not supplied the correct documents, or has provided insufficient data.

So far, just over 1,000 have been approved to proceed with a full application to the fund. But the progress in terms of actually fixing these blocks is miserable. Just 254 have started work and just 30 have completed it – fewer than 1% of the buildings which have applied to the fund.

The government is understood to be "currently monitoring" 1,585 high rises with dangerous cladding, of which 903 still have the materials on their walls. This would account for around 50,000 flats and 120,000 residents – although it is not clear what criteria the government has used to decide which buildings are deemed worthy of monitoring.

It is hard to say how safe or unsafe these buildings are without more data about what they are clad with, and how extensive the cladding is. It is likely that many are far less dangerous than Grenfell Tower. But among the more than 3,000 buildings that applied for funding and are still waiting to have their cladding removed, it is also likely that there are some which are very dangerous indeed.

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And what of buildings below 18 metres in height? Here the picture is even worse. The government estimates there are 75,000 blocks between 11 metres and 18 metres in England, accounting for 1.6 million individual flats.

Results from a pilot data collection exercise published last month suggest between 6,620 and 8,890 will require work to fix them due to "life safety" risks. The data was drawn from a survey of 2,856 buildings, which means there is huge potential for uncertainty.

Given that guidance was only recently changed to impose any restrictions at all on cladding materials used on buildings of this height, there is every reason to believe at least some will be fitted with cladding materials like those used on Grenfell Tower and elsewhere. And this is without considering blocks below 11 metres, for which there aren't even estimates.

We do know that, in London alone, there are 1,099 buildings of all heights of enough concern to the fire service to result in the imposition of a fire strategy that requires everyone to evacuate as soon as a fire breaks out. Using the government's methodology, this probably accounts for around 55,000 individual flats and 130,000 people.

Grenfell was an extreme example and many of these buildings will not be anything near as unsafe. But with so many buildings affected, there are also undoubtedly some out there where the risk is very severe indeed.

And it remains possible that, sooner or later, a normal kitchen fire will occur in one of these buildings which sends flames streaking up the outside in an echo of the terrible events of 14 June 2017.

Fire doors

What about danger on the inside? There were several issues at Grenfell Tower, including the smoke ventilation system and the addition of gas pipes which appear to have punched holes through crucial compartment walls.

But the lack of self-closers on flat entrance doors was most critical, with 64% broken or missing on the night of the fire.

"Of all the fire-stopping measures within a building, the fire door is the biggest one, and if it's open, it can't perform," says Neil Ashdown, managing director of Fire Doors Complete.

Louise Halton, scheme manager at the Fire Door Inspection Scheme (FDIS), adds: "A fire door self-closer is a vital component for most fire doors. It ensures that the fire door closes and remains closed, as a fire door can only hold back the spread of smoke and fire if the door closer operates correctly."

Is this problem widespread? Recent research by the FDIS suggests it is. The organisation warned of a "tragedy waiting to happen" after revealing that 100,000 inspections it carried out produced a failure rate of 75%.

This is not always a result of the door closer. The most common problem was excessive gaps between the door and the frame.

Nonetheless, Ms Halton calls the issue of broken self-closers "a fairly common occurrence". And this, along with the general poor standards FDIS has uncovered, is a problem.

"With three-quarters of fire doors across the UK not meeting the required standard, the risk of a fire-related tragedy increases significantly – particularly in buildings that are home to vulnerable residents," she says.

"The role of fire doors is to keep any fire in the compartment in which it starts, to protect the occupants and contents of other compartments and provide a safe, protected route to allow the occupants to escape."

Mr Ashdown says the cost of a new fire door self-closer is between £30 and £130, and fitting it is around an hour's work. This is not an especially expensive problem to solve, but it can be a big issue. The recent Twin Parks fire in the Bronx in New York (pictured above), which killed 17 people, is understood to have partly been a result of failing fire doors.

Mandatory checks on self-closers, recommended by the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, only come into force next January. Without legal rights to access flats, many housing providers Inside Housing has spoken to fear being unable to complete them.

There is also the question of how good the door is, even if closed. At Grenfell Tower, tests carried out by the Metropolitan Police revealed the doors provided only 15 minutes of fire resistance, as opposed to the legal minimum of 30 minutes.

Further research, commissioned by the government and various manufacturers, showed 25 other models of 'composite door' (typically made of a glass-reinforced plastic shell) failing with just seven models passing. The government's expert panel concluded this was evidence of "a performance issue... across the market".

"This shouldn't be blamed on white van men. The whole issue of fire performance was not at the bottom, it was at the top of the industry," Mr Ashdown says. "What has come out since Grenfell has shocked me."

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Nonetheless, there has been no large-scale replacement of defective fire doors. The government's expert panel stopped short of recommending replacement, and left it down to the individual building owner to decide what to do.

The result is that we remain in a position where hundreds of thousands of flat entrance doors are likely to be defective and may not close automatically in a fire, just as was the case at Grenfell Tower. It is not too much to assume that at least some of them are in buildings with combustible cladding on their walls.

Evacuation

If fixing the outside and inside of buildings is a monumental task, surely we can at least devise plans to ensure people get out during a fire?

In the UK, the pre-Grenfell system placed near total reliance on stay put. This strategy dates back to the early days of tower block construction in the 1960s, and a belief that sturdy fire doors and concrete structures would prevent a fire spreading from one flat to another.

The government stresses, when questioned, that stay put "remains an appropriate strategy where compartmentation works to stop the spread of fire", and that this is the case for the vast majority of fires.

The problem though, is what to do when it does not work.

Pioneering analysis by researchers at the University of Leeds shows that this happens more frequently than sometimes suggested. They analysed fire service data and found fire spread outside the compartment of origin 1,847 times across the 2010s – once every two days on average.

The number of fires attended in high-rise buildings is increasing, bucking the general trend. The University of Leeds data shows that, once a fire breaks out, you are twice as likely to die in a high rise than in a house, and far more prone to delayed attendance by firefighters. All of this points to an urgent need to plan for how to get people out.

But because of our longstanding reliance on stay put, we have not designed our high-rise buildings for evacuation. Most have no fire alarms and just a single staircase, even in the tallest buildings.

On this latter point, we are a global outlier. South Korea is the only other country in the world not to mandate a second staircase. In Italy, the requirement kicks in at 80 metres, in China at 54 metres. In the United States and Ireland it is four storeys and in Canada it is just two.

Not having a second staircase or alarms to alert residents make evacuating a building difficult. At Grenfell Tower, there was no Plan B for residents to evacuate themselves and no Plan B for the fire service to manage an evacuation.

This situation has not improved markedly since the fire. There is still no requirement for new buildings to include a second staircase, and many do not, even new skyscrapers.

What about alarms? The Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommended the adoption of 'evacuation alert systems' which could be operated manually by the fire service if a blaze got out of control.

These will be required in new buildings from December, but there are not yet plans to retrofit them in existing towers. Andrew Scott, director of C-TEC, the alarm company, estimates the cost of installing one of these systems at around £500-£700 a flat.

He adds that one of the major fears among social landlords is false alarms, but this is unlikely. The switch to activate the system is held in a sturdy fire-proof box, accessible only by the fire services.

Other alarm technologies are available, he adds, which also do not come with a risk of regular unnecessary alarms. Systems can detect when fires are breaking out in multiple flats and only operate block-wide alarms in these circumstances. Or they can be modified to send a signal only to the part of the building where the fire is spreading.

But appetite to install these systems remains muted. "One of the big problems is that there's not a standard for what an alarm system looks like in a block of flats in this country," he says. "The only mechanism [the LFB] had for evacuating people at Grenfell was to go and knock on doors, and that is still the preferred method in guidance."

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Professor Ed Galea is an internationally recognised expert on evacuation and founding director of the fire safety engineering group at the University of Greenwich. His view is that the UK remains too reliant on stay put.

"Stay put is fine as a Plan A," he says. "But you have got to have a Plan B, and then a Plan C. Plan B should be the residents of the building evacuating themselves and then Plan C can be the fire service rescuing those still trapped."

But the UK government is not pursuing this. Instead, its stance is that stay put remains a good strategy for the majority of buildings, and rather than moving away from it, we should fix the issues that make it problematic.

It has funded research, currently being carried out by the University of Central Lancashire, into how the fire services could manage an evacuation of a high rise, but results are still to come.

There is international precedent, though, for what fire services could do. Dr Michael Reick, a regional fire chief in Germany and former leader of the fire research laboratory at the University of Stuttgart, says: "There is always a chance that buildings fail catastrophically."

"We [firefighters] have to prevent smoke spread and we have to be able to transport people through smoke-filled egress – even if they are disabled – at least to some extent. This will never be perfect and reliable, but there are good procedures in many countries."

He explains that German fire services since decades ago make use of fans, smoke hoods and very frequently use smoke curtains to control the flow of smoke in a burning building and to protect egress routes because "the stairway is the most important room in a building on fire".

"The key thing for me is to be able to control smoke spread, even with opening doors, missing doors or doors which have been destroyed by the fire. We have plenty of incident reports where it's proven that this is quite often possible," he says. "We would not tell people in general to stay in their apartment. If the staircase is smoke free and they want to leave the building, this is fine. If the staircase is smoke-filled, we might tell them to wait and use our ability to improve the situation and then get them through it."

But Dr Reick is clear that this was not the fault of those present on the night. The plan should have been developed years in advance. "People in the UK blame the fire department for not having a Plan B. I can understand this. But this Plan B should have been prepared by fire engineers years before. These preparations did not happen," he says.

The London Fire Brigade, at least, has made some progress in this regard, ordering a large amount of new equipment such as smoke hoods. Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service managed to safely evacuate The Cube in Bolton (pictured above), which suffered a huge fire in autumn 2019.

But across the UK, there is no evidence that fire services have the plans or equipment necessary to do what the teams in Germany do routinely: evacuate a tall building safely during an out-of-control fire.

Perhaps though, having seen what happened at Grenfell, people will just get out on their own, ignoring advice to stay put?

"I completely disagree with that," says Professor Galea. "Traditionally, the problem with evacuation is getting people to respond: it's called the response time. At the World Trade Center on 9/11, people who were knocked out of their chairs by the impact on the building got back up and started working."

"People who owned small companies spent time on the phone trying to find other premises, or went to the toilet even though they could see debris falling out of the window."

"9/11 turned the problem on its head. People were evacuating at the drop of a hat. It seemed that the response-time problem had gone away. But after a few years, the problem was back to where it was. People's memories fade and their behaviour returns to normal. The same thing will happen with Grenfell."

There is also the question of how people with mobility issues or other disabilities would be able to evacuate. At Grenfell, 15 of those killed had disabilities which hindered their ability to escape, meaning the fire killed 40% of the people in the building with such issues.

But the government recently rejected a proposal to require building owners to produce personal emergency evacuation plans, known as PEEPs, instead saying residents with disabilities should rely on staying put or awaiting rescue from the fire service.

This is a position which particularly concerns Professor Galea. "There aren't enough firefighters to manage the evacuation of a whole building and rescue all the disabled residents and fight the fire at the same time."

"PEEPs can allow as many disabled residents as possible to escape before they arrive, which leaves the fire service with a workable Plan C: to rescue those who are still trapped."

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He says the government was wrong to reject the idea that PEEPs could be carried out by a 'buddy' – a neighbour or relative – without the need for 24-hour staff in buildings.

"The concept of having buddies helping residents to evacuate, we did not invent that," he says. "It happens in Canada, it happens in the US. They don't call it PEEPs, but they talk about having friends and neighbours assist in the evacuation."

His view is that stay put should be binned as a concept, and residents should instead simply be told to leave when the alarm sounds, with an alarm system installed that is either manually activated or triggered by an unusually large fire.

This view was echoed last week by another internationally respected fire expert, Professor Jose Torero, at the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. His report said it was "essential" that stay put is abandoned, because of the inability of current testing methods to prove that fire will not spread externally.

What is needed is a Plan B. "The fire service didn't have a Plan B at Grenfell and the building didn't have a Plan B, which is why I believe so many people died," says Professor Galea.

Could it happen again?

So, five years on from Grenfell, we still have issues with dangerous cladding, faulty fire doors and a lack of an evacuation plan. The ingredients of that tragedy could still exist elsewhere.

But perhaps this approach – a straightforward mapping of the failures of Grenfell onto other buildings – is the wrong way of looking at it.

We were unprepared for Grenfell in the UK because our faith in the building regulations meant too few people recognised the risk of a major facade fire before it was too late.

We are now all too aware of this risk. Which risks are being overlooked now?

Ask fire safety experts this question, and it will not be long before you hear the phrase "timber".

Over the past two decades, and particularly in the years since Grenfell, there has been a series of fires at buildings constructed using lightweight timber frames.

These blazes have been terrifying. In Crewe and west London in summer 2019, fire completely destroyed two large residential buildings and very nearly resulted in massive loss of life.

Despite these fires, timber-frame buildings are not subject to separate treatment under the building regulations. This means they will have stay put strategies, no alarms, no evacuation plans and often a single staircase, despite these measures being predicated on the fire performance of a concrete tower.

The method of construction, which involves a lightweight frame encased in plasterboard, is known to be vulnerable to fire. If the plasterboard is damaged, a blaze can enter the cavity and ignite the structure, meaning it burns inside walls and is near-impossible for the fire service to extinguish.

"It doesn't make sense to me, to have a stay put plus a combustible structure," says fire engineer Andrea White, managing director of consultancy AW Fire. "I've seen a report of one building where it was just nine minutes to 13 minutes before the fire was out of control and spreading through the structure."

However, the government does not appear to share these concerns.

"If you were to talk to government, they'd say we've had no deaths in timber frame," says Ms White. "But there are all sorts of individual circumstances in each of these fires that have meant we haven't had fatalities yet. You can't rely on these to keep happening. I don't necessarily think we'll have another fire with 72 deaths, but there is absolutely a risk of some fatalities."

Modular construction is another increasingly popular form of housebuilding. Individual flats are built in factories and then assembled on site, like a stack of boxes.

The potential problem with this is the scope to leave gaps between each box in which a fire could spread if it is not assembled and maintained properly.

This concerns Dr Jim Glockling, technical director at the Fire Protection Association. "I believe every single cavity barrier should be photographed when put in place. Cladding is easy to replace. It's expensive, but easy. What if problems are deep in the 3D structure of the building?"

"I see a future when a few of these buildings perform badly – usual story: fire spreads in building, building burns to the ground. If there is a loss of life, we will get every modular building coming under scrutiny, like we have with cladding systems, but this time it will be an impossible fix."

Peter Apps - Feature Writer of the Year

There are other risks out there: the office blocks recently and sometimes shoddily converted to residential units, with limited oversight, in the past decade, or large-panel system tower blocks from the 1950s and 1960s. These are towers formed from large concrete blocks stacked on top of one another, which are known to perform poorly in fire, especially as they age, and carry the added risk of collapse.

What the government has done since Grenfell is focus narrowly on the specific problem in the tower (ACM in tall buildings), and miss the broader truth that the way to prevent a disaster is to introduce layers of protection, to provide the best chance against unforeseeable events.

Engineers describe this as redundancy: new systems which kick in if another one fails. In the UK, layers are more limited than in the rest of the world, with little focus on things such as fire suppression through sprinklers or evacuation. Instead, we still rely almost solely on the building's compartmentation to protect life if a fire breaks out.

"Every country in the world is vulnerable to unknown risks," explains one senior fire expert. "The problem is, when new technology appears, it goes to market before the safety is properly understood.

"A high-rise building is a very complex system. That means the safety has to be assured, so if one system does not operate perfectly, the other system picks up.

"For example, you provide an alternative route to evacuation just in case the first entrance becomes impassable; or a smoke ventilation system, or particularly strong compartmentation, or sprinklers waiting to sense heat.

"That's the principle of redundancies. No layer is perfect, but the combination makes the danger of a fire drop really quickly. In the United Arab Emirates, they have more facade fires than any city on the planet, but they have many other layers, because of the levels of redundancy, and so they have very few deaths," he says.

In the UK, this is not happening. There has been no major programme to retrofit sprinklers and, as discussed above, the government is continuing to resist calls for evacuation plans and the associated need for fire alarms and multiple exits.

"The problem in the UK is that we are relying only on compartmentation and the stay put strategy. This is one of the things where change is coming way too slowly. It's taking 20 years to change something which could be changed in a couple of years," the expert adds.

Taking all of this together, could Grenfell happen again? Views vary. "I don't think that a Grenfell Tower fire would be repeated," says one expert. "What happened in Grenfell was so many things went wrong, and that is highly unusual. That's what makes it so tragic and relatively easy to avoid. You just need a few things to go right."

Professor Galea is less confident. "My fear is that we could have another Grenfell, if not worse, tomorrow. Part of the problem we have is this widget mentality. You just fix the widgets that you see were broken and wait until the next widget breaks.

"But there will always be known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. That's what makes having a Plan A, B and C for what to do when things go wrong so important."

Others think another multi-fatality fire in a tower block is likely, but that it would not be as devastating as Grenfell Tower. Dr Jonathan Evans, chief executive of Ash & Lacy and a cladding expert, adds: "I don't think we'll see another large loss of life again like Grenfell unless a building has avoided remediation.

"It's impossible to say, of course, whether other failures might happen, such as a collapse in a tall tower due to fire-induced structural failure. There are some quirky structures out there that might get past an assessment that shouldn't, but they're rare. However, I do think we'll see further fires like those in 2019, where people won't be so lucky."

Danielle Gregory of Tower Blocks UK, the campaign group that supports social housing residents in dangerous buildings, is less positive. "We're not in any doubt that there will be further preventable death in tower blocks. We think the government response has been inadequate and disjointed."

One of the things that concerns her is that tenants still have little route to have their concerns listened to. "In almost every case where there has been a serious fire, including Grenfell and the 2009 fire at Lakanal House, tenants have been raising concerns in the run-up to it," she says. "These concerns are still being raised by many people who live in social housing, and they are still struggling to get their landlords to listen and act."

Add all of this up, and we go to the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire with the depressing reality that a repeat remains, at least, a possibility. That is something no one would have accepted when they first saw those horrifying images five years ago.

FEATURE WRITER OF THE YEAR (HIGHLY COMMENDED)

Jack Simpson

Inside Housing

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

Pacy and impactful, this journalist's features pull the reader in and hold their interest. Their stories, including a scoop on the details of Michael Gove's building safety plan, displayed the talents of a news-driven journalist who knows the story they are chasing and is adept at working contacts to stand it up.

ITEM 1:

Gove's building safety plan: the full rundown of what he will say in his speech

Since the Grenfell Tower fire, Jack has established himself as one of the foremost journalists in the country reporting on the building safety crisis. With this he has established a wide range of contacts and broad knowledge base of the issues. This piece underlined how important both were, with Jack using his contacts to get hold of Michael Gove's building safety plan speech before any other publication, including nationals, and use his knowledge to pull together this analysis laying out what Gove was going to say, but most importantly the significance of the changes. As the only publication with this insight on the morning of Gove's announcement, thousands flocked to the site in the morning to read Jack's rundown. Gove's building safety changes was the biggest story of that day, dominating national news sites and broadcaster's schedules, and Jack was at the centre of this covering the debate on social media. Jack's piece and his social media analysis had cut through on a national level, evidenced by Jack being invited to answer questions about the building safety changes on Eddie Mair's drivetime phone-in show on LBC.

ITEM 2:

The Waiting Game: how Building Safety Fund delays are slowing down cladding work

Jack's second piece showed his ability to turn nuggets of information into full blown investigations. After chancellor Rishi Sunak sold the £1bn building safety fund as the silver bullet that would fix all non-ACM cladding back in March, Jack began hearing stories of widespread issues with how the fund was being administered. Beginning as just a trickle, he decided to investigate. Speaking to several leaseholders and campaigners, he discovered the fund was failing at nearly every level. From the reluctance of the government to provide funding in the months and years after Grenfell, to the huge resource issues its agencies were having responding to the flood of applications, the piece gave a comprehensive and revelatory assessment of the state of affairs. And with the government set to launch new funding pots, an investigation exposing the flaws of the current scheme was timely. Alongside the longform piece, Jack built up to the story with five different exclusive news stories, showing the issues with the building safety funds from tenants not hearing about status of applications for more than a year, to remediation projects being paused because of delays to the release of agreed funds.

ITEM 3:

The Birmingham housing association that went from zero to 8,000 homes in four years

After more than three years reporting on the explosion of exempt accommodation in Birmingham, August saw Jack publish a week's worth of stories and investigations looking into its growth in the city and the key players behind it. After seeing Reliance's rapid growth that saw it become responsible for a third of all exempt properties in Birmingham, Jack decided to investigate. Spending weeks speaking to sources in the sector about the provider and poring through company documents, he was able to tell the full story of how Reliance came to be. What he revealed was that a dormant Kent-based landlord was acquired and then moved up to Birmingham to make the most of the city's exempt boom. It also exposed holes in the current social housing regulatory system, which allows individuals to takeover housing associations, without going through the same checks those registering would do. Due to potential legal pitfalls, Jack had to ensure that his accuracy was spot on and his process saw him evidence every line of the piece, as well as have several conversations with IH's lawyers before publication. It was clear that Reliance didn't want Jack looking into its affairs. Reliance issued a statement labelling the line of questioning as 'disappointing' and describing it as 'uncredible journalism'. It was clear that this something they didn't want out there, underlining the importance of this work.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

Gove's building safety plan: the full rundown of what he will say in his speech

10 Jan 2022



The housing secretary will set out his proposals for how he intends to fix the building safety crisis later today. In what is being billed as the biggest intervention to the crisis – which has been going on since the Grenfell tragedy – many leaseholders will be hoping it can end their misery. Jack Simpson gives a rundown of what we can expect from the speech

Later today, Michael Gove will stand in front of parliament and deliver his plan to fix the building safety crisis once and for all and protect tens of thousands of leaseholders from crippling remediation costs.

More than four-and-a-half years since the Grenfell Tower fire killed 72 people, Mr Gove will say that the Building Safety Programme remains broken and that it should be the industries responsible for causing the problems that should shoulder the costs, not blameless leaseholders.

So, should leaseholders feel hopeful?

Four housing secretaries have gone before Mr Gove, all with their plans to fix the building safety crisis, and all have left residents caught up in the crisis disappointed.

But this feels different. For the first time, Mr Gove will today clearly state that "no leaseholder living in a building above 11 metres will ever face the costs for fixing dangerous cladding".

And to achieve this, he has some wide-reaching proposals.

As part of his plans, Mr Gove will clearly set the government's position that it is the developers, contractors and manufacturers that are responsible for the problem and must pay.

At the heart of this will be a new £4bn fund to protect leaseholders living in blocks between 11 and 18 metres tall, and Mr Gove will expect developers to pick up this tab.

The government will also take a more proactive approach in trying to recoup costs of the companies that it feels are responsible for issues, with a new central taskforce whose sole purpose will be to expose and pursue developers that have mis-sold products or cut corners in construction.

Controversial guidance like the Consolidated Advice Note, which has dragged tens of thousands of buildings into the building safety crisis, will be replaced, and Mr Gove hopes that a new proportional approach to building safety assessments will develop.

And he will not take further legislative action off the table either. He is threatening to impose new legislation on developers if they are unwilling to contribute more.

Things could reach a head in the coming weeks, with the government planning showdown talks with the construction sector and leaseholders, to thrash out a way forward.

Inside Housing has now seen the draft speech and can give the most comprehensive rundown so far of what will be in it and what the proposals will mean for leaseholders and the housing sector.

The £4bn plan to protect leaseholders

Mr Gove will say today that it is now the government's position that no leaseholder living in a building above 11 metres tall should have to pay a penny towards cladding removal.

Key to this is his plan to raise £4bn to cover the cost of remediating buildings between 11 and 18 metres.

Previously, the government planned to help these leaseholders through a loan scheme that would see the work paid for upfront, and then leaseholders pay back the loan at a maximum of £50 a month.

The plan put forward by the former housing secretary was controversial and would still have innocent leaseholders on the hook for tens of thousands of pounds.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

With that in mind, Gove has unceremoniously binned the plan.

Instead, he wants to raise £4bn to put towards a grant scheme that would completely absolve these leaseholders from costs. But how would it be funded?

On Friday, BBC Newsnight's Lewis Goodall published a letter from the Treasury (see below) which stated that it would not be providing any more government funds above what has already given to remove dangerous cladding.

Currently funding for building safety stands at £5.1bn, with £2bn expected to be recouped from developers over the next decade.



So, Mr Gove has looked to the construction industry to pay for it. In a letter sent today to developers, he has called for a new deal with the industry to make financial contributions to this fund.

And if they don't? The housing secretary has threatened to pursue them through legal actions, and restrict their access to public contracts or planning powers.

This will be put formally to the country's 20 biggest house builders in a series of roundtables in the coming weeks.

At these meetings, Mr Gove wants them to agree to the financial contributions, to remediating any of the buildings over 11 metres that they have developed, and to provide information on all of their buildings over 11 metres that have historic fire safety defects. He has given them a March deadline to agree to this. If they do not agree, Mr Gove has not ruled out legislation to force them to act.

It is important to point out that he has vowed to underwrite those costs through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC) budget if he cannot get developers to pay.

But this is a risk.

Any money not covered by developers will have to come from other parts of the department's budget. And with the Treasury telling him to prioritise safety over supply, could this come from some of DLUHC's housebuilding grant programmes, such as the £11.8bn Affordable Homes Programme?

Also, it should be noted that the £4bn is exclusively for cladding remediation. In the speech there is no mention of other defects.

As the past few years has shown us, it is a building safety crisis, not a cladding scandal, and leaseholders are facing huge bills to fix noncladding- related issues.

In many cases, problems such as defective or missing fire breaks are more serious than the cladding. Expect leaseholders to put pressure on the government to extend the fund to cover these issues.

But with the Treasury saying it will not give any more money, and DLUHC not having any more to give, it is looking increasingly likely that leaseholders may have to shoulder these costs.



Picture: Getty

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

Hitting developers where it hurts

As housing secretary so far, Mr Gove has shown that he is not afraid to publicly shame or question companies the government feels are responsible for fire safety issues.

He was vocal in his criticism of the Formula One Mercedes team's decision to sign a sponsorship deal with Kingspan, the insulation manufacturer that has been a key company in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. The public and political pressure eventually influenced Mercedes to end the deal.

And before Christmas, as first reported by Inside Housing, Mr Gove took the step to ban Rydon Homes from accessing the Help to Buy programme. Rydon Homes falls under the same group as Rydon Maintenance, the lead contractor on the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower.

Expect more of this.

In his speech today, the housing secretary will reveal that he is setting up a centralised taskforce, which Inside Housing understands will be called Operation Apex, that will expose and pursue developers and contractors responsible for cutting corners and building unsafe homes.

The Times reported yesterday that the government has already recruited a team of forensic accountants to track down those responsible for building dangerous homes.

Of the more than 1,000 tall blocks with fire risks so far analysed by Operation Apex, 43% belonged to one of 14 corporate groups that "make significant profits and own those buildings as part of a commercial strategy", the paper reported.

Another 10% are owned by "one of five large, very active developers" that are likely to have built them, and that made £1.2bn in post-tax profits last year alone.

For those who are found to be responsible for issues, there will be repercussions too. This team will review government schemes and programmes and ensure that there are "commercial consequences" for those responsible, or those who are too slow to fix the problems, in the form of public contract bans or bans from other government schemes.



Former housing secretary Robert Jenrick (picture: Parliament TV)

Scrapping the Consolidated Advice Note and taking a more proportional approach

When the Consolidated Advice Note was first published in January 2020, nobody would have predicted the chaos it would cause in the flat sale market.

The government guidance document stated that all buildings, regardless of height, needed to be checked, and if dangerous materials were found, they would need to be removed.

With this in place, lenders used it when assessing which buildings needed external wall system (EWS) forms. The result was that the majority of buildings, regardless of height, required checks, leaving leaseholders unable to sell as they waited for one. This caused near paralysis to the flat sale market and great trauma for residents.

Understandably there has been pressure for the past two years to get the Consolidated Advice Note changed.

Despite repeated promises from the government over the past six months that it would, it is only today that this looks like it will happen.

According to the speech, the advice note will be scrapped and the government will instead advise assessors to follow new guidance that has been developed by the British Standards Institute, called PAS 9980.

The catchily named new piece of guidance will be used by fire risk assessors to carry out statutory assessments of external walls of blocks under the new Fire Safety Bill. It will take a more risk-based approach to danger, and it is hoped it will be more proportional and reduce the amount of remediation needed. However, there have already been certain instances where the PAS 9980 standards have been used on blocks below 18 metres tall.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

In these cases, assessors have concluded that costly remediation is needed. One such block is Oyster Court in south London, where despite PAS 9980 being used, it was still concluded that remediation was needed – which could cost residents £80,000 each.

It is also hoped that the scrapping of the advice note would soften the approach by lenders regarding EWS forms.

In July, former housing secretary Robert Jenrick announced that banks should no longer ask for EWS forms on any buildings below 18 metres. It came after research by its experts suggested that there was no systemic risk of fire in these blocks.

However, many banks have not budged since stating that they would only consider changing their approach once the advice note was scrapped.

So, now that has happened, will they change their approach?

Well, not necessarily. Many of the banks also had a second condition at the time, which stated that they would also need to see the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) change its guidance around EWS checks on buildings below 18 metres, before they would reconsider.

Before Christmas, after a four-month consultation, RICS revealed that it would be rejecting the government calls and keeping its current guidance in place. The current guidance states that there are only certain types of blocks under 18 metres that do not require checks.

But don't expect Mr Gove to go without a fight on this. In his speech, he will state that he will take the power to review the governance of RICS and "make sure that they are equipped to support a solution to this challenge".

He will follow that up by saying that those in the industry who refuse to work to take a more proportionate approach "should be clear about our determination to deliver positive outcomes for those caught up in this issue".

Make of that what you will.



Picture: Getty

Accelerating the Building Safety Fund

In March 2020, chancellor Rishi Sunak announced that he would be launching a new £1bn Building Safety Fund, which would be used to cover the costs of remediation of dangerous non-aluminium composite material cladding for leaseholders.

The fund was opened in May of that year. In February 2021, an additional £3.5bn was added to it.

Yet despite it opening more than 18 months ago, and huge sums being on offer, progress on getting that money out to blocks to complete work has been slow.

As of last month, only 12 blocks that had received money from the Building Safety Fund had seen cladding work completed, with work having started on only 137. And while £863m had been allocated to blocks, only £209m had actually been given to high rises.

To address this, Mr Gove will open the next phase of the Building Safety Fund in the coming months and accelerate the pace with which money is being distributed to blocks, so that work can begin. He will also announce the importance of a risk-based approach, with the intention to identify and give money to the most at-risk buildings first. This could also see a more localised approach.

Elsewhere, Mr Gove will also announce that he will make changes to the way money from the Building Safety Fund is distributed and make it more consistent with the government's approach around proportionality.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended



Leaseholders in Brindley House saw their buildings insurance increase by 1,237% due to cladding concerns (picture: Google Street View)

Indemnifying building assessors and fixing insurance problems

The EWS process, which currently governs whether a flat can be sold, requires people to carry out building inspections. After an inspection is carried out, they will sign off whether the building has a clean bill of health and can be sold, or remediation is required.

However, the problem since its inception has been that there has been such a small pool of competent professionals available to carry out these checks. This has meant leaseholders waiting months, if not years, for checks to be carried out.

On the one hand this is caused by a national shortage of these professionals, on the other hand it is because those who can do the work cannot afford the personal indemnity insurance to do it. Much of this is because insurers are not keen to back someone's judgement on a block if that is later deemed wrong and could leave the inspector, in the form of the insurer, on the hook for costs.

To try to navigate this, Mr Gove will announce today that the government will be implementing a scheme to indemnify building assessors conducting external wall assessments. The scheme was first trailed in early 2021 and will give assessors more protection by helping to cover them for any claims.

And it is not only the insurance of assessors that is causing a problem with regards to building safety. The government will also promise to address the situation of sky-rocketing buildings insurance. In the years since the Grenfell tragedy, insurers have taken an increasingly risk-averse approach to high-rise buildings as a result of the building safety crisis and this has hit leaseholders in the pockets with buildings insurance premiums across the country.

In some cases, buildings have seen increases of as much as 1,000%, as insurers look to cover their backs.

The government is set to work on a more concerted plan through Lord Greenhalgh to get the insurance sector to come up with a solution that could reduce these costs.

But it is not as if these costs have been going up in a vacuum of communication between the government and the insurance sector on buildings cover.

For years the two have been in dialogue. The issue is that insurance is built on risk-benefit assessments and not goodwill, and while the aforementioned changes could bring down those, coming to a solution for those insurers that have done the risk-benefit sums will be difficult. Insurers are driven by numbers, not goodwill.



A waking watch patrol being carried out at a block in London (picture: Dan Joseph)

Help for leaseholders and shared owners before the changes come in

While Mr Gove has set his sights on bringing to a close the worry and financial burden leaseholders up and down the country currently face, this will still take years to implement and fix.

Many leaseholders are still unlikely to be able to sell their homes in the short term, while others will continue to face costs for interim safety measures such as waking watches and other building safety issues.

With this in mind, Mr Gove will announce some measures later today aimed at helping those people.

These will include bolstering the Waking Watch Fund with an extra £27m. The additional cash will effectively double the fund to £57m to go towards the installation of communal fire alarms in blocks and end the use of expensive waking watch patrols across the country.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

The waking watch patrols, which in some cases cost blocks well over £20,000 a month, have been highly controversial since being put in place by the National Fire Chiefs Council as a way of keeping leaseholders safe in buildings that had seen their evacuation policy change from 'stay put' to 'simultaneous evacuation'.

Shared owners, who are arguably the most disproportionately hit by the building safety crisis, will also be given protections.

Currently in blocks where work is needed, shared owners are being billed 100% of their part of the cladding bill, despite in many cases owning only 20% of their flat. The terms of these leases also means that shared owners are unable to sub-let.

The government looks set to bring in guidance that encourages landlords and lenders to allow sub-letting arrangements. This will allow trapped shared owners to move elsewhere, while renting their flats. Some housing associations have already begun this but others are blocking these efforts.

And as huge remediation bills, sometimes to the tune of £208,000 per flat, fall through letterboxes, fears of evictions and forfeiture of flats is on the increase. In some cases, this has already happened.

Mr Gove will announce that he will look to address this issue and work to come up with a solution that will protect those most at risk of this outcome.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

The Waiting Game: how Building Safety Fund delays are slowing down cladding work

25 Mar 2022



Illustration by Peter Crowther

The £1bn Building Safety Fund launched in 2020 should have been a relief for leaseholders facing extortionate bills to fix their blocks, but many are still waiting. Jack Simpson reports.

When the government announced it would be launching a £1bn Building Safety Fund in March 2020, it was huge news for leaseholders.

Giving his first Budget speech, chancellor Rishi Sunak said the fund would go “further than before” and make sure “all unsafe cladding was removed from every building above 18 metres”.

For the first time, public money would be spent on cladding other than aluminium composite material (ACM). For those drowning in the worry of living in unsafe buildings and facing extortionate bills to fix the issues, a life raft had been thrown.

But two years on and the results have been mixed. What was supposed to accelerate remediation has failed to yield the results hoped for.

Process issues and the sheer volume of applications have overwhelmed government teams and caused delays. So far, the fund has paid for work to start on only 173 buildings. An estimated total of 3,439 blocks have been registered for the fund. Only 19 buildings of those deemed eligible have seen work completed.

So why the problems? Why has the fund that was supposed to be a beacon of hope for leaseholders left many stuck waiting for funding? Inside Housing takes a deep-dive into the Building Safety Fund story to find out why it has struggled and what lessons can be learned.

Less money, more problems

The Building Safety Fund’s launch followed substantial pressure from campaigners to do more on dangerous cladding. While the government had provided funding for blocks with ACM cladding, tens of thousands were still facing unpayable bills in buildings that have dangerous products such as extruded polystyrene, timber and high-pressure laminate.

With their flats valued at £0, leaseholders were unable to move home and were stuck paying huge insurance and waking watch bills while waiting for remediation costs of up to £100,000 to bankrupt them.

The government’s response came in March 2020. In a Budget dominated by the pandemic, Mr Sunak announced his new £1bn fund to cover the costs of removing dangerous non-ACM cladding on buildings taller than 18 metres. This was increased by £3.5bn a year later by then-housing secretary Robert Jenrick.

Despite these huge numbers, before the fund had even launched, there were already concerns that it was not large enough. In May 2020, the government confirmed the funding would cover work on only a third of all buildings that need remediation.

Working on a “first come, first served” basis, leaseholders, who only had a one in three chance of getting funding, were worried they might miss out. The overwhelming demand was confirmed when 1,070 buildings registered within weeks of the Building Safety Fund opening in July 2020.

Others would not even have the chance to apply. Leaseholders at the Skyline Central building in Manchester were told by the government that they would be barred from the fund. The reason? In a bid to get dangerous materials off their building as quickly as possible, they had previously agreed to a loan to pay for the work. The fund would only cover blocks where no such funding solution was in place.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

Private freeholders could apply for funds and social landlords could secure money to cover costs that would otherwise be met by leaseholders and shared owners.

The funding would be dished out for pre-work support and full construction costs after a four stage process (see the 'how the process works' box, right). It would be managed by Homes England and the Greater London Authority (GLA), with the department having ultimate control over funding decisions.

But there were strict deadlines. A full application for a building had to be submitted by 31 December 2020, with work starting by 31 March 2021.

"When we started working through the process to the timelines originally imposed by the Building Safety Fund, they slipped because they were completely unrealistic for people to meet," explains Kathryn Kligerman, a partner at law firm Devonshires, who has helped a number of housing associations through the process.

"While some providers made applications to the fund, they couldn't all meet requirements to start work on site by a certain date (which ultimately would have involved finding a contractor and drafting and negotiating the contracts within a short period of time) and try to pursue third parties for damages, as the conditions of funding required."

This was worrying for leaseholders, who feared the financial help was slipping away as the deadline approached. Alison Hills, who faced potential bills of more than £100,000 to fix her St Albans home, recalls: "It was so stressful. Effectively we were thinking that if we missed out, that was it for support, there was nothing we could do."

Just two weeks before 31 December, the deadline was extended, with completed applications required by June 2021 and work to begin in September. Deadlines were then largely abandoned, with buildings now assessed on a case-by-case basis and encouraged to proceed as quickly as possible.



Leaseholders at the Skyline Central block in Manchester took out a loan for work, so were barred from the fund

The feeling of powerlessness described by Ms Hills is echoed by many leaseholders, particularly in private blocks. The application is managed by the freeholder, usually through a managing agent. Inside Housing has heard several accounts of leaseholders being left completely in the dark.

Some leaseholders at the Atlas Wharf block in east London found the communication from those managing their building to be so poor that they had to ask their MP, Apsana Begum, to get an update on the status of their application.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC) response revealed that after failing to send off the correct information in October 2020, it then took nearly a year to complete the registration, despite government chasing.

The block's cladding consultant says a new board was elected in April 2021 and after this it appointed a team to carry out surveying work ahead of applying to the fund fully in October 2021. The company adds that the block's directors kept residents informed throughout the process and that eligibility was agreed in February 2022.

Applications pending

Government delays have also been a problem. This is largely down to the sheer volume of registrations. Since the fund opened, 2,826 private and 222 social housing registrations have been submitted – covering an estimate of 3,439 blocks. Of these, 2,554 registrations have been reviewed. This is just the first step in the process.

Currently, 1,015 buildings are proceeding to full application, with the others still awaiting further evidence or having been excluded for issues such as height and requiring work not covered by the fund, which is strictly limited to cladding removal. A total of 852 buildings have been deemed ineligible.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

These applications are processed by Homes England and GLA teams, with assistance from private specialist consultants. Each building is given a caseworker.

Leaseholders in buildings across the country say they are being met with a wall of silence over applications.

Residents at the Liberty Place block in Birmingham, where the remediation bill is £4.9m, are still waiting for a response to the application that was sent in July 2020.

"We have no indication of why they haven't completed our review yet. The only thing I can think of is that they are totally inundated," says Martin Holland, chair of the building's residential management body.

It is a similar story for those living in The Milliners building in Bristol. After applying to the fund in October 2020, leaseholders were told that their block would be rejected on the grounds of height. Assured that their building was 19 metres tall, they appealed the decision in January 2021. That same month, leaseholders were told they had valid grounds for an appeal, but a decision still has not been made.

Inside Housing has heard in some cases that GLA staff are having to look after more than 20 buildings each. A recent job advert from the body revealed it is looking for five programme officers to help process applications.

Giles Grover from the End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) campaign says: "It's clear that the department is struggling to keep up with processing applications, partly because of the scale of this crisis, partly because of the onerous requirements being put on applicants to be eligible." He adds: "The government is working nowhere near the actual 'pace' it wants to or says it is."

To fix the communication issue, the government set up a portal in January 2022, in which leaseholders could check on the progress of their application. But they say it does not include enough information.

Contractual issues have also held up a huge number of applications. The process requires freeholders to sign a funding agreement with the government, but this has been a point of contention for freeholders and their managing agents. The disagreement revolved around several clauses in the funding agreement, including one that meant managing agents could become liable for costs not covered by cladding funding and one which could have seen leaseholders pay some costs upfront.

How the process works

Phase one: registration – building owner registers for fund, providing details of block's height and materials

Phase two: eligibility confirmed

- First stage – building owners submit full application, This contains more information on ownership of the block and if additional pre-tender support is required. This would include 10% of total project costs for materials assessments and building surveys
- Second stage – building owner supplies detailed project plan, material assessment and full costs for the work. This is then assessed by one of government's consultants and once agreed sent to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' funding board for approval

Phase three: if the building is approved for funding, applicants will be notified and be asked to sign a grant funding agreement, which will require the building owner to confirm that all information is correct. A payment can then be made for a percentage of the costs of the project

Phase four: completion of remediation work – when work is completed, the building owner needs to provide evidence that the block is now compliant with regulations before the final payment is received

Managing agents responsible for hundreds of registered blocks would not progress with applications because of concerns around signing these agreements.

In the week before Christmas last year, building safety minister Lord Greenhalgh triumphantly tweeted that after months of dialogue, the "logjam in signing the Building Safety Fund agreement" had been cleared.

However, three months on and many leaseholders are yet to see these agreements signed. Stephen Squires, who lives at Britton House in Manchester, says he welcomed the news back in December, but the latest delay makes it feel like a "nightmare that will never end".

"Once the agreement is signed, it will be months before we have workmen on site, and the project to fix our building is 50 weeks," he explains.

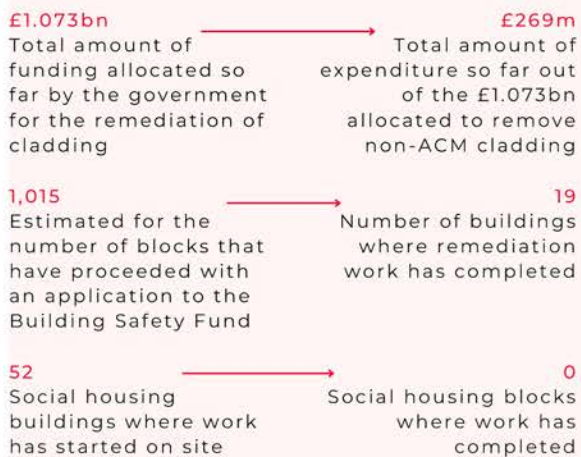
Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

The government's current position is that the revised agreement means there should be no obstacles to remediation now. But targets have been missed. It initially pledged to commit £1bn by the end of March 2021. This was achieved nine months late at the end of January this year, with £1.073bn allocated.

However, much of this money is yet to find its way to buildings. At the end of last year, only £269m of the £1.073bn allocated was expenditure – money actually released to fix blocks.

The government says progress is being made and that around 19,000 homes have been fully remediated – an increase of 1,100 homes since December 2021. But those trying to access the funding disagree. One housing association building safety expert says: "Right now, the limiting factor should be the supply chain, but I think it is actually the fund."

Building Safety Fund in numbers



Slow work, increased costs

Even for those who have managed to access the fund, the process has not been smooth. Leaseholders in the Icona building in east London received confirmation of funding in January 2021 and work started in February. But due to rules not allowing blocks to draw down all of the money at the start of the project, work had to be suspended in July because of administrative delays in receiving the next wave of funding.

Funding was then released and work started again in August. However, with just 10% of the project left to go, leaseholders are once again in a situation where the next tranche of funding is stuck in the administrative process and work may have to be suspended again.

"We are out of money for the second time, have depleted our reserve fund and are using this year's service charge collections to pay contractors because it is so important to us to not stop work again," says Peter Tolson, voluntary resident director of the building's management company.

For leaseholders who have received money and had their blocks fixed, it has been life-changing. But there are problems with how the system is working, underlined by the missed deadlines and thousands of exasperated leaseholders. If the rate of remediation through the fund continues at this pace, it will be decades before all blocks receive funds – never mind see work completed.

Speeding up the process becomes even more important when you consider the changes housing secretary Michael Gove is looking to bring in to fix the building safety crisis. Mr Gove set his stall out when he said that "no leaseholder living in their home should pay a penny towards cladding costs in a building".

At the heart of that will be a new £4bn funding pot to fix buildings above between 11 and 18 metres. This fund will have to deal with a much larger pool of blocks: there are believed to be eight times as many buildings in England in this height threshold. As guidance imposed no limit on the use of combustible materials on their walls, many are likely to need fixing.

A DLUHC spokesperson says: "Industry must pay to fix the problems they created and our tough new measures will mean any leaseholder living in any building over 11 metres will not pay a single penny for the removal of cladding. We are actively pursuing building owners who have failed to act, and are accelerating the work of the Building Safety Fund, with the next round of applications opening shortly."

So while the committed money is welcome, it will mean nothing to leaseholders until their buildings receive the money and the issues are fixed. "The government said that it learned lessons from the ACM fund – residents' lived experiences show this to have been warm words," says EOCS's Mr Grover. "We need and deserve action at a true quantifiable pace on the ground."

The longer leaseholders wait, the longer it will take for them to get their lives back on track. Each day that passes is another in which we gamble with a repeat disaster.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

The Birmingham housing association that went from zero to 8,000 homes in four years

18 Aug 2022



Reliance now manages more than 8,000 exempt bedspaces in Birmingham (picture: Alamy)

Reliance Social Housing went from a dormant housing association based in Kent to Birmingham's largest exempt accommodation provider in the space of four years. Jack Simpson investigates the landlord's rapid rise.

If you are an exempt accommodation claimant in Birmingham, there is a one-in-three chance that you will be living in a property managed by the city's biggest provider, Reliance.

Reliance has become synonymous with exempt accommodation in Birmingham, and it has been a major driving force behind the West Midlands city's exempt accommodation boom, which has seen numbers double from just over 11,000 in 2018, to more than 21,000 today.

The housing association is now the head registered provider (RP) for more than 8,000 exempt bedspaces across the city, 38% of all exempt accommodation in the city. And with this has seen some significant cash go through the landlord too.

A report by The Independent and Open Democracy revealed that Birmingham City Council had paid an estimated £161m to Reliance through exempt accommodation claims in the past four years.

And while there is no suggestion that the majority of Reliance's properties have any serious issues, with this rapid growth has come increased scrutiny by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH), as well as some local politicians: Birmingham's cabinet member for housing has written to the chief executive of Reliance expressing concerns about the quality of some properties in her area.

But Reliance was not always the exempt behemoth that it is now. Rewind five years, and it was a dormant housing association based 149 miles away in Gravesend, Kent.

So, what happened? How did a Kent-based RP with no homes transform into the biggest provider in the West Midlands' biggest city, housing thousands of vulnerable tenants?

Inside Housing has dug through the landlord's Companies House records and spoken to those on the ground in Birmingham to tell the story of Reliance's rise.

The rise

When the Kent-based company RY Winning Hand registered as a social landlord on 14 October 2013, it would barely have been noted.

It came at a time when it was a lot simpler to register with the RSH than it is today. RY Winning Hand was one of 35 housing associations to register as an RP in 2013. To put into perspective, last year only nine new registrants became RPs.

The first accounts for this new Gravesend-based social landlord were underwhelming: it had assets worth £446. That would barely buy you a door to a social home, never mind a whole property.

In the following years, assets increased – at one point to more than £48,780 – but they never reached any notable levels. RY Winning Hand had become, for all intents and purposes, a dormant RP.

That was until May 2018. After next to no changes on the landlord's Companies House accounts for nearly four years, a shift began to occur.

On 25 May, the company made a wave of appointments at director level. Throughout May and June, five new directors joined RY Winning Hand. By July 2018, it had lost its Gravesend-based directors and the original owner had given up significant control.

Two days later, the registered office had changed location from Kent to Duddeston, Birmingham.

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The person with significant control also changed, with Naveed Ali Minhas now in charge. This would change three months later, with Tanzeel Sabahat becoming the person with significant control on 30 October 2018.

A year later this would change again, this time to Mohammed Sajjid Sarwar, who still has control today.

By the end of August, the name had changed, and RY Winning Hand became Reliance.

This is one of the curious things about the regulated social housing sector. If you want to launch a new RP, you need to go through a registration process and supply a detailed application. This can take up to two years.

However, acquiring or taking over an RP already in existence gives you a quicker route into becoming an affordable housing landlord. It also means you are not required to undergo many of the same checks you would have to go through during the registration process for entrants creating a completely new landlord. In recent years, the acquisition route has been taken by a handful of providers coming into the sector.

Along with the change of name came another change, with Reliance becoming a community interest company (CIC). In the documents supporting this, it set out the organisation's primary activities. It would now aim to benefit individuals in need of affordable housing, including those who are especially vulnerable and in need of either emergency accommodation or supported housing with assisted living.

Its journey into exempt accommodation had begun.

Exempt accommodation is a type of supported housing that can be provided by housing associations, often through managing agents, charities or CICs. It is offered to people with few other housing options, such as migrants, those fleeing domestic abuse, prison leavers and people experiencing substance misuse issues.

If a provider gives a small element of care, support and supervision, it is 'exempt' from usual rules that limit the amount of housing benefit that tenants can claim to Local Housing Allowance rates.

Inside Housing has seen one Reliance tenancy agreement, which has the total eligible rent for one room in shared accommodation set at £215 a week. By means of comparison, the maximum amount of housing benefit that can be awarded for someone living in a shared room in a traditional house of multiple occupancy (HMO) is just over £291 a month.



Reliance has a number of properties in the Edgbaston area of Birmingham (picture: Alamy)

Now with their new name and new clear aims, Reliance's management moved quickly to build up its exempt property portfolio. August 2018 saw it purchase its first supported accommodation scheme. By 20 June 2019, it had 2,000 properties under its management in Birmingham.

Some of these properties would have been bought outright, but many would have been secured through lease deals with managing agents and in some cases individual landlords.

Under these deals, Reliance has a network of managing agents with which it has lease and managing agreements. In the main, these managing agents will provide the housing, housing management and support, while paying Reliance a management fee. For exempt accommodation providers this is usually around 10% to 15%.

Reliance's accounts in June 2019 proclaimed that a blend of skills had allowed it to grow considerably quickly since inception, with the aim to become the best in the sector.

With these skills, and under the lease-based model, Reliance continued to grow. It was one of the biggest contributors to Birmingham's explosion in exempt accommodation property numbers between 2019 and 2020.

By March 2021, less than three years after its first supported housing purchase, it was managing 5,642 bedspaces across 1,591 properties. This made it the largest provider in the city, with Concept next on the list with 3,773.

There is no doubt that these properties provide important housing for people with few options, and crucial support for those who need it. But because this is such a vital part of the housing sector and the sums involved are so huge, it is important that the services Reliance and others provide are carefully scrutinised.

Inside Housing has asked how it funded these purchases and lease deals to allow it to become so big, but Reliance declined to comment.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

There was another significant change during this period. In July 2020, Reliance converted from being a for-profit association to a not-for-profit association.

But had it grown too big, too quickly? The association by that point had nearly 6,000 bedspaces and only 21 staff members, and was operating a model that the regulator had previously questioned when investigating other exempt providers in Birmingham. Would this catch the attention of the English sector's regulatory body?

In August 2021, the RSH revealed that it was investigating Reliance over matters that may have impacted its compliance with the regulator's Governance and Financial Viability standards.

Three months later, we got the answer. In October, Reliance was deemed non-compliant with both standards.

It was clear that the regulator had questions about the model Reliance was operating, particularly its use of third-party managing agents.

The RSH stated that it did not have assurances that Reliance had effective and embedded systems in place to ensure that managing agents were providing the services and required levels of support to its tenants in accordance with the agreements in place and the housing benefit claim.

It also suggested in its judgement that Reliance demonstrated a weak contracting environment, and said it did not have assurances that the landlord had effective systems in place to give it sufficient oversight of these payments.

The regulator added that Reliance did not adequately reconcile and monitor the payments made to third parties with evidence that the services were being provided to its tenants – and that as a result, there was a risk that third-party managing agents were not providing the services being claimed, or that services and housing management practices were inappropriate.

At the time Reliance said that it was disappointed with the judgement but that it was determined to protect and expand its "social housing" portfolio and would endeavour to take all necessary steps to satisfy the regulator of any concerns around the "exempt sector".

The judgement did prompt action from Reliance. The landlord decided to review its managing agents, saying it would take "constructive action" against those that were underperforming and "decommission" those that failed to meet Decent Homes Standard.

Reliance is not alone in being on the receiving end of this type of judgement. The regulator has raised similar concerns about the use of the third-party managing agent model by other exempt accommodation providers in Birmingham. However, while Reliance was managing more than 7,800 units at the time, in the eyes of the RSH it was still deemed a small housing association.

This is because it has only six units of 'social housing' and the exempt properties it controls are not. This means that while the RSH does regulate the governance and financial viability for landlords of this size, they are not subject to the regular in-depth assessments (IDAs) that large associations are, and are also spared from receiving the governance gradings given to larger associations.

This is wholly compliant with legislation as defined by Section 69 of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008. Birmingham's other large exempt accommodation providers have similar splits between non-social housing and non social housing homes: Concept Housing provides more than 5,000 units of accommodation but only 104 general needs social housing properties, and Ash Shahada has more than 3,000 properties but only 200 units for general social needs housing.

It seems this is a gaping hole in social housing regulation. An organisation can be registered as a housing association and manage more than 8,000 properties, but is not subject to regular IDAs because only a handful of these are technically registered as general needs social housing – although the council can inspect conditions in these properties under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS).

Under the Social Housing Regulation Bill, the regulator is set to receive several new powers that will allow it to regularly inspect landlords' properties and assess them on things such as health and safety and repairs performance.

The regulator will also be able to order emergency repairs if the standard of the home is not up to scratch.

However, under the new laws, this will only apply to general needs social housing. As a result, hundreds of exempt homes may not be subject to this type of regulation.

Jack Simpson - Feature Writer of the Year - Highly Commended

While there is no basis to suggest that an IDA of Reliance, Concept Housing or Ash Shahada would be negative, or that the regulator would have to use its new powers against any of those landlords, the fact that such a substantial proportion of exempt accommodation can fall outside regulation designed to protect tenants living in homes provided by councils and housing associations is a cause for concern.

The criticism in the regulatory judgement has not stymied Reliance's growth. The provider has added more homes and more managing agents to its ranks after telling Inside Housing in April this year that it had brought in measures to control saturation, including stopping new provision entirely in some areas and capping managing agents from growing above 10% of their managed portfolios.

As a handful of housing associations have pulled out of the exempt sector in Birmingham, Reliance has taken on some of the managing agents that worked under them, under its own umbrella. This included managing agents from Prospect Housing and New Roots, which both left the exempt sector officially last year.

This has meant the number of bedspaces under Reliance has continued to swell.

A snapshot provided by Birmingham City Council to Inside Housing in April after a Freedom of Information request showed Reliance as the overarching RP for 8,229 claimants.

That is 4,837 more than Concept Housing, the second-biggest provider in the city, and means that Reliance is responsible for 38% of the 21,647 claimants across the city.

It means the association is securing benefit payments worth tens of millions of pounds every year. A conservative estimate based on Reliance receiving £200 in exempt benefit for all of its exempt properties across Birmingham would mean that in April it would have received £1.64m across all its properties just in that week alone.

While it is important to remember that not all of this is retained by Reliance, and that much of it would be dispersed across the managing agents it uses, these are huge sums of public money when totalled up over a year, or a series of years, particularly for an organisation that was dormant up until four years ago and last year had only 21 staff members.

And this growth has resulted in heightened scrutiny by local councillors. Last month, Sharon Thompson, cabinet member for housing at Birmingham City Council and a councillor for Birmingham's North Edgbaston ward, confirmed that she would be alerting the RSH after receiving complaints about the conditions at some properties.

In the letter, which was also signed by North Edgbaston councillor Marcus Bernasconi, Ms Thompson raised concerns over high levels of issues linked to Reliance properties in North Edgbaston and claimed they had seen photographic evidence "showing some shocking living conditions" as well as a lack of support.

Separately to this, Lauren Rainbow, who represents the Quinton Ward near the centre of Birmingham, wrote to the landlord about complaints that local residents had made regarding consistent anti-social behaviour at one particular property in her ward, where the West Midlands Police had been called out multiple times.

When previously commenting on this letter, Reliance told Inside Housing that it was working with the council and the RSH to ensure the quality of service and support was meeting the required standards, and that it had implemented a robust action plan to ensure it was fulfilling strategic objectives and regulatory compliance.

It also criticised Ms Thompson's decision to publish her letter without contacting Reliance, and added that as an organisation, it will continue to prioritise the welfare of tenants, and regularly review and seek to enhance its complaints procedures.

When asked to provide a comment for this piece, Reliance said: "Reliance's senior management is disappointed by the line of reasoning that your proposed article will take.

"Reliance is fully committed to improving the lives of its tenants and welcomes contributions from credible journalism which seeks to address the pressing issues facing the sector."

Although the organisation has received criticism from councillors and is still deemed noncompliant by the regulator, it continues to provide crucial roofs over the heads of thousands of people who need one. And it continues, albeit at a slower pace than previously, to grow.

As the biggest exempt accommodation provider in Birmingham, Reliance is the symbol for a supported housing phenomenon that has exploded in the country's second city – a phenomenon that does not look like it is going away anytime soon.

HOUSING /RESIDENTIAL JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

Peter Apps

Inside Housing

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

Judges wanted to share their praise for all entrants in this category. Competition was stiff and the range of topics and approaches was impressive. Writing was highly relevant to the journalists' audiences.

The winner is a skilful writer with unrivalled knowledge. His coverage was deeply informative and moving. He shone a light on actions and their consequences, providing actionable insight for readers. He avoided cliched approaches, combining sharp analysis with a deeply human delivery. The result was original, high-impact journalism, with great relevance to the audience and beyond.

The second phase of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry featured 308 days of oral evidence, spanning 84 weeks spread out across a two-and-a-half year period which also included the coronavirus pandemic. Inside Housing is the only news outlet – trade or mainstream – to have covered every single session. The commitment required to do so has been vast. It is the largest commitment of editorial resource to a single project in the magazine's history and continued even when reporters were placed on part-time furlough for more than six months. The result, though, has been worth the effort. The magazine has published daily reports from almost every session and weekly diaries from every week, as well as occasional round-ups of key evidence. Regular Twitter threads from its reporters summarising the evidence have built up a dedicated audience and amassed millions of impressions during the process. The result has been the complex, dense information at the inquiry being distilled, explained and made available to the professionals who need to hear it and the wider public. The scandal which the inquiry has uncovered has been broadcast to a far wider audience as a result of Inside Housing's work. This work has been led by Pete Apps, the magazine's deputy editor, who has carried out most of the reporting work and edited any reports written by others. The Financial Times has called his reporting a "must read for academics, lawyers and firefighters" following the inquiry and The Huffington Post has described it as "the most comprehensive reporting" of the inquiry. Pete has been commissioned to write a book summarising the evidence, a deal secured on the strength of his inquiry reporting. The Grenfell Tower Inquiry marked a once-in-a-lifetime look behind the scenes of the construction industry. Thanks to the efforts of Inside Housing and Pete, a clear, concise, digestible record of its evidence is available to all those in the industry who need it.

ITEM 1:

Grenfell Tower Inquiry diary week 70: 'Show me the bodies'

In this entry, Pete has submitted two weekly diaries as a sample of this broader piece of work. The first is the most pivotal week of government evidence, which shows Pete's ability to turn the complex evidence into a compelling narrative at its most effective.

ITEM 2:

Grenfell Tower Inquiry diary week 84: 'Every decision affects someone who is an adored child, a beloved sister, a respected uncle, a needed mother'

The second entry is the final week of the inquiry and shows Pete's ability to draw out the human cost of the fire as well as the technical information relevant to the magazine's audience of social landlords.

ITEM 3:

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry has painted a vivid picture of the world we must leave behind

The third entry is an essay he wrote summarising his thoughts at the end of the process – demonstrating his ability to write in a compelling and clear way and to distil the most important lessons from the evidence.

Peter Apps - Housing / Residential Journalist of the Year

Grenfell Tower Inquiry diary week 70: 'Show me the bodies'

1 Apr 2022



An important week at the Grenfell Tower Inquiry saw a dramatic conclusion to the mammoth cross-examination of civil servant Brian Martin, as well as the first politicians. Peter Apps reports

1,408 days on from its first public hearing, the Grenfell Tower Inquiry this week called national politicians to the witness box to account for their actions in the years before the fire for the first time.

Brandon Lewis and James Wharton were the first of five former government ministers to give evidence.

But before the ministers appeared, the inquiry heard the concluding days of evidence from key civil servant Brian Martin, which built to a dramatic denouement late on Wednesday afternoon.

We will begin our recap with Mr Martin's actions in the immediate aftermath of the Lakanal House fire in 2009.

'I'm satisfied that there will be no need for you to re-visit Lakanal House'



Lakanal House as it stands today (picture: Google Street View)

The blaze at Lakanal House killed six people, including three children, when it ripped through the south London block on 3 July 2009. The government initially instructed the Building Research Establishment (BRE) to investigate the fire, to establish whether anything needed to change in the official guidance, Approved Document B, for which Mr Martin was responsible.

Its first report was submitted to Mr Martin on 16 July 2009. But two days earlier, Mr Martin had emailed a fire safety consultant who had inquired about the fire, telling him: "Based on the snippets of info I've had so far, I don't think there's any need for changes to [Approved Document B]."

How could he have reached such a conclusion so fast? Mr Martin said he had formed a "preliminary view" that the fire "was mostly an issue with the original construction of the building".

A fortnight later on 28 July, Mr Martin pulled the BRE off the case. "I'm satisfied that there will be no need for you to re-visit Lakanal House," he wrote. "Any further visits will need to be funded by a third party."

Mr Martin said that given the Metropolitan Police and London Fire Brigade (LFB) were investigating, the department had concluded "it was better to let those authorities carry out their investigations".

Peter Apps - Housing / Residential Journalist of the Year

"But you were also, weren't you, by doing this, calling a halt to any further investigations into... whether there were matters within the regulations and guidance which needed to be considered for amendment?" asked Richard Millett QC, lead counsel to the inquiry.

Mr Martin again cited the police investigation. "As a government department, you don't want to undermine a potential prosecution by getting in the way," he said.

'It would have to be a more severe issue to justify something retrospective'



Mr Martin

'It would have to be a more severe issue to justify something retrospective'

The police investigation did progress. And in November 2009, it received the results of tests on the panels which had been installed beneath windows at Lakanal House.

These panels – made of combustible high-pressure laminate cladding bonded to a foam insulation core – failed to obtain a Class 0 rating when tested. In fact, they performed so poorly that the second part of the test was not done due to fear that the testing equipment would be damaged.

The test showed the panels breaking up when exposed to fire and "flaming strongly" with burning debris falling to the ground.

Mr Martin (pictured above) said he had not considered the need to do anything to establish whether similar materials had been used on other buildings.

Asked if he was "never interested in doing a survey of what was out there to make sure that the buildings people were living in weren't dangerous", he replied: "I think that's a fair criticism. It would have to be a more severe issue to justify something retrospective."

"Even though six people had lost their lives in the fire at Lakanal?" asked Mr Millett.

Mr Martin said it would be "very wrong" to conclude that the external wall issues were the "cause of those deaths".

As he left the witness box for the lunch break following these comments, there was a call of "shame on you" from the public gallery.



Mr Millett

Mr Martin said it would be "very wrong" to conclude that the external wall issues were the "cause of those deaths".

As he left the witness box for the lunch break following these comments, there was a call of "shame on you" from the public gallery.

'That answer was, do you accept, inaccurate and wholly misleading?'

In early 2013, the inquests into the six deaths in the fire opened. As 50 days of evidence ground on, substantial confusion opened up about the fire safety requirements for the window panels.

Mr Martin was asked to give evidence to clarify the issues. But his evidence appears to have been less than clear.

For example, in his witness statement he said the standard of Class 0 "introduces the principle of limiting the combustibility of external walls". But Class 0, as the government had been warned repeatedly before Lakanal, was not a combustibility test and many combustible materials could pass it.

"I don't know how many times I have to disagree with you on this point," said an irritated Mr Martin when challenged on this. "The concept of combustibility is a sliding scale, and Class 0 is one of a range of different classifications that attempt to classify how combustible something is."

Peter Apps - Housing / Residential Journalist of the Year

In his oral evidence, he would tell the inquest that "if [the panels] caught fire, they probably weren't Class 0".

"Now, that answer was, do you accept, inaccurate and wholly misleading, wasn't it?" asked Mr Millett.

"I don't know if it's wholly misleading, but I think it's fair to say that it wasn't as precise an answer as I could have given," replied Mr Martin.

One thing Mr Martin drew no attention to in his Lakanal evidence was the crucial addition of the words 'filler material' to Approved Document B in 2006, which he said was intended to ban the use of combustible composite cladding panels.

"Were you trying to avoid scrutiny by the coroner... because you knew it was less than clear?" asked Mr Millett.

"I don't think that's what I was thinking, no," said Mr Martin, arguing that the issue was not directly relevant to the Lakanal House fire.



The Grenfell Tower Inquiry's headquarters in Paddington, west London (picture: SWNS)

A few weeks after the end of the evidence, Lakanal coroner Francis Kirkham wrote to the government with suggested changes, part of a formal legal process designed to allow coroners to make recommendations to prevent future death.

In her letter, Ms Kirkham recommended changes to Approved Document B, in particular the department ensure that it "provides clear guidance... with particular regard to the spread of fire over the external envelope of the building".

In his witness statement, Mr Martin said the department decided that this recommendation had been effectively met by the changes introduced in 2006 – primarily the inclusion of the words 'filler material' – and so no further changes were required.

But why did he not plainly set this out to the coroner? "I guess we could have done. That's not the approach that we decided to take," he said.

On April 11, he summarised the coroner's recommendations for minister Don Foster. His summary did not mention the issue of external fire spread.

"Why did you... omit reference to the one particular thing that the coroner drew attention to specifically?" asked Mr Millett.

"I don't think I did that deliberately," said Mr Martin.

In his summary, he advised ministers to "set out the government's intentions to issue a revised Approved Document B in 2016-17 following a full review of the fire safety aspects of building regulations".

But the coroner had not called for a total rewrite. Instead, she wanted more clarity on external fire spread. Mr Martin was not clear on whether this was to be accepted or rejected.

"You're advising the minister to weave between the recommendations and the response without making it crystal clear whether they're being accepted, rejected or adopted only in part. It's mealy-mouthed," said Mr Millett.

"I'm not sure I would say it's mealy-mouthed. I accept the fact it doesn't clearly say one way or the other, and none of the people that reviewed this... thought that that was an issue at the time," said Mr Martin.

In a final collated summary sent to then-communities secretary Eric Pickles, Mr Martin added a line to the advice to say that a full review of Approved Document B "would require significant resources and have a disruptive effect on the construction industry".

Instead, he said the department could work with an industry scheme for window installers to ensure "their members are fully aware of the scope of the schemes and the requirements applicable to their work" – something the coroner had never recommended. He added that a full review of Approved Document B was due, in any case, by 2016-17.

Why the change? "This was the coalition government, following the financial crisis, so ministers were very focused on avoiding anything that might impact on the economy in a negative way," Mr Martin said.

Peter Apps - Housing / Residential Journalist of the Year

"Was this extra text intended to ensure that the recommendation received a warm welcome in a deregulating department which was focusing on promoting housebuilding and removing impediments for the construction industry more generally?" asked Mr Millett.

"It could be. I honestly can't remember," replied Mr Martin.

In his response to the coroner, Mr Pickles noted the plans to review the scheme for window installers. He said the department had commissioned research to underpin a full review by 2016-17. The focus on external fire spread had been lost.

'We only have a duty to respond to the coroner, not kiss her backside'



Mr Martin arriving at the inquiry (picture: SWNS)

Coroner Ms Kirkham had also heard evidence about how a sprinkler system may have extinguished the fire before it spread from the flat where it started.

As a result, she told the government to "encourage providers of housing in high-rise residential buildings... to consider the retrofitting of sprinkler systems".

She was the second coroner to recommend this move. The coroner investigating the deaths of firefighters at Shirley Towers in Southampton in April 2010 said the same, prompting a letter to housing providers.

The inquiry saw that civil servants from the housing team emailed Mr Martin about this issue on 16 April, with one saying she was "losing the will to live".

Mr Martin responded saying that the department had two options. First, it could "try and actively raise awareness of the coroner's thoughts with all landlords". But he called this: "A big and essentially pointless task."

Alternatively, he said the department could "tell the coroner that we've already raised this with social landlords... so we don't plan to do anything".

"We only have a duty to respond to the coroner, not kiss her backside," he wrote.

"I'd suggest the second option," he said.

"Your attitude to the coroner's recommendations would not tend to indicate that they were being taken very seriously, do you agree?" said Mr Millett.

"It's an informal comment between colleagues and it's no more than that, as far as I'm concerned," said Mr Martin.

He explained that the department had limited options. If it instructed local authorities to fit sprinklers, it would trigger a requirement for 'new burdens' funding to cover the costs.

"So I think that was the difficulty for the department with this, saying something more direct would have created a funding problem," he said.

Ultimately, in Mr Pickles' response, he said the department had "recently written to all social housing providers" regarding sprinklers and he attached a copy of the letter. No further warning was issued.

'Ronnie will not listen to reason, so I just ignore him'



Architect Sam Webb

As we have heard repeatedly, the department was repeatedly urged to get on with the review of Approved Document B by an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) chaired by the late David Amess MP.

The secretary of this group was a former firefighter, Ronnie King, who drafted a series of letters to ministers emphasising the need to act on the recommendations concerning sprinklers and external fire spread.

Peter Apps - Housing / Residential Journalist of the Year

In November 2014, Mr Martin was asked for an “oven-ready background and line to take” for the minister, in case he was questioned about Approved Document B.

In his response, Mr Martin referred to Mr King’s letters. “Yes – he’s very annoying,” he wrote. “He’s miffed that we made some de-regulatory changes in 2013 so why can’t we do a quick change to the [Approved Document] now and require sprinklers wherever they can go. Ronnie will not listen to reason, so I just ignore him.”

“Why was it acceptable just to ignore him?” asked Mr Millett.

“This is an informal email between colleagues. We didn’t ignore him,” replied Mr Martin.

“Do you agree, looking back on it now, that the concerns of the APPG were met by you, and certainly by the department... with unjustified hostility and derision?” asked Mr Millett.

“No,” replied Mr Martin.

We also saw an extract from the witness statement of the campaigning architect Sam Webb (pictured above), who recalled that he sat next Mr Martin at a lunch in the Houses of Parliament in February 2016.

He said he warned Mr Martin that another fire like Lakanal was “likely” if the guidance was not removed and added that if it happened “in the middle of the night when people were asleep, then the death toll was likely to be 10 to 12 times the six people who died in the Lakanal fire”.

“Brian Martin’s reply to me was, ‘where’s the evidence? Show me the bodies,’” said Mr Webb. “It was as if he needed a disaster before he or the government would act.”

He added that another fire safety expert, Arnold Tarling, had heard Mr Martin use the same phrase.

“Have you ever used words to anybody along the lines of ‘where’s the evidence? Show me the bodies?’” asked Mr Millett.

“I certainly would have talked about evidence a lot, that’s the key challenge that we always have. I don’t think I would have said, ‘show me the bodies,’” Mr Martin said.

‘Some people might wonder why you allowed something as obviously relevant to life safety to sink into the morass of other issues’



Nick Jenkins

Earlier in the week, Mr Martin continued to face questions about emails he’d received warning him about the use of aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding panels before the Grenfell Tower fire.

This centres on an exchange of emails with cladding supplied Nick Jenkins (pictured above), who warned Mr Martin in February 2016 that “there are many such buildings and their numbers are growing” and called the situation of “grave concern”.

As the inquiry has already heard at length, Mr Martin hoped the words ‘filler material’ in the guidance would be taken to mean the internal core of an ACM panel, and therefore ban the most combustible varieties of it.

But he had never made this explanation public and had not acted after being specifically warned to clarify it to prevent the use of ACM at an industry meeting in July 2014. Why did he not act after the warning from Mr Jenkins?

“I didn’t know who Nick Jenkins was. I didn’t know whether the points that he was making were true or not,” said Mr Martin. “I just didn’t pick up on this as being as severe an issue as I could have done and probably should have done.”

The failure to act came despite discussing ACM with colleagues previously and advising them that such a blaze “should not happen here” thanks to the provisions in Approved Document B.

So why did he not pass Mr Jenkins’ warning on to his seniors? “I wish I had. I think I probably should have done... it’s difficult to know what was going on in my head at the time. It was certainly an extremely frustrating period, and I think that had affected me in some way, which I find difficult to explain,” said Mr Martin.

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Mr Martin would attend a further meeting with industry figures at the Centre for Window and Cladding Technology (CWCT) in March 2016.

At this meeting, the minutes recorded an agreement that the paragraph containing the phrase 'filler material' was "poorly written and open to interpretation" and would be changed in the next revision of Approved Document B.

Mr Martin said he had agreed with other attendees that the clause was "certainly potentially misleading". But why had he not said this previously when asked about it?

"I don't remember a particular point at which I changed view. I think it's just the way the discussion's been recorded here," he said.

At this point, the review of Approved Document B was mired in delay and still in its scoping stages.

"Did you give any consideration to acting on the need for the revision more urgently?" asked Mr Millett.

"As I say, at that time, I didn't recognise this as being more urgent than any other problems that I was aware of," said Mr Martin.

"Some people listening to this might wonder why you allowed something as obviously relevant to fire safety, life safety, the difference between life and death, to sink into the morass of other issues," said Mr Millett.

"Because that was my job. My job was to cover a wide range of different subject matters. If I'd have recognised how severe the issue was with cladding, then I think I may have pushed harder," replied Mr Martin.

In July 2016, the National House Building Council (NHBC) issued guidance on cladding which endorsed the use of ACM cladding, providing it had a Euroclass B rating, even alongside combustible insulation.

Mr Martin confirmed he was aware this had been done and said he raised no concerns about the publication of the NHBC guidance document.

He told the inquiry he had "presumed" the NHBC had seen testing which showed ACM systems could comply, but accepted he did not ask this directly.

Speaking at the conference where the guidance was released, the inquiry saw that Mr Martin had addressed cladding fires directly. He said that "they tend not to kill people so why are we even worried" and added that it was "probably because we've been lucky".

'Are you sure this wasn't a planned, deliberate and underhanded attempt by you and those around you to rewrite history?'



Mr Martin became emotional during this final day of evidence (picture: Grenfell Tower Inquiry)

Mr Martin's mammoth seven-and-a-half day cross-examination came to a conclusion late on Wednesday with an interrogation of his actions in the days following the fire.

The inquiry has previously seen that he wrote a briefing note to ministers which said ACM cladding was "banned" by Approved Document B.

On Wednesday, he was asked about a briefing he gave permanent secretary Melanie Dawes about the issue two days after the fire.

Mr Millett ran through a devastating list of the many warnings and missed opportunities to clarify the guidance in the prior years. Mr Martin admitted most of these issues were not brought to her attention.

"I could have talked her through the entire history of the building regulations, I suppose, but I don't think there would have been time," he said.

"Are you able to agree that all of those matters that I've asked you about would have been highly pertinent and of fundamental and obvious importance for Melanie Dawes to know at the time?" asked Mr Millett.

"I'm not sure they were at the time. I'm sure other people will think differently," he replied. "When you put them all together, do you accept that they reveal a catalogue of failures, errors and omissions on your part, Mr Martin?" asked Mr Millett.

"I think to some extent, yes," he replied.

After this briefing, Mr Martin helped assemble a group of experts to advise on the fire. The government particularly wanted to know why the fire had spread so rapidly and whether it was likely to be a one-off.

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Again, Mr Martin mentioned none of the long list of issues about ACM and the missed opportunities he had to correct the misleading guidance.

"Was one of the reasons or the reason why you mentioned none of the matters that I've just put to you that you realised in the starkest possible terms that the catastrophic series of errors that you had made were on your watch, solely yours, and you didn't want to own up to them?" asked Mr Millett.

"No," said Mr Martin.

"Is there any other explanation?" asked Mr Millett. "Because we were focused on the immediate response," said Mr Martin.

A few days later, the government sent a now-infamous letter which told the industry cladding like the material used on Grenfell was banned. In a footnote, it said that "for the avoidance of doubt", the words 'filler material' meant the requirement for limited combustibility building materials "applies to any element of the cladding system".

It is hard to understate the importance of this letter. It has been the core of the government's denial of its responsibility for Grenfell and the cladding crisis in the years after the blaze. Arguably, it is also the genesis of the efforts to remove all materials which fell below this standard from buildings.

The inquiry saw the footnote was drafted by Martin Shipp, a technical director at the BRE, with Colin Todd, a fire safety consultant, adding the phrase about "all elements" of a cladding system. In an email he said this was to "hammer it home" that combustible cladding was banned.

Sir Ken Knight, the current chair of the government's independent expert panel, was also on the email chain.

But in his testimony, Mr Martin had already accepted – repeatedly and unambiguously – that it was not the case that official guidance required 'all elements' of a cladding system to be limited combustibility.

So how did the government end up saying otherwise in this crucial letter? "I must have missed that at the time," he said. "I was probably really tired at that point, I think."

"Are you sure this wasn't a planned, deliberate and underhanded attempt by you and those around you to rewrite history in the light of the deaths at Grenfell in order to protect the government's position after the event?" asked Mr Millett.

"No," replied Mr Martin.

At the end of his evidence, like so many before him, Mr Martin was asked what he might have done differently given the chance.

"I find it difficult to express how sorry I am for what's happened to the people of Grenfell Tower," he said.

Mr Martin added: "Over the last few months, I've been looking through the evidence and the documents, and when you line them up in the way that we've done over the last seven days, it became clear to me that there were a number of occasions where I could have potentially prevented this happening.

"I think I'd become – over time I'd become entrenched in a position where I was focused on what I could do to improve the approved document, and didn't realise just how big the problem was.

"What I will say is that the approach the government – the successive governments had to regulation had had an impact on the way we worked, the resources that we had available, and perhaps the mindset that we'd adopted as a team, and myself in particular.

"I think, as a result of that, I ended up being the single point of failure in the department, and I think that's why, when I missed that point, that's why I think we failed to stop this happening. For that's something I'm bitterly sorry."

'Everything happens slowly in the civil service'



James Wharton

On Thursday, the inquiry heard from James Wharton (pictured above), a former junior minister who was responsible for building regulations between May 2015 and July 2016.

Mr Wharton did not give much away, regularly responding to questions with "I don't recall".

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A recurring theme from the officials who have given evidence so far was the difficulty they faced in getting ministers to see their work as a priority, in part due the deregulatory agenda of the government of the time.

However, Mr Wharton pointed the finger back at the civil service.

In his witness statement to the inquiry, he said: "Everything happens slowly in the civil service and the likelihood is that nothing I could have done would have speeded the review up." This was in reference to the delayed review of Approved Document B, which has been a large focus of this module.

However, the inquiry was shown yesterday that Mr Wharton failed to sign off a crucial research report that was necessary for the advancement of the review of the document. Multiple emails were sent to Mr Wharton's private office over many months, however Mr Wharton said he was never made aware of it.

Generally, Mr Wharton repeatedly blamed the department's inaction on building safety on the fact that he was not briefed well by civil servants.

"With the benefit of hindsight... there were far more concerns being raised than were drawn to my attention or I was aware of at the time and that the urgency and seriousness of what needs to change was much greater than I was led to understand," he said.

However, this was hard to reconcile with the multiple letters the inquiry was shown that were sent to Mr Wharton from the APPG on Fire Safety and Rescue during his time as minister.

The letters, which were revealed by Inside Housing in 2019, explicitly warned that Approved Document B was "badly in need of revision" and said the issue had "significant life safety implications".

Mr Wharton's responses to the group were short, non-committal and placed emphasis on the government's deregulatory agenda.

APPG chair Mr Amess wrote to Mr Wharton to tell him that his comments had been met with "unanimous dejection" from the group.

When confronted with these letters, Mr Wharton accepted that his responses were "below the standard of engagement that should be expected", however he insisted he was taking the APPG's views on board.

Overall, Mr Wharton failed to accept that the government's deregulatory agenda played a big role in the lack of progress on building safety matters.

He said he "never felt that reducing the [regulatory] burden was going to prevent us from doing anything that we have to do", insisting that reducing the burden of red tape on industry is "generally a good thing to do".

'But it wasn't working, was it? This is the point we're dancing around, Mr Lewis'



Brandon Lewis

Finally, the inquiry also heard from Brandon Lewis (pictured above), current cabinet secretary for Northern Ireland, who held responsibility for fire safety in various ministerial roles before Grenfell.

Questioning of Mr Lewis focused on why tougher standards were not introduced to ensure fire risk assessors were competent, despite repeated warnings.

"Nothing was done in order to regulate when you had a cumulative weight of evidence that something needed to be done," asked counsel to the inquiry Andrew Kinnier QC. "Why in those circumstances was greater weight attached to an ideological presumption against regulation, rather than taking action when it was plain the sector led approach was not working?"

Mr Lewis replied: "My point would be it wasn't just an ideological thing... it was also around what practically can make a difference and [that] is making sure that the right experts who have that understanding and expertise are available to the organisations that need that advice."

"But it wasn't working, was it? This is the point we're dancing around, Mr Lewis, which your answers are not grappling with," said Mr Kinnier.

"The question you asked me is why we made the decisions at that point of time. And my answer is that's why we made the decision we did at that point in time," said Mr Lewis.

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"Is the reality that it took a multi-fatality event such as Grenfell to focus proper attention on the issues that had been discussed in the decade before?" Mr Kinnier asked.

"In a practical sense, that's clearly happened, tragically obviously," said Mr Lewis.

He said that some of the warnings he received were "several years apart" and that he had not necessarily looked at the issues in a "cumulative way".

The inquiry continues.

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Grenfell Tower Inquiry diary week 84: 'Every decision affects someone who is an adored child, a beloved sister, a respected uncle, a needed mother'

22 Jul 2022



The final week of oral evidence for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's second phase contained more heartbreaking evidence about the deaths in the tower. Peter Apps reports

Across 308 days, spread over two-and-a-half years, the second phase of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry has been an enormous, devastating excavation of the reasons why a tower block in west London ended up becoming a death trap for 72 people.

The inquiry's oral evidence is now complete. The final week saw presentations covering the circumstances of the deaths of 23 victims delivered to the panel.

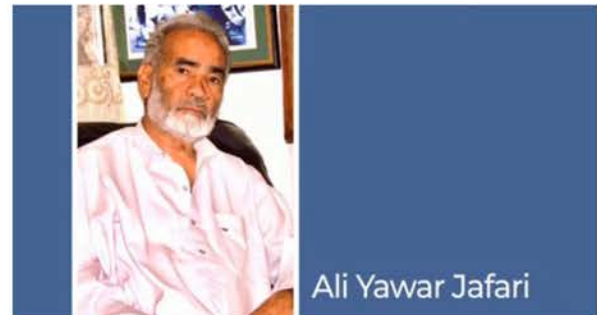
As explained in prior diaries, this is being done in the hope that it will relieve the families of the need for a full re-examination of the distressing evidence at inquest hearings after the inquiry report is published.

At the end of the evidence, inquiry chair Sir Martin Moore-Bick did not give an estimate for the publication of the final report, but warned writing it would be a lengthy process.

The inquiry will return in the week commencing 7 November for overarching closing statements.

As ever, this evidence can be upsetting and a trigger warning is appropriate. The details below are, by their nature, upsetting.

'The immediate cause of death here was caused by the accidental opening of the lift, a lift that remained outside of regulated control'



Three of the presentations on Tuesday covered a group of residents who are believed to have died in the relatively early stages of the fire, after attempting to escape the building in the lift.

One of these was Khadija Khalloufi, a 52-year-old Moroccan-born woman who had lived in a flat on the 17th floor of the tower since 1990 with her husband Sabah and his son, Alex, who she treated as her own. Family lawyer Danny Friedman QC said Khadija "selflessly cared for all of those around her".

Khadija and Sabah were roused by neighbour son their floor and warned there was a fire in the block at around 1.25am. They tried to leave the building.

However, on their way down the stairs, they became separated. It appears Khadija stopped on the 11th floor to alert a friend and her children of the fire.

Also on this floor was Ali Yawar Jafari (pictured above) and his daughter Nadia. Aged 81, Ali Yawar had some serious health problems and was unable to descend the stairs unassisted.

The fire had broken into Ali Yawar's flat through the kitchen window at around 1.20am. Nadia had roused her father and was helping him to escape.

"Once in the lobby, at Mr Jafari's insistence, they knocked on neighbours' doors and called a family friend in the tower to warn him," Mr Friedman said.

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Along with Khadija, they then entered the lift. Already inside were two other residents, one of whom was Mohamednur Tuccu.

Mohamednur, who grew up in Eritrea but fled to the UK in the 1990s, was said to be "affectionately remembered by his family for being well mannered, hardworking and, above all, kind... He was 44 on the night of the fire.

He had become separated from his family, who he lived with on the 19th floor after they had fled in panic when the fire affected their flat relatively early in the blaze. Tragically, his wife, three-year-old daughter and a cousin who was visiting them were among a group who went up to the top floor, where they would later die.

There were now five people in the lift: Mohamednur, Khadija, Ali Yawar and Nadia Jafari and one other resident.

The inquiry has previously heard that when firefighters arrived at the tower, one of the first things they did was try to activate an override switch which would have put the lift under their exclusive control and prevented residents using it unaided.

Evidence as to why they could not remain to be settled. The view of an inquiry expert is that the 'drop-key' the firefighters tried to use did not fit. But this has been challenged by the Fire Brigades Union, which suggested the mechanism failed because it had been contaminated with dust and debris during the building work.

What is clear is that a simpler, safer key mechanism could have been installed in the tower. But this was not done due to fears that it would be used by "unauthorised persons" who bought a skeleton key from the internet.

The result was that the lifts remained in service, exposing residents to "the fatal risk of being taken to the floor affected by fire".

This is precisely what happened. The lift stopped unexpectedly at Floor 10. Conditions on this floor were dire.

The fire had reached one of the flats on Floor 10 at around 1.20am, which caused the occupants to flee. But their door did not have a working self-closing device, and smoke poured into the lobby.

"Dense, toxic smoke flooded in and filled the lift," said Mr Friedman. "The evidence of those that survived suggests that the smoke was so dense that it entirely eclipsed the lift lights. It had a bitter, chemical smell and made it very difficult to breathe."

It is estimated that the doors were open for around 25 seconds before they closed and the lift descended again. But in this time, in the dark and confusion, Khadija, Ali Yawar and Mohamednur exited.

Smoke conditions were so serious on this floor that the inquiry's toxicology expert estimated they could cause collapse within 30 seconds or two minutes.

It is estimated that Ali Yawar collapsed almost immediately, while the two others collapsed shortly afterwards while searching for the exit to the stairs.

Meanwhile, Sabah was outside the building, telling emergency services that he had lost his wife. Nadia Jafari and her sister Maria, who had left moments earlier with their mother, tried to re-enter the tower when they realised their father was not with them but were stopped by police.

They said their father was missing and "were told not to worry and that the firefighters would bring everyone downstairs".

"As a matter of fact, there is no evidence of [LFB] deployments to Floor 10 during much of the next hour, despite the Jafari sisters' information and a number of residents making emergency calls from that floor," said Mr Friedman. The three bodies were later found on the 10th floor by firefighters.

The inquiry has previously heard that as well as the issue with the key switch, lifts were also not upgraded to 'firefighting' standards during refurbishment work in 2004, which meant they could not have been used by firefighters during the blaze.

"The immediate cause of death here was caused by the accidental opening of the lift, a lift that remained outside of regulated control, and the consequences that flowed from those deficiencies," said Mr Friedman.

'They can be perhaps called the forgotten ones from flat 113'



Mohammad Alhajali

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Among the most harrowing evidence of the entire inquiry relates to four residents, including two-year-old Jeremiah Deen and his mother Zainab, who died in Flat 113 on the 14th floor.

This was the home to none of them, but where they had been moved by firefighters who reached their floor earlier in the night and felt unable to guide them safely out of the building.

The story of these residents' deaths was told on Thursday, and began with Mohammad Alhajali, a 23-year-old Syrian man who travelled to the UK in 2014 with his brothers to escape the civil war.

He moved into Flat 112 with his brother Omar and their childhood friend Mahmoud Al-Karad (who was working a night shift when the fire happened) in September 2016. At the time of the fire, Mohammad was studying for a civil engineering degree and was engaged to be married.

He was described as "an unusually charismatic person, much loved and valued for his selflessness, compassion and strength of personality".

"Sir, you will recall being told of Mohammad's smile, his unrivalled joy for life and his dreams for the future, including his dream that one day he would be able to bring his whole family together in one place, where they could settle and live their best life. This was a young man who was well loved and loving," said Mr Friedman.

When flames reached Flat 116 on the 14th floor at approximately 1.25am, the family who lived there fled. But like with so many other front doors in the tower, there was no working self-closing device on their frontdoor, which meant the landing quickly filled with choking black smoke.

The brothers tried to leave, but were prevented from doing so by the smoke. They shouted for help from the window and a firefighter told them firmly to stay put.

Also on the floor was Denis Murphy, who lived in Flat 111. Aged 56 at the time of the fire, he was said to have come from "a large, loving Irish family".



Denis was a family-oriented man who would set a day each week to phone each member of his family "to make sure that he had time for a proper chat with all of them".

"The loss of Denis has been immeasurable for the Murphy family," said family lawyer Allison Munroe QC. He loved Grenfell Tower, where he had lived for three decades, but believed the refurbishment was "a form of social cleansing". "My Dad was convinced that [the council] were trying to socially cleanse the area of the ordinary people, like him who lived there," said his son Peter in a witness statement.

Denis, who suffered from arthritis and breathing difficulties, was one of the many residents of the tower with vulnerabilities.

He made his first 999 call on the night of the fire at 1.25am. He was advised to stay where he was, with the call handler wrongly telling him that the stairwell was full of smoke. It was in fact relatively clear at this point, and many residents evacuated down it from higher floors in the tower.

Denis' flat rapidly filled with smoke, and he told the emergency services on another call at 1.40am that he was locked in a bathroom. His relatives also called 999 on his behalf.

Nearby in Flat 115 were Zainab Deen and Jeremiah. "Zainab Deen loved being a mother. Jeremiah was truly her pride and joy," said Ms Munroe.

Born in Sierra Leone and 32 at the time of the fire, Zainab was described as "a lively personality, and her great sense of humour was enjoyed by all who came across her".

"Zainab was very kind, liked helping people including those who had nowhere to go, she would help homeless people in the community and offer them her sofa/her own home while they got themselves sorted," said one of her friends in a witness statement.



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Zainab was also, Ms Munroe said, a woman who had overcome suffering. She had learning difficulties and mental health problems and had recently escaped "an unhappy and tormented marriage".

At the time of the fire, her life was turning a corner. After a period of homelessness and unemployment, she had a tenancy in Grenfell Tower and was due to be starting a job as a waitress on Monday 19 June. A friend remembered her "dancing for joy at the prospect of a new job".

Jeremiah was two at the time of the fire and was described as a "very clever and a happy child". He was beginning to explore and appreciate the world around him, and he loved football.

"Two years old," said Ms Munroe. "That's an age where children are walking and talking and sometimes talking back. They are growing out of their infancy and into childhood.

"However, they're still very young, and when a two-year-old cries, they cry like a baby. When they're in pain, they show their pain like babies. They want to be held in your arms and cuddled and told everything will be alright."

Zainab made her first 999 call at 1.29am and several more throughout the night. She repeated that she was trapped, that smoke was coming into the flat and that she had a baby.

She was repeatedly told that the fire was in fact on the fourth floor, to put wet towels around doors and stay where she was.

"Effectively, Zainab is being told that she is wrong and she should disbelieve the sight of her own eyes and the smells of her own nose and the sounds of her own ears," said Ms Munroe.

"One can only imagine how those words, 'You're wrong, the smoke, the fire, is not on your floor' would have been received by someone like Zainab, who is learning disabled with a history of mental ill health."

At 1.51am, four firefighters who had been sent to rescue Denis reached the 14th floor and found eight residents trapped in the various flats. But they did not attempt to evacuate them. Instead, they told them to stay all together in Flat 113, where the smoke was least severe.

"Our decision to leave the eight people in Flat 113 was because of the conditions in the stairwell, where there was thick black smoke. If any one of them inhaled the smoke, that individual would not last long and pass out. I don't think leading eight people down to the ground floor is an option because they can't hold their breath for that long, it is just leading them to their death," said one of these firefighters in a witness statement.

The firefighters' radios were also not working when they tried to call for assistance and they were running low on air.

Mohammad and Omar asked them to evacuate them. But they were told it was unsafe in the stairs and they would not be able to breathe

"Once in Flat 113, the brothers pointed out to the firefighters the extent of the fire from the windows on both sides of the flat, but the decision remained that they were not to leave, despite their wish to do so," said Mr Friedman.

According to the inquiry's expert toxicologist, escape would have been possible at this time.

Images from the wall on the second floor, which was being used as the base of the firefighting operation in the tower, showed that the flat and floor number and the fact that eight persons were present was scribbled on the wall by one of the firefighters after he descended.

However, this information became muddled as this base of operation moved both up to the third floor and then down again to the ground throughout the night.

No crew was dispatched to rescue them, but at 2.23am, a crew returning from a higher floor entered the 14th floor and Flat 113. They did not rescue them nor is there any evidence that they reported their presence to their seniors.

Two crews were deployed to the 14th floor at 2.27am and 2.31am. Neither had clear briefings that there were eight people trapped in Flat 113 and one crew had been sent to entirely the wrong flat.

Nonetheless, one of these crews arrived at the flat, knocked on the door and shouted "fire brigade".

"The events that follow remain the subject of an evidential dispute," said Mr Friedman. "However, the tragic result is clear: four of the occupants... were guided down the stairs by the firefighters, while the other four occupants - Denis Murphy, Mohammad Alhajali, Zainab Deen and Jeremiah Deen - were left behind."

There was no search of the flat before the firefighters left, as is required by brigade policy. The reasons for this failure will be considered further in the final report.

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When Omar reached the ground floor at 02.45am and discovered that his brother had not come down with him, he was seen on CCTV footage to immediately point frantically upstairs, imploring firefighters to return to the flat.

Omar and his friend Mahmoud, who had by now returned from his nightshift, repeatedly told emergency services personnel about those left behind.

At around 2.30am, Denis' family drove to the tower. They called Denis on the way and he spoke to his son, Peter. "Boysie, Boysie, I can't breathe, I'm stuck, I can't get out, I don't know what to do," Denis told him.

"This was the very first time and indeed the last time that I had heard my Dad so scared," said Peter in his witness statement.

When the family reached the scene, they also repeatedly told emergency services where Denis was trapped.

Further crews were deployed to the flat, but they were either waylaid by residents they found on the stairs or "inexplicably redeployed to fight fire and carry out general search and rescue on lower floors".

The first phase report has already branded the failure to use crews with extended duration breathing apparatus to rescue them as "a mystery".

Zainab and Jeremiah also remained trapped in the flat. "One thing that has been absent in the main part from the inquiry are the sounds of the night," said Ms Munroe. "For Zainab, the sounds of the night would have been particularly terrifying. They were loud, they were constant and unrelenting, and they went on for hours and hours and hours. That is what Zainab and indeed two year-old Jeremiah would have been exposed to."

Zainab made several further 999 calls after being moved to Flat 113, the last in which she is clearly identified being at 3.17am. By this stage she was described as sounding "hysterical".

She also had a final call with a firefighter outside the tower who was handed a phone by her friend Francis who had been speaking to her.

During this call, he heard Jeremiah coughing and crying before falling silent. "My boy's dead," Zainab said. "I want to be with my son."

Shortly afterwards, this firefighter was informed by a colleague that crews were unable to get beyond the 12th floor. "I knew I couldn't tell her this," he said in a witness statement. "I just couldn't tell her that so I basically lied to her and continued to tell her that we were coming for her."

She lost consciousness during the call and eventually stopped responding. Denis and Zainab are estimated to have died at 3.45am. Jeremiah is estimated to have died slightly earlier.

"Zainab's greatest fear was losing Jeremiah," said Ms Munroe. That single thought occupied her final hours on this earth. Jeremiah and Zainab died as they lived: inseparable. They will be together forever."

The last person to speak to Mohammad was his brother Hashem, who had arrived at the tower during the fire.

"Mohammad was crying and asking to speak to their mother. But Hashem was worried that, if he ended the call, he would not get back through," said Mr Friedman. "He told Mohammad he could speak to their mother when he got out. Mohammad also asked him to play the Qur'an to him, and Hashem managed to do that by playing it from a speaker on his phone."

Mohammad is estimated to have died between 4am and 4.26am.

The four left in Flat 113 were described as "the forgotten ones" by Ms Munroe.

Ms Munroe concluded her presentation for Denis by reading a statement from his family. "Denis, we wish you knew how much of you there is in everything we do. It can be the smallest thing, but you're there, under the surface somewhere. We wish you knew how we carry you with us everywhere, always. Our precious memories of you will be cherished forever."

"I could have got out a long time ago, we could have, but they said, "Stay in the flat, stay in the flat"

The final evidence to the inquiry was the heartbreaking story of the El-Wahabi family, who died together in their 21st floor flat.

"There is a city on the north-west coast of Morocco where the Loukkos River meets the Atlantic Ocean, the crowded streets teem with life and the white-fronted houses rise in tiers precariously above the city," said Ms Munroe.

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"From a distance, it seems almost as if they would tumble into the waters, where they meet the dazzling blue sea below.

"This place is called Larache, and it holds a special place in the hearts of many in the expat Moroccan community in London. For the El Wahabi family, it is particularly dear because this wonderful coastal city was the birthplace of both Abdulaziz and Faouzia El-Wahabi."

The couple, who had lived in Flat 182 in Grenfell Tower since 1996, had three children: Yasin, 20, Nur Huda, 15, and Mehdi, 8. Abdulaziz's sister, Hanan Wahabi, lived with her family on the ninth floor of the tower.

"These two families were as close as a sibling family could possibly be: one family, two branches," said Ms Munroe.

Abdulaziz, who had been a hospital porter at University College London for 22 years, was fondly described as "never short of a word or two".

"Whoever knew Abdulaziz would know just how much he could talk. For our mother, who loved his company, she could listen to him all day, and now she is at a loss," recalled his brother Hamed.

"To remember Aziz is to remember, 'Awright, mate! Hello, Jane! Hello, sis!' He had a twinkle in his eye and did not take life too seriously," recalled one of the nurses at the hospital. He was described as the "glue" in the family.

Faouzia was described as a "calm, caring and grounded woman", possessing "serious culinary skills" and "able to create mouthwatering dishes from all over the world". She also knitted and crocheted clothes that were sold at Portobello Road Market, with the profits going back into the community.

Yasin, the eldest child, was described as "a local celebrity" who had "inherited his father's gift of the gab". "This was a young man who was going places and he was going to make a mark," said Ms Munroe.

Nur Huda was described as "warm and good spirited" and an "incredibly skilled, aggressive and agile" footballer. She had recently sat her GCSEs. After the fire, her aunt Hanan collected her results. She had got an A in additional science, and Bs in core science, history, PE, maths, English language and literature. "Her parents would have been so proud of her," said Hanan.

Mehdi "was the baby of the family, and everyone just loved him".

"Mehdi had an amazing imagination and was a wonderful storyteller. Again, a chip off the old block, he had the gift of the gab and talked non stop," said Ms Munroe.

On the night of the fire, all five members of the family were at home.

Throughout the night, they made multiple calls to the emergency service - being advised to stay put.

"A striking feature of all these telephone calls by the El-Wahabi family is how calm and polite, almost to the point of being apologetic, they are," said Ms Munroe.

At the same time, they also took calls from their family members outside the tower who desperately urged them to leave.

As they told the emergency call handlers that smoke and flame were entering their flat, they were repeatedly told that firefighters knew where they were and would reach them. "Believe me," the call handler said at 2.21am.

Finally, in a call at 2.43am, after the stay put advice had been dropped, the family were told to flee.

By this point, they were hiding under a bed together, with smoke and flame spreading through their flat.

"I could have got out a long time ago, we could have but they said, 'Stay in the flat, stay in the flat,'" Abdulaziz told the call handler.

The call handler then told them they had to get out before saying: "I'm going to have to leave you...we've got so many calls coming in."

"Flat 182 should have been a priority for evacuation as it was known that there were children in the flat," said Ms Munroe.

A crew was finally deployed at 2.44am to reach them, but they did not get to the 21st floor, after finding some casualties in the stairs. The family made no further calls. It is estimated they could have escaped until as late as 2.45am and survived.

In contrast, Hanan and her family on the ninth floor had fled the tower in the early stages without calling 999 because fire had penetrated their flat very quickly.

"One branch of the family survived," said Ms Munroe. "They became aware of the fire early on and fled their flat shortly after seeing the flames. They evacuated, they survived, they lived to mourn their loss and question why."

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"The other branch of the family on the 21st floor did not survive. Abdulaziz and his entire family, his beloved wife, his cherished three children, they all died that fateful night."

"When Grenfell Tower caught alight on 14 June 2017, the news filtered through across the globe. People watched and heard about the horrors. They cried for strangers they had never met," Ms Munroe added.

"One part of the globe was particularly hurt: the city of Larache mourned. It mourned for its lost sons and daughters, for friends and families taken too soon, for people who would never again see the beautiful city, its golden beaches and its clear, azure blue waters. For the people who had lost their futures, and who would never realise their hopes and aspirations. For the people whose dreams would never be fulfilled. For Abdulaziz, Faouzia, Yasin, Nur Huda and Mehdi El-Wahabi."

'Every decision affects someone somewhere who is an adored child, a beloved sister, a respected uncle, a needed mother'



The inquiry also heard presentations for Amal Ahmedin, Amaya Tuccu Ahmedin and Amna Mahmud Idris, the family of Mohamednur Tuccu and still-born baby Logan Gomes.

The presentations for Isaac Paulos, Vincent Chiejina, Joseph Daniels, Steve Power, Abufras Mohamed Ibrahim, Isra Ibrahim and Fathia AhmedElsanousi can be viewed.

At the end of the evidence, lead counsel to the inquiry Richard Millett QC (pictured above) gave some closing remarks.

"There may have been times in the past three weeks when you were struck by the vast distances between the final terrible experiences of those who died, what they saw, smelt, heard, felt, feared and said in those last hours, and the matters that we have investigated over the past two-and-a-half years in this phase," he said.

"How great is the gulf between, for example, what Jessica Urbano Ramirez experienced in her final hour and the filler debate?

"What did Hamid Kani's end have to do with the NBS specification? Raymond Bernard's final moments with the evolution of GRA 3.2?

"The Choucairs deaths with Class 0? Hesham Rahman's with the Lakanal case study? What did Arconic's Test SB have to do with Mehdi El-Wahabi's last moments?

"At times in these weeks you might have wondered whether we were sitting in a completely different room listening to something wholly unrelated to all the other threads making up the fabric of this disaster, and it is this perception of distance in itself which is an important discovery in our work.

"It tells us how so many actions and omissions of so many people- working in offices and on their smartphones, in meeting rooms, on sites, in testing houses, discharging endless strings of emails - have consequences perhaps far remote from their consciousness, but which were always objectively present in the perpetually contingent.

"It also tells us that every decision, every act, omission, interpretation, understanding, practice, policy, protocol. affects someone somewhere, someone who is unknown and unseen, but who is an adored child, a beloved sister, a respected uncle, a needed mother."

At the end of his comments, Mr Millett invited those present- on the final day, a crowd of lawyers, journalists, bereaved residents and survivors - to stand and observe a 72-second silence for those who died.

The proceedings closed with their names being read. It feels fitting, after 84 weekly diaries stretching over two-and-a-half years, that we sign off in the same way.

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These are their names:

Mariem Elgwahry, Eslah Elgwahry, Fatemeh Afrasiabi, Sakina Afrasehabi, Mohamed Neda, Rania Ibrahim, Hania Hassan, Fethia Hassan, Debbie Lamprell, Jessica Urbano Ramirez, Hamid Kani, Berkti Haftom, Biruk Haftom, Raymond Bernard, Abdeslam Sebbar, Hesham Rahman, Husna Begum, Kamru Miah, Mohammed Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Rabeya Begum, Majorie Vital, Ernie Vital, Marco Gottardi, Gloria Trevisan, Sirria Choucair, Bassem Choukair, Nadia Choucair, Mierna Choucair, Fatima Choucair, Zainab Choucair, Hashim Kedir, Nura Jemal, Yahya Hashim, Firdaws Hashim, Yaqub Hashim, Gary Maunders, Anthony Disson, Ligaya Moore, Sheila, Victoria King, Alexandra Atala, Mary Mendy, Khadija Saye, Farah Hamdan, Omar Belkadi, Malak Belkadi, Leena Belkadi, Logan Gomes, Ali Yawar Jafari, Khadija Khalloufi, Mohamednur Tuccu, Amal Ahmedin, Amaya Tuccu Ahmedin, Amna Mahmud Idris, Isaac Paulos, Vincent Chiejina, Joseph Daniels, Steve Power, Abufiras Ibrahim, Isra Ibrahim, Fathia Ahmed Elsanousi, Mohammad Alhajali, Denis Murphy, Zainab Deen, Jeremiah Deen, Abdulaziz El-Wahabi, Faouzla El-Wahabi, Yasin El-Wahabi, Nur Huda El-Wahabi, Mehdi El-Wahabi, Maria del Pilar Burton.

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Grenfell Tower Inquiry diary has painted a vivid picture of the world we must leave behind

22 Jul 2022



The Grenfell Tower Inquiry's headquarters in Paddington (picture: SWNS)

The evidence that has emerged during the Grenfell Tower Inquiry has painted a dispiriting picture of both the public and private sectors. As the evidence reaches its close, Peter App, offers some reflections

The last two-and-a-half years have been like no other in recent memory. The country has convulsed its way through seemingly unending political turmoil, extreme weather, Brexit negotiations, war in Europe and a pandemic.

Amid all this, the mammoth second phase of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, slowly and steadily playing out in an anonymous-looking conference building around the corner from Paddington Station in west London, has too often vanished beneath the surface of the public consciousness.

This is a shame. Because its investigations have, piece by piece, delivered a stunning condemnation of the state of our public and private sectors, from ground-level social housing management to the corridors of Whitehall, taking in the fire service and the construction industry on its way.

During that time, Inside Housing had followed all of the 308 days of evidence. As the process now finally comes to a close, here are some reflections.

The first thing to say is that this process - dry, lengthy, complex and frustrating as it has occasionally been - has been enormously important.

At the start, back in January 2020, I would have credited myself with knowing quite a lot about why the Grenfell Tower fire happened. The truth is I had only the faintest outline of the story and it would never have emerged without an inquiry tenacious and powerful enough to take on a secretive government and giant corporations with much to lose.

The steady, fearless cross examination of the witnesses has left them with nowhere to hide and forced significant admissions about the mistakes which led to the blaze.

There are those who would have preferred the police investigation to go first. That - particularly from the affected community who are being made to wait far too long for justice - is understandable.

But had it, this evidence would have been investigated in private by poorly resourced non-specialist detectives and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) lawyers. Any flaws in their work would never have been known.

Now if we do not see justice, then we will at least be able to explain in detail why this is a miscarriage of grave proportions. And if we do not get change, we will at least be able to state in the clearest terms why this a devastating mistake. These two faces are probably the best reason for hope in the ongoing battle for both.

So what of the story the inquiry has revealed? We have reported the details piece by piece over 84 weeks, and they are simply too large to try to summarise in full here.

It has felt like a once-in-a-lifetime peek behind the curtain of how organisations behave when they think no one is watching. What is scariest about that is the fact that the behaviour has been remarkably consistent.

Time and again, I have been asked: did even one organisation do what they should have by the people of Grenfell Tower? As we have progressed through many layers of the public, private and hybrid sectors under scrutiny, the answer has always been a resounding "no".

In the private sector there was a callous indifference to anything - morality, honesty, life safety - that was not related to the bottom line of the business.

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In the public sector there was an aversion to anything that disrupted the status quo, a weary cynicism and an insular desire to protect the reputation of organisations by refusing to admit or actively concealing flaws.

Why has this come about?

In the first module, which examined the behaviour of the construction sector during the refurbishment, there was a startling lack of accountability. Nobody felt responsible because nobody was made responsible.

Questions about safety could always be passed up and down a complex supply chain. In an environment where profit margins were constantly squeezed and companies flirted within solvency, cash was all that mattered. The cheapest option and the quickest option won the day. Compliance and safety were silly questions, to be addressed only in terms of what could be gotten away with, not what needed to be done.

In the second module - which looked at those who made, sold and tested the violently combustible products used in the cladding system - the behaviour was yet more sinister.

Devastating fire tests were concealed. misleading safety certificates were knowingly obtained and products were pushed for use on high-rise buildings despite their dangerous fire performance being known.

Sitting behind all this behaviour was a ruthless drive for sales by three global corporations under scrutiny: Kingspan, Celotex (part of Saint Gobain) and Arconic.

Kingspan's marketing team brushed off questions about safety bluntly. The technical manager at the time wrote that a firm raising questions about the safety of its product could "go fuck themselves and if they are not careful we will sue the arse of them [sic]".

Arconic, meanwhile, sat on tests demonstrating the danger of the product from as early as 2004, with internal emails instructing staff to keep the fire performance of the cladding panels ultimately used on Grenfell "VERY CONFIDENTIAL".

At Celotex, the manager asked to develop a product for the high-rise market questioned the sense of pushing for sales on tall buildings "because in the event of a fire it will burn". He was overruled by those pushing for sales.

The evidence exposed a system where the checks and balances which may have kept this behaviour in check were provided by private companies who viewed those they were supposedly scrutinising as clients and overtly fretted about losing business if they did not do their bidding.

"The frailty of this house of cards was an ideal prop to facilitate industry capture of an inadequately robust regulatory regime," said Stephanie Barwise QC, representing the bereaved and survivors.

This part of the inquiry is a gigantic red flag which simply must lead to systemic change going beyond the bounds of the cladding industry. The same incentives exist wherever one industry pays another to test its products and helps set its own rules. This matters greatly.

If companies approach, for example, their 'net zero' obligations with the same attitude to which those under examination here approached the claim that their products were of limited combustibility, then the future of the world will be hot, nasty, brutish and short.

Module three turned the spotlight onto social housing and should be troubling for those who care about this sector. It revealed a shocking failure to listen to residents' concerns, and a risibly poor performance when it came to maintaining basic fire safety standards, which appear to have had devastating impacts.

Sitting behind this was an attitude where the managing company and council appeared to see themselves as in conflict with the residents of the tower, instead of a company providing a service to them. Residents who raised complaints had checks run on their tenancy background and were branded troublemakers in internal emails.

External scrutiny, meanwhile, appears to have been treated as an annoyance to be avoided, not a crucial warning that all was not well. The board worked to defend itself, not to drive change. The housing sector must look at this evidence, learn from it and change, not indulge in a defence of the actions on display.

This module also exposed a failure to plan for the escape of disabled residents, which continues today and was undoubtedly a policy position set by central government that spread far beyond west London.

It underscored the terrifying way in which the lives of vulnerable people appear to matter less in policy terms and must, in the final analysis, be understood as a critical cause of the fire resulting in so many deaths.

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Sadly, the attitude that deaths where there is 'existing vulnerability' or 'co-morbidity' matter less has been echoed in events outside the inquiry room, during the pandemic and the recent extreme weather.

It is a worrying indictment of the British state and society in general. Just because protecting the rights of a disabled or vulnerable person is more complex, does not mean they should be abandoned. As Allison Munroe QC said, it is a club we may all join eventually.

Sitting behind all this was politics, which became particularly apparent in Module Six. This was not limited to a single period or single party, but reflected and repeated across 30 years of failure by the British state.

Government after government pledged to cut 'red tape', reduce regulation on industry and free companies to "innovate" by setting their own rules and managing their own affairs.

Amid industry pressure not to toughen standards, successive governments failed to explicitly toughen fire standards to ban the cladding ultimately used on Grenfell, despite increasingly clear warnings.

In 2001, it had even sponsored an official test that clearly showed the danger of the exact material later used on the tower but still failed to make the relatively minor tweak required to ban it. This test was never released, even after Grenfell. Without the inquiry, it would likely still be hidden in dusty government archives.

Even six deaths at Lakanal House in 2009 and painfully clear recommendations from the coroner in 2013 were not enough to shake the primacy of deregulation in favour of fire safety.

"We only have a duty to respond to the coroner, not kiss her backside," wrote official Brian Martin, responsible for the relevant guidance. He also extolled the need to protect the interests of "UK plc".

In the aftermath of the fire, the government insisted -wrongly- that the cladding used on Grenfell was subject to an outright ban. It did so - it appears - because it knew that any other statement would be utterly unpalatable.

This should be an important lesson to politicians who extol deregulation and cutting red tape. Grenfell shows us that, when push comes to shove, people do think the state should regulate to ensure their homes do not become fire traps, rather than leave this decision to the wisdom of the market. Deregulating in the face of safety concerns is placing economic theory above commonsense and will be seen that way by the public in the final analysis.



Civil servant Brian Hartin arrives at the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (picture: SWNS)

There was also a constant theme of decay in the public sector. From the fire service to the civil service, staff were demotivated and exhausted by resource pressures and appeared capable of little more than keeping the most basic functions going.

Whether something was safe, appropriate or even legal was a secondary concern.

They came across as imprisoned by the structures they worked in, believing they had no power to change or even challenge the accepted way of doing things, but simply to keep them going.

As Danny Friedman QC, one of the barristers for bereaved and survivors, said: "Everyday moral restraints make it hard for people, especially public servants, to admit inhumanity or comprehend that inhumanity is not restricted to bad people."

"And yet, it occurs in bureaucracies and businesses when basic moral restraints become neutralised or otherwise compromised:"

How had they been compromised? If public sector organisations are constantly defunded, devalued and told to do more with less, their cultures will sour. People who come to work bitter and tired become, in the end, concerned only with shovelling through the latest pile in front of them.

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"The anxiety and frustration of not being able to actually move things forward was... going to kill me if I stayed," said Richard Harral, a senior member of the team of civil servants responsible for the building regulations.

"I resigned because I had enough. I wasn't able to do the job how I was taught to do it. It was affecting my health and I just didn't want to work there any more," said John Hoban, the building control officer who ultimately signed off the tower's deadly refurbishment.

While these circumstances are not complete excuses for what happened, they reveal an alarming consistency among the two arms of the state that were arguably in the most pivotal positions to stop the catastrophe.

A crumbling public sector doesn't show itself immediately. People carry on, patch things up, work overtime, screech themselves beyond their capabilities and eventually break. That's what happened here.

What can be done about all this?

One apparent lesson is the value of transparency. People, and the organisations they work for, care for their reputations and invest in protecting them. This can force change, but only if they are capable of being exposed.

Had Arconic, Celotex and Kingspan been obliged to release the full details of the testing on systems containing their products in the years before the fire, they would have been far less likely to end up on the walls of people's homes.

Had Rydon, Studio E and Harley Facades been required to answer candidly the questions of residents concerned about their work, then key mistakes might not have been made.

The state has the power to enforce this transparency when it comes to matters of life safety. There is no convincing argument for it not to do so.

Another factor that would focus minds in board rooms would be prosecutions. The inverse is true. Bluntly, if no one goes to prison, the message to the industry will be that this behaviour is tolerated and we will not see change, however well crafted the inquiry's recommendations are.

It is also no exaggeration to say that if the Metropolitan Police is to have any hope of a relationship of trust with the working class communities of London, it must show that it is willing and able to prosecute the people responsible for the deaths of a community like them in Grenfell Tower.

Anything less will be a fatal blow to its legitimacy in the city. This investigation should matter to the Met more than any other in its history. Not least because in terms of lives lost it is the biggest crime it has ever investigated, larger than all the terror attacks on London this century combined.

Finally, I am also often asked: will any of this lead to change? It is difficult to feel positive. The evidence appears to call for a root-and-branch restructuring of the public sector and the way industry is regulated.

The rejection of key recommendations from the first phase as not proportionate does not bode well. Neither do current boastful pledges from Conservative Party leadership hopefuls and the leader of the Labour Party about cutting red tape.

Neither, when the question is ultimately one of compassion, does the fact that the government spent the fifth anniversary of the fire trying to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda.

But while the state is the only body large and powerful enough to drive the industry-wide change that is required, change need not only come from government.

It is open to anyone who worked in the myriad industries which gave us the Grenfell Tower fire - and I include myself as a housing journalist among that wide group - to resolve to be better.

To be more honest, less cynical, more willing to admit fault, more compassionate, more able to see that the way we've done things in the past does not have to be the way we will do things in the future and more alive to the fact that there are human beings at the sharpest end of any of our systemic failings.

In delivering some hard truths, the inquiry has given us all this chance to change. We must take it, and leave the world which gave us Grenfell behind.

NEWS REPORTER OF THE YEAR

Will Ing

Architects' Journal

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

Focused and tenacious, the winning writer worked hard for their exclusives. Their determination to stand up tips and chase down exclusives was nicely matched by their delivery – using well-chosen words, imagery and video to bring stories to life. This journalist didn't hesitate to get out on their bike to snoop around a building site where they thought a development had hit the buffers, earning them the scoop that the half-built scheme was to be demolished – a story that was widely read and followed up.

ITEM 1:

Farrells' £1bn Royal Docks plans in doubt as GLA hits developer with quit notice

A genuine scoop which was later picked up by several national publications, including The Times and The Guardian. I'd heard whispers that work was stalled on this mega- development. The architect Farrells and development manager Stanhope were keeping quiet. But, tellingly, emails to developer ABP bounced back. My gut told me something was amiss. I scoured ABP's financial accounts in the hope of a clue. It became apparent to me that the company was on the brink of collapse. The final key to the story came when I approached the Greater London Authority (GLA), who had not told anyone what was going on at the site. Embarrassed perhaps? They'd had already been forced to defend the procurement of ABP some years earlier. However, when I confronted them with what I had discovered, they admitted the plans for the £1 billion commercial district were unravelling, hidden behind veneer that they were proactively trying to kickstart the development. In July the GLA finally tore up its contract with ABP, and the future of the vast site now remains unknown.

ITEM 2:

Half-built dRMM scheme in east London to be demolished

Another exclusive story which was read more than 23,000 times and followed up by followed by the BBC and the Evening Standard, as well as other trade outlets, such as Construction News and Property Week, and local papers like MyLondon. I'd talked to a local resident who lived near the site. He thought construction work had come to halt. To find out more, I visited the half-built scheme. There I found a notice on the construction hoardings announcing that the development may have to be demolished. I then had to battle with Taylor Wimpey to find out more. I kept going. Eventually they admitted that the whole scheme would have to be flattened due to a structural problem. While the development is only seven-storeys tall, it is huge, occupying almost an entire block in Hackney Wick. I captured this for readers by cycling around the site and taking a video of it – which I then integrated into the story. The demolition is a major embarrassment for Taylor Wimpey: it will delay the project completion by years; it will waste hundreds of tonnes of concrete – and a very significant amount of embodied carbon; and cost, in all probability, millions of pounds.

ITEM 3:

Morris+Company adds second staircase to stalled Canary Wharf skyscraper

I was the first journalist to cover this scheme when it was recommended for approval at Tower Hamlet's planning committee in January. However, before the committee took place developer Ballymore postponed the application to 'consider' safety concerns raised by the London Fire Brigade at the last minute. This was widely reported, including in The Guardian. This article revealed how the developer and architect responded to those concerns. There was a widespread interest in this story – and several publications, such as Inside Housing and MyLondon, followed my article on it. I beat them to the story because I was canny enough – and technically-minded enough – to monitor the list of planning documents (of which there were 365) and extract the key information from an updated outline fire statement, planning statement addendum and floor plans. The story is of interest as it sets a precedent for dozens of other high- rise residential projects in the UK. Architects were also interested to see how an extra stair core could be fitted into the building footprint – something I showed them by publishing the floor plans. They are also interested in the scheme as its the first skyscraper designed by Morris+Company, a young but well-regarded practice.

Will Ing - News Reporter of the Year

Farrells' £1bn Royal Docks plans in doubt as GLA hits developer with quit notice

20 Jan 2022



1/7 Completed building in the first phase of the Farrells masterplan at Royal Albert Dock
Source: Guy Archard / ABP

Farrells' megaproject at Royal Albert Dock in east London is in jeopardy after the GLA told its cash-strapped developer to get on with building it or leave

The £1 billion scheme was supposed to complete in 2023, providing headquarters to Chinese and other international companies and, according to Farrells, serving as 'a contemporary commercial trading centre'.

A contract to develop the 15ha site was let by the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2014 to Chinese developer ABP. The appointment was marred by accusations of favourable treatment by the then-mayor of London Boris Johnson's overseas officials.

Since then, most of phase one has been completed, with just the refurbishment of two buildings left to go. However, no significant work has started on phases two to six and no construction has happened at all on the project since April 2019.

The AJ understands that only a very small part of the finished buildings are occupied.

In its latest accounts, published last month, ABP said it made a loss of £13 million last year, and has net financial liabilities of £14 million. It also wrote off £11 million, saying the 'coronavirus pandemic has adversely affected the market for sale and rental developments'.

ABP said its parent company, Dauphin Holdings, was seeking to raise funds and defer credit payments, but acknowledged there was 'significant doubt about the company's ability to continue as a going concern'.

The GLA served a final termination notice to ABP in August, ordering it to restart construction and comply with the terms of its development contract or else be removed from the job.

A GLA spokesperson said: '[We have] been concerned for some time by the lack of progress by the developer at Royal Albert Dock, and served ABP with a Final Termination Notice in August after the developer proved unable to meet all of its obligations under the agreement in place for delivery of this scheme.

'ABP's guarantor, Dauphin Holdings Group, has now formally stepped into the project and assumed ABP's responsibilities. As part of this process, Dauphin Holdings Group must comply with all of ABP's outstanding obligations and bring forward the development of this key site.'

The AJ understands that ABP and Dauphin will be removed as developers on the project unless they can comply with their GLA contract by March. If the companies were removed, a decision would then be taken as whether to proceed with Farrells' masterplan for a commercial hub.

A spokesperson for Farrells said: 'We completed the first phase of Royal Albert Docks in 2019, whereby we successfully delivered the initial stages of our user-driven, mixed-use masterplan, with ABP London and the wider project team.' The spokesperson declined to comment any further.

ABP and Dauphin could not be reached for comment.

Will Ing - News Reporter of the Year

Exclusive: Half-built dRMM scheme in east London to be demolished

29 Apr 2022



1/16 dRMM's design for a mixed-use scheme with three blocks at Monier Road

Taylor Wimpey is set to demolish a half-built mixed-use scheme in east London - designed by dRMM but delivered by another architect — after finding 'potential structural issues'

The scheme, known as The Factory, features three residential and commercial blocks linked by podiums on a rectangular 0.36ha site at Monier Road in Hackney Wick. The scheme was set to have 148 homes, with buildings up to seven storeys tall.

Stirling Prize-winning architect dRMM secured permission for the development in October 2019 but has not been involved in the project since, with BM3 Architects appointed as delivery architect. Taylor Wimpey subsequently began building the scheme, with concrete structures and decking currently visible along the length of the site.

However, the £4.3 billion housebuilder stopped working on the site last year. It now says it will demolish all the existing structures on the site before rebuilding the dRMM scheme with a revised design that still complies with planning consent.

A spokesperson for the group said: 'Following the discovery of a potential structural issue, identified as part of a routine check during the early stages of construction at our development in Monier Road, Hackney Wick, we have taken the decision to demolish the existing concrete structures and rebuild.'

'Health and safety is our top priority and this decision has been carefully and thoroughly considered after close consultation with independent structural engineers.'

'We are currently finalising a demolition strategy and timeline and are in the process of communicating with local residents and businesses about our proposals.'

The housebuilder has declined to say how much money it will have to write off for demolition costs and wasted construction costs, or whether it will seek compensation from any of its suppliers.

When completed, the scheme will feature red, white and black coloured blocks with ground-floor shop space and homes and amenity space above. The development is one of several by Taylor Wimpey in Hackney Wick, with others including the dRMM-designed Wick Lane.

A dRMM spokesperson said: '[We] were concept architects and designed the scheme up to planning so we're not able to comment on the construction.'

BM3 Architects declined to comment. Both Tower Hamlets Council and the London Legacy Development Corporation have been contacted for comment.

dRMM worked with structural engineer Clarke Nicholls Marcel on the proposal until planning.

However the AJ understands that Taylor Wimpey subsequently brought in structural engineers JPP to deliver the project and work with BM3 Architects.

A spokesperson for Clarke Nicholls Marcel said: 'We were not employed by Taylor Wimpey to provide any post-planning civil and structural engineering design services.'

They claimed Clarke Nicholls Marcel had no involvement in the design of the structure as constructed.

JPP was contacted for comment.

Will Ing - News Reporter of the Year

Exclusive: Morris+Company adds second staircase to stalled Canary Wharf skyscraper

15 Mar 2022



7/25 Morris+Company's proposed tower at Canary Wharf
Source: Morris+Company (design and access statement, PA/20/02128)

Morris+Company has added a second set of stairs to a proposed 52-storey tower in Canary Wharf after the London Fire Brigade raised safety concerns over the original design

Developer Ballymore paused plans for the 424-home tower in January, hours before the application was due to be ruled on by Tower Hamlets Council. This followed the fire brigade saying it 'disagreed' that the proposed single-stair design provided 'suitable and convenient means of escape' in the case of a blaze.

Now Morris+Company, working with fire engineer WSP and planning consultant Rofle Judd, has updated the tower plans, replacing a lift in the building's southern core with a new stairway that can be accessed from every floor.

The changes, which do not affect the number of homes or the building's façade, mean there will be one fewer lift for the building. However, a planning statement said the other three lifts had been 'increased in size and will operate at a faster speed to meet waiting time requirements'.

The document also said some amenity spaces had been 'provided with their own access/exit lobby separate from the core' and that a 'direct firefighting access corridor' had been provided on the ground floor.

The updated outline fire statement said the plan in the case of a fire is still for residents to stay put in their plans, with simultaneous evacuation for other spaces, including shops.

It added the fire risk would be minimised through construction, by 'mainly' using 'non-combustible concrete' as well as having non-combustible external cladding and insulation. It also said the building would have sprinklers, and that fire alarms were recommended for individual flats.

In January the London Fire Brigade said: 'We do not believe that sufficient justification has been provided for the tall single stair approach, nor do we agree that particular aspects of the design are compatible for such an approach.'

The LFB's objection followed fierce campaigning by Tower Hamlets Justice for Leaseholders (THJL), a local group of leaseholders living in flats with flammable cladding and other fire safety defects.

A spokesperson said: "We would like to thank Ballymore for listening to local resident and leaseholder concerns and going back to the drawing board for this scheme. They did not have to put in a second fire escape stairwell as the national legislation or building regs haven't changed, but they have decided to do the right thing.

"We urge other developers to follow their lead on this, but the law must change to bring us into line with Scotland which mandates a second stairs on all new residential buildings above 18 metres."

Single staircases are allowed in tall residential buildings in England if the building's fire safety strategy involves most residents staying in their properties – rather than evacuating – in the case of fire. However, single-stair towers have come under scrutiny following the Grenfell Tower fire, where compartmentation failed.

The London Fire Brigade raised concerns about more than 120 planning applications featuring tall buildings with single staircases between April 2021 and January 2022, according to Inside Housing.

Morris+Company's 174m-tall tower is earmarked, alongside a pocket park, for a 0.44ha site running along Cuba Street. The castle-inspired scheme is now due to be ruled on by Tower Hamlets' Strategic Development Committee in the coming months.

A spokesperson for Ballymore said: 'We've revised the design of our Cuba Street development, following comments from the London Fire Brigade during the planning consultation process. These plans have now been submitted to planning committee.'

Will Ing - News Reporter of the Year

'Every Ballymore development is built in full accordance with all current guidance, advice from independent fire safety experts and industry best practice. No development moves forward without full consultation with the London Fire Brigade and the support of Building Control, with whom we continue to work closely across our development portfolio.'

A London Fire Brigade spokesperson said: 'While we are not a statutory consultee on such planning applications, we are currently in discussions with the design team for this development and will be providing comment to the local authority in due course.'

Morris+Company has been contacted for comment.



NEW: Updated ground floor plans for Morris+Company's proposed Canary Wharf skyscraper

SCOOP OF THE YEAR

Jack Simpson

Inside Housing

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

This year's scoop of the year had real depth and was a hugely relevant story for the winning writer's audience. The journalist developed the trust of key contacts over a long period of time, and as a result beat every national publication to a story that will have a profound impact on the built environment for years to come.

ITEM 1:

Gove mulls extra cladding cash and public contract bans under proposed building safety changes

This big policy announcement was an exclusive for Inside Housing, revealed a month before any pick-up from nationals. Jack published this huge scoop outlining details of new housing secretary Michael Gove's plans to fix the building safety crisis and protect leaseholders from crippling costs – before any government announcement was made.

Using his reliable contacts built up over years of investigating building safety, Jack was able to get his hands on details of several parts of Gove's plans. It was the first piece that indicated to leaseholders that the government's approach was changing towards protecting the tens of thousands of leaseholders caught up in the cladding crisis.

The significance of this story can only be judged by the news coverage of Michael Gove's building safety plans a month later. It was the top story for nearly every broadcaster and most news websites, with many of the details being available exclusively on the Inside Housing website for over a month, where it had become the site's most popular news story.

This was also the first in a string of exclusives on building safety by Jack, as he was also the first to reveal Rydon was set to be banned from using Help to Buy by the government; and the first to publish the contents of Michael Gove's speech setting out his building safety plans.

This story further underlined Jack as one of the foremost journalists on the building safety crisis and is the biggest of several major scoops he has written on the subject in recent years.

Jack Simpson - Scoop of the Year

Gove mulls extra cladding cash and public contract bans under proposed building safety changes

3 Dec 2021



Housing secretary Michael Gove speaking in parliament (picture: Parliament TV)

Developers responsible for dangerous cladding could be barred from public contracts and an extra £1bn could be released for medium-rise buildings in measures being considered by government, Inside Housing can reveal.

Sources close to government have indicated that housing secretary Michael Gove is currently mulling stricter penalties for those seen to be responsible for building safety issues, while also considering plans to bolster the £5bn Building Safety Fund.

The proposals could see developers and contractors barred from accessing government contracts and funding schemes, such as Help to Buy, if they have a record of persistent building safety issues, or are not seen to be rectifying the issues quickly enough.

The intervention is one of a number of proposals being considered by Mr Gove aimed fixing the building safety crisis, which is currently affecting around 1.2 million leaseholders living in blocks across the country.

Other proposals include:

- Giving an additional £1bn to the Building Safety Fund to remediate medium-rise buildings
- Give an additional £30m to Waking Watch Relief Fund
- Scrapping the planned leaseholder loan scheme for buildings under 18 metres tall
- Remove 'consolidated advice note'
- Speed up cladding remediation by prioritising highest-risk buildings

Last week Mr Gove told MPs in parliament that he intended to reveal a series of measures to tackle the building safety crisis "shortly".

At the heart of these measures will be a move to try to protect leaseholders from huge remediation bills, and instead push for more contributions from developers, contractors and manufacturers seen as responsible for the crisis.

In some cases, leaseholders are facing bills in excess of £100,000 to fix historic fire safety issues, which is causing widespread mental health issues for those trapped.

To protect leaseholders, Mr Gove is also looking at adding more money to the Building Safety Fund, with an extra £1bn for the remediation of medium-rise buildings. This will take the total amount of money paid by the government to help fix dangerous cladding to £4bn, with an additional £2bn expected to be raised over the next decade from the residential property developer tax.

Estimates from the Housing and Communities Select Committee put an estimate on the total bill for fixing the building safety crisis as in excess of £15bn.

The government will also put £30m more into the Waking Watch Relief Fund. The fund was setup last year and is primarily used to fund the installation of all building alarms in buildings where expensive waking watches, which can cost in excess of £20,000 a month, are in place.

The additional money comes as the government looks to distance itself from 24/7 waking watch patrols in buildings, which can cost leaseholders hundreds of pounds a month. In November, prime minister Boris Johnson called the patrols "absurd".

The cladding loan scheme, which would see leaseholders in medium-rise buildings pay for remediation work monthly over a period of decades, also looks likely to be scrapped.

First mooted by former housing secretary Robert Jenrick in February, it was met with widespread criticism by leaseholders across the country.

Jack Simpson - Scoop of the Year

In a Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee hearing in November, Michael Gove said that he would be pausing the loan scheme plan, stating that he was "disturbed with the principle of leaseholders having to pay anything".

For those in shared ownership homes, the government is also looking at ways in which it can allow these leaseholders to sub-let their homes. This is currently not allowed under general shared ownership leases, however some associations like L&Q have allowed this to happen.

In addition to the crippling remediation bills many leaseholders are facing, hundreds of thousands are currently trapped in their homes as a result of the external wall system (EWS) crisis.

The EWS1 form was launched in December 2019 by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors as a way of unsticking the flat-sale market.

It requires a competent professional to check whether a building has dangerous materials and requires remediation. If it does, banks will usually not be willing to provide mortgages on these flats, leaving many leaseholders trapped.

In July, Mr Jenrick called on all lenders not to ask for EWS1 forms on blocks below 18 metres tall. It came after research by government advisors which concluded that there was "no evidence of systemic risk of fire in blocks of flats".

Inside Housing understands that the government is now trying to implement changes that will significantly reduce the number of checks required, as well as support those carrying out the checks.

As promised, the consolidated advice note, the piece of legislation which states that all buildings regardless of height must be checked, will be removed before Christmas.

The government is also looking at a government-backed insurance scheme for those carrying out the fire safety checks, to try to bolster the numbers of building inspectors and give them more protection over decisions.

There could also be more government oversight of the building checks in the future, with a central body set up to audit checks to ensure that a proportional approach is being taken.

Inside Housing also understands that a taskforce will be set up within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) that will work exclusively to recover funds from those companies that it feels are liable for some of the issues.

Next month the government is set to host an event that will bring together all stakeholders involved in the current cladding scandal, including campaigners, developers and managing agents, that will focus on ways to speed up remediation of dangerous buildings and protect leaseholders from costs.

Leasehold groups said it was positive that Mr Gove was looking at these areas and it provided evidence that, for the first time in a while, the government was listening to them, and that there was the political will to protect leaseholders from burdensome costs.

Giles Grover from the End our Cladding Scandal Campaign said: "Solving this crisis has always been about choice – we are slowly beginning to have more comfort that the right choices are being made by Mr Gove and that he has the mandate and authority to persuade Rishi Sunak to help us properly.

"It has long been painfully clear that an increase in grant funding is urgently required to bring about a fair end to this scandal that has blighted our lives for years – but we still need to see action on the ground to make buildings safe at pace, and we still need cast-iron guarantees that we will be protected from all costs to do so.

"Our heads continue to tell us to be cautious but our hearts are increasingly optimistic that we will soon begin to be able to think about moving on with our lives."

A DLUHC spokesperson said: "We do not comment on speculation. It is unacceptable and unfair that leaseholders are facing excessive bills – they are innocent parties in this and building owners and industry must make buildings safe without passing on costs to them.

"The secretary of state is looking at our work in this area to ensure we are doing everything we can to protect and support leaseholders, and we will be setting out further proposals in due course."

EDITORIAL BRAND OF THE YEAR Awarded the Marley Cup

Dezeen

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

It's challenging to partner with a company and still create compelling content, but that's exactly what the winning publication did on multiple occasions in incredibly difficult commercial circumstances. On top of this, the title's website is really well-designed and makes for a great user-experience, the content is often excellent and audience engagement is hugely impressive.

The judging period was an extremely challenging time for Dezeen, the world's most popular architecture, interiors and design magazine.

With the architecture and design industry still reeling from the impacts of Covid-19, hopes of a swift economic recovery were dashed by serious supply chain issues and increasing costs caused by a combination of external factors – not least the war in Ukraine – which caused marketing budgets to be cut for many of our traditional clients. This led to revenues from banner ads, our most significant source of income, to fall by 20 per cent during the period.

What was already looking like a tough year got immeasurably harder when, tragically and unexpectedly, we lost our founder, CEO and editor-in-chief Marcus Fairs, who died in June.

Despite these setbacks, Dezeen managed to secure and deliver a number of prestigious and lucrative content partnerships with leading blue-chip brands, which have been less affected by the supply chain issues impacting the architecture and design industries.

This enabled us to, despite the drop in banner ad income, grow revenue by 30 per cent and, therefore, increase the size of our editorial team. This ensured that we could continue to set the architecture and design agenda with industry-leading coverage of the most pressing issues affecting architects and designers around the world, alongside a series of impactful editorial initiatives.

Marcus is an irreplaceable loss, but over the past 12 months, the team has proven it is in a strong position to move forwards and build on the legacy that he started.

Editorial Brand of the Year - Dezeen

Highlights from Dezeen's work include:

Design competitions with LG, Epic Games and Arrival

Three of our most high-profile commercial partnerships during the judging period were design competitions, which saw Dezeen team up with some of the world's leading brands.

The Redesign the World contest

The Redesign the World contest was a partnership with Epic Games, which called for new ideas to rethink planet Earth.

OLEDs Go!

OLEDs Go! was a collaboration with electronics brand LG, which challenged participants to come up with innovative new designs using OLED display technology that cater to people's changing lifestyles since the pandemic.

The Future Mobility Competition

The Future Mobility Competition is a partnership with electric vehicle company Arrival, challenging our readers to reimagine the future of transportation in cities.

Each of these content partnerships, which Dezeen conceived of, delivered and documented through a combination of written articles, videos, live talks and webinars, was a six-figure deal. Combined, the projects brought in over £600,000 of revenue. This helped to offset the significant downturn in display ad revenue we suffered during the period and helped us achieve growth.

The projects also contributed high-quality and engaging content for our readers. In total, the content received over 500,000 page views and 10 million social media impressions.

Deconstructivism and 9/11 Anniversary editorial series

To compliment our daily news coverage, the judging period saw us publish a number of original editorial feature series.

Our Deconstructivism series reignited global interest in one of the 20th century's most interesting and controversial architectural styles – with the pieces in the series being read 350,000 times.

We interviewed the key figures that led the movement including some of the world's best-known architects such as Wolf Prix, Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman, as well MoMA curator Mark Wigley and Joseph Giovanni, who coined the term deconstructivism.

Meanwhile, our 9/11 Anniversary series, which marked 20 years since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, explored the impact the atrocity had on skyscraper design and architecture around the world. A highlight of the series, which generated more than 150,000 page views, included an exclusive interview with Ground Zero masterplanner Daniel Libeskind, who shared his experience of the traumatic event and revealed how this informed his design for the rebuilding of Ground Zero.

IBP JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

Will Ing

Architects' Journal

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

This year's IBP journalist of the year has displayed brilliant versatility, but with a common thread running through their work – the clear impact of their articles on their audience.

The judges described their work as tenacious, insightful and, above all, important. They won two categories and were shortlisted in a third, a fantastic achievement which underlines the depth of their reporting over the year.

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION AWARD

Oliver Shah

The Sunday Times

For 15 years, Oliver Shah has been one of the leading journalists in the property world, through his work as Associate Editor and Leader Writer for the Sunday Times and latterly, his must-read weekly column in React News.

He was named business journalist of the year at the 2017 Press Awards for his investigation into Sir Philip Green's £1 sale of BHS. The judges described it as 'the standout business story of the year' and said that his 'bravery [and] doggedness... brought the whole BHS affair to the public consciousness'.

He was also named business journalist of the year at the 2017 London Press Club Awards. Oliver has been interviewed on Radio Four's Today Programme, BBC News, BBC Five Live and Sky News.

He attended Reading Grammar School and studied English Literature at Cambridge University between 2002 and 2005. He worked for various trade magazines before completing a postgraduate qualification in newspaper journalism at City University in 2008. He then joined the London business daily City AM in 2009 and The Sunday Times in 2010.

His first book, 'Damaged Goods: The Inside Story of Sir Philip Green, the Collapse of BHS and the Death of the High Street' was published in 2018 and was a Sunday Times bestseller.

ABOUT IBP

Our purpose is to encourage, champion and develop skill at the highest level in built environment journalism and communications.

Who we are

The IBP aims to bring together a diverse community of journalists and communication professionals who share a common passion for the built environment. We want to create the opportunity for our peers, and those who want to enter our industry, to succeed by recognising, celebrating and sharing their contribution in making this a deeply exciting sector to work in. We believe our work is helping to create a better world, and we want to encourage greater inclusivity by providing opportunities to those who are currently under-represented in built environment journalism and communications. By working together, we can champion the design, development and building of a better built environment for our communities and stakeholders to prosper.

What we do

As an ethical organisation, we are committed to furthering best practice in our disciplines through our awards programme, which shines a spotlight on established talent as well as promoting up and coming talent from across and beyond our industry. By championing the very best in built environment journalism and communications, we can highlight and influence the important contribution that designers, constructors, developers, investors and consultants make towards the future prosperity of our society. The built environment is at the heart of who we are and how we live – and we aim to promote and drive this positive agenda. We are focussed on ensuring that all those who want to enter our industry have the opportunity to succeed, and partner with third parties so that those who are under-represented can benefit from the expertise our members provide.

If you are interested in joining the IBP, or if your organisation would like to become a supporter, please contact:



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