

# The Colin Wiles blog

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## Safety First: The Grenfell Inquiry

Ali Yawar Jafari was born in Afghanistan in 1936. He was a keen traveller, and fond of animals and gardening. Once, he saw a pigeon whose legs were tied in string and he waited for days to catch it so that he could free it. He told his family that he was pleased the pigeon was now free to go wherever it wanted. Ali Yawar lived in flat 86 at Grenfell Tower and was 81 when he died in the fire on 14 June 2017.

This is just one tiny human story in the 174 pages of testimonies in Chapter 32 (“Remembering those who died”) of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s official [Grenfell Tower Inquiry](#). I challenge you to read these pages without crying. They reveal the human side of this catastrophe, of the talented, diverse, hardworking people living in that block. A community of Londoners that was let down by the state and its agents.

Just to recap the key events of that night. A fridge fire in flat 16 on the fourth floor was reported at 12.54am in a 999 call. Two fire engines arrived at 12.59am and two more shortly after. By 1.20am they had extinguished “*an ordinary kitchen fire*”, in the report’s words, but by this stage the fire had spread into the external cladding. Within 20 minutes it had reached the roof and then spread around the whole block, moving upwards and downwards. By 1.50am 168 residents had evacuated the building. By 2.47am the normal “stay put” policy was abandoned and a further 36 residents escaped. The last resident was evacuated at 8.07 am.

72 people died.

The firefighters who attended “*displayed extraordinary courage and selfless devotion to duty*” but the London Fire Brigade comes in for some criticism in the report for control and communication failures, its lack of up to date information about the tower and for its failure to call for earlier evacuation between 1.30 and 1.50 am.

But hindsight is wonderful. No firefighter could have been prepared for what was encountered that night, the speedy spread of the fire and the catastrophic failure of a fundamental principle of firefighting – compartmentalisation.

Part two of the Inquiry will look at the wider construction and safety issues, but the Inquiry has already reached some fairly firm conclusions about the rapid spread of the fire. When the block was refurbished in 2016 foam insulation panels were affixed to the concrete façade and these were protected by aluminium composite rainscreen panels which had a polyethylene core. There were cavities between the original concrete façade, the insulation panels and the aluminium rainscreen panels, to allow ventilation and drainage.

Because of the external cladding, the new uPVC windows were pushed outwards, by several centimetres, to lie flush with the new façade, but this left a side gap between the old and new window position that was not adequately fire stopped. The fridge was next to the window. uPVC starts to melt at only 60°C and because the windows were glued, rather than bolted, to the old wooden window jambs the windows slumped downwards and lost their shape, so fire spread into the cladding and cavities.

Both the insulating foam and the polyethylene core in the ACM panels are combustible. Polyethylene is *“a highly flammable synthetic thermoplastic polymer which has a heat of combustion similar to that of petrol or diesel fuel.”* Both the foam panels and the ACM panels were also mostly exposed at their ends, and so unprotected from fire.

A key finding in the report is that *“the design of the refurbishment, the choice of materials and the manner of construction allowed an ordinary kitchen fire to escape into the cladding with disastrous consequences.”*

The primary focus of part two therefore is likely to consider how this and other buildings were wrapped in highly combustible materials.

Two weeks after the fire I wrote a [blog](#) about the measures taken by Parliament after the Great Fire of London in 1666. A series of Building Acts were quickly passed, requiring that *“No man whatsoever shall presume to erect any house or building great or small, but of brick or stone...the building with Brick is not only more comely and durable but also more safe against future perils of Fire.”*

Wise words.

Further Building Acts banned thatched roofs and required windows to be recessed so that fire could not spread from window to window, and for parapets to protect roof timbers from fire spreading upwards. Progress in safety legislation continued until the 1980s when new Building Regulations were introduced that allowed buildings to be faced in materials of “limited combustibility”. By that stage, presumably, there was a high (or foolish) level of confidence that compartmentalisation overrode any dangers from the external spread of fire.

The present Part B Building Regulations are opaque to say the least. Read the Inquiry’s summary of the Regulatory context at chapter five and your head is likely to explode. After the Lakanal House fire in 2009, the inquest judge described the Building Regulations as a *“a most difficult document to use...”* Any re-write, she said, should use words and a format *“...which are intelligible to the wide range of people and bodies engaged in construction, maintenance and refurbishment”*. This was ignored.

Part two will hopefully, finally, lead to a fundamental overhaul of the Building Regulations, that will make homes safer.

In the meantime, I would urge everyone in UK housing to read, at the very least, the Executive Summary of the report, and the recommendations (on evacuation plans, etc). But in particular, read the human stories in chapter 32. They are incredibly moving and should make us realise that keeping people safe must be at the very top of our priorities. Because housing is above all about people. We should stop talking about our homes in the abstract (“units”, “stock”, “dwellings”) and instead recognise them and describe them as places where real people like Ali Yawar Jafari can feel completely safe, in order that they can lead dignified and fulfilling lives, and that includes helping a pigeon to be free.

## About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

