

The Colin Wiles blog

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Grenfell Tower: Three years on

Can you remember the shock you felt waking up on the morning of 14 June three years ago? I watched the BBC reporting from beneath Grenfell Tower as huge gobbets of burning insulation and cladding fell to the ground. The tower appeared to be burning upwards as well as downwards. It was hard to take in – was this really happening?

I also found it difficult to write about the catastrophe. It seemed somehow disrespectful to the 72 people who had died and their friends and families. But this was probably the defining moment of British housing over the past 50 years and we all had a duty to try to figure out what had gone so horribly wrong.

So, write I did. I wrote about the history of fire prevention in the capital going back to the aftermath of the Great Fire of London in 1666, when an Act of Parliament was passed that stated: *“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.”*

I wrote about the relaxation of Building Regulations in the eighties that allowed materials of “limited combustibility” to be fixed to the outside of buildings. I mused that this was not just an issue for social housing but that, *“... as time goes on I am certain that cladding and fire safety concerns will be uncovered in all sectors and all property types. Above all this will become an urgent issue for legislators and the government. They will both need to take a hard look at their primary role – to keep us safe. This they have not done.”*

In the three years since June 2017, a great deal has happened. Often, the wheels of justice move painfully slow – look at Hillsborough – but within a year the Hackitt Review was published, recommending a simpler and more effective system for building safety, putting in place a dutyholder scheme and a greater role for residents.

Over a year later, in October 2019, the Part 1 report of Sir Martin Moore-Bick's Public Inquiry was published. It found that the cladding and insulation were principal factors in the spread of the fire. A police investigation is also underway. Part 2 of the Inquiry began on 28 January to explore the wider construction and refurbishment issues, but was suspended on 16 March and is now unlikely to report for at least 18 months. But some shocking revelations have emerged already.

For example, the architects did not have experience of working with cladding or high rises and they had limited knowledge of fire safety regulations and cladding. They felt under pressure from the ALMO to replace zinc cladding with cheaper ACM. They did not understand how fire might spread across the crown of the building and down the other side. A junior member of their team was responsible for sourcing cladding and insulation options and he focused primarily on cost, aesthetics, and the speed with which the material could be delivered, rather than safety. The architect ended up being a subcontractor to the main contractor, Rydon.

Likewise, the fire engineer spent only 15 hours working on the fire safety strategy.

One of the key questions for the inquiry will be: *“Where did the buck stop in ensuring that the refurbishment complied with the Building Regulations?”* The answer that has emerged so far is *“nowhere and no one”*. So many firms and organisations were involved that no one assumed overall control or responsibility. There was the council, the ALMO, the architect, the contractor, the insulation supplier, the cladding supplier, a specialist cladding subcontractor, a fire engineer, the panel fabricator, the engineering consultant, a clerk of works, a structural engineer, and various subcontractors for different elements of the work. There was no real leadership. Everyone seemed to assume that someone else was responsible. Is it any surprise that the ball of “safety first” should have been dropped or mislaid when so many people had their fingers in the pie?

After the Lakanal House fire, the coroner wrote to Eric Pickles in 2013 urging a rewrite of the Building Regulations, describing them as *“...a most difficult document to use”*. This was ignored. But when the Public Inquiry finishes its work, I think there should be two primary reforms. First, a complete review of the Building Regulations to provide simpler, clearer rules that forbid any combustible materials being affixed to buildings, ensuring strict compartmentalisation and other safety features in new and existing buildings. Second, an end to cost cutting in building procurement, scrapping design and build and other forms of complex contracts where key people can hide behind red tape, putting safety first, and providing a clear chain of command and responsibility to build homes that will not fall down or burn down.

Is this too much to ask?

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.

