

Blog

The Housing Quality Network

June 2020

On the third anniversary

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On the third anniversary of this tragic fire, we should remind ourselves that the deaths of 72 people were preventable – they died because their Means of Escape stairs weren't safe to use.

The essence of good fire safety is the art of getting people that are endangered by fire out of a building, safely and efficiently. If the victims had been able to safely use their Means of Escape and had made it out of the building, it's highly likely they would be alive today. Instead, they were told to stay put. And they did. And they died. The instruction to leave came too late; there was no evacuation strategy to get them to safety because a proper one hadn't been planned.

It was 3 July 2009 when six people died in the fire at Lakanal House because they obeyed instructions to stay put in their flats. The inquest wouldn't begin until January 2013. Long before this the LGA pre-empted a forthcoming inconvenience to landlords: a requirement for residents in flats to have an evacuation strategy. It did this in 2011 in its guidance document *Fire Safety in Purpose Built Flats*, by inventing the phrase "stay put is an evacuation strategy".

This document served only to embed and entrench stay put as an easy option for fire officers and landlords. Residents wanting a Plan B, a safe way out for use in unforeseen circumstances, were all coldly ignored by landlords, landlord representative bodies, fire engineers, guidance documents, and fire chiefs. The institutional indifference to the views of people in flats that wanted an escape plan was comprehensive.

"Stay put is an evacuation strategy" is as perverse a use of language as you'll find anywhere. To stay is to remain, to evacuate is to escape – you cannot do both at once; it's utterly ludicrous to suggest that staying is a way of leaving. Stay put never was and never will be an evacuation strategy of any sort; it's a complete misuse of the word 'evacuation'. We have seen with our own eyes, at Grenfell Tower, what happens when stay put is the designated evacuation strategy: there is no evacuation strategy. Forced to stay in, residents dangerously ignore every natural instinct in their body: the terror of not being able to escape the unfolding threat or the lethal gases and deadly smoke that penetrates every nook and cranny.

The fire strategy mentioned in CP3 1962 was in fact to "protect vertical egress routes", referring to the means of the escape stairs. It went on to say "occupants of these floors [above

or near the fire floor] should be free to reach safety via the staircase". The 1971 version of CP3 stated in relation to resident fire actions when there's a fire in a block: "The occupants of any dwelling may seek to leave the building, therefore provision should be made for them to do so, unaided, using adequately protected escape routes." How many lives could have been saved by adequately protected escape routes?

'People might get crushed on the stairs' is another urban myth we need to eradicate on our journey to constructive conversations. Looking at the capacity of 1100mm (a common width in old blocks), existing ADB calculations, vol 2, page 46, table 7, *Capacity of a Stair for Basements and for Simultaneous Evacuation of a Building* tell us the "maximum number of persons served by a stair width" of 1100mm, in a 23 storey block, is 1,100 people. Suggestions that people evacuating down a single means of escape stairs, that I heard from a civilian representative of LFB at the Tall Building Fire Safety Conference last year, would cause the death of residents in a stairway crush, are inaccurate and unbeneficial. Apart from that, anybody that's ever tried to evacuate a residential block of flats simultaneously, with the use of door knocking as a fire alarm, will tell you: it's almost impossible. Research has been telling us this for years. I can't believe we're still discussing high rise fire safety with these misplaced assumptions doing the rounds time and again.

Equally, means of escape stairs in flats do not compare in any useful way to the broad long stairs outside football stadiums where people tragically perished in crushes in the 60s and 70s. Or the stairs going down into underground stations during WW2. They're all completely invalid and quite unhelpful comparisons, often served up by people with an unhealthy obsession with preventing residents from moving to a place of ultimate safety when there's a serious fire in their building.

If we're serious about improving fire safety, we need to start standing up and challenging the fire sector to help us do that, not recreate old guidance. Fire safety in high rise has become bogged down and held back by misbeliefs and misconceptions. To implant them into yet another code of practice or guidance document would be irrational. It's exceptionally rare that a system becomes worse when it's opened up to scrutiny. We need scrutiny and transparency when forming our standards and guides; it'll improve them. In this context it has the potential to save lives.

Where might we go from here? Sir Martin Moore Bick's recommendations following Phase One of the Grenfell Inquiry include a section on evacuation, number 12. It requires "that the owner and manager of every high-rise residential building be required by law to draw up and keep under regular review evacuation plans" and "that the owner and manager of every high-rise residential building be required by law to prepare personal emergency evacuation plans (PEEPs) for all residents whose ability to self-evacuate may be compromised (such as persons with reduced mobility or cognition)".

The small number of seemingly unaccountable people that are determined to dis-involve landlords from fire safety arrangements for residents of high-rise blocks will not give up. If not through the existing *Fire Safety in Purpose Built Flats* guide, how might they continue their mission to ignore the (at least) 78 deaths caused by stay put, and further embed the right of a landlord to use "stay put is an evacuation strategy" as a route to circumnavigate Sir Martin Moore-Bick's recommendations?

One avenue that might be used to circumnavigate the Grenfell Inquiry recommendations is by writing a Code of Practice for Housing Fire Risk Assessors. If it states assertively and unequivocally that “stay put is an evacuation strategy” and “in general needs blocks of flats, the presence of disabled residents is likely to reflect the extent of disability in the general population...however, it is not normally practicable for a freeholder or landlord to make special arrangements for evacuation of these residents in the event of fire” then fire risk assessors of flats will not consider the procedures for evacuation of any residents. It’ll be irrelevant. Assessors will effectively be told to ignore those Grenfell Inquiry recommendations by their Code of Practice.

The new Code of Practice for Housing Fire Risk Assessors is open for comments until 30 June at the [British Standards Institute website](#). You have to be a member to be able to comment and, yes, it does contain the above quotations that conflict directly with Sir Martin Moore Bick’s recommendations. It uses precisely the same language as the LGA guide: “Stay put is an evacuation strategy” – that same guide that saw around [50% of blocks of flats fall into a noncompliant state of fire safety](#). That’s not a great success rate for such a serious topic.

After all of the promises made post-Grenfell, residents still aren’t being listened to. Some of the people, authorities, and organisations that are refusing to engage with them are actively undermining the fire safety of their families, again.

It might be seen as surreptitiously dishonouring the memory of those that lost their lives at Grenfell Tower and at Lakanal House if this new Code of Practice gets beyond draft stage, but all of the indications are that it soon will. Sir Martin might have already lost the first battle in his fight to ensure his recommendations are not, pre-emptively or otherwise, undermined.

May all of those people that lost their lives at Grenfell Tower rest in eternal peace. You will never be forgotten.