



Building towards a better housing service

– by Doug Goldring, Director of Housing Management



The legacy of the Grenfell Tower tragedy has, and always will, impact the way we deliver our housing services and drive our ambition to change and improve.

Since taking back control of our housing, we have made some important changes to our policies, culture, and most importantly, the way we work with residents. However, we know there is still more to do, and we are committed to bridging the gap between the Council and its communities and putting our residents at the heart of everything we do.

Fire safety

It was imperative following the tragedy that we improved and prioritised fire safety measures, taking a look at not just the structures of our buildings but also the expertise of our staff and the way we support vulnerable or disabled residents to evacuate in the event of an emergency.

Our dedicated Fire Safety Team is currently made up of 12 full-time staff, including qualified fire engineers, risk assessors and surveyors, and we have also taken on a Fire Safety Apprentice from the local community. We have hired two dedicated Building Safety Managers to look after high-rise residential buildings. These employees visit estates in person, and act as a dedicated outlet for residents to raise any concerns or issues around fire and building safety. We have also provided detailed fire safety training for staff within all areas of Housing Management.

We have completed 356 person-centred fire risk assessments and prepared 195 personal emergency evacuation plans for vulnerable residents who need extra support evacuating their home in an emergency.

We have installed Premises Information Boxes (PIBs) on all buildings over 11 metres in height, which include information to assist firefighters such as building drawings, the latest fire risk assessment and a list of residents who may need assistance. Local Authority Liaison Officers from the Council can now also access PIB files digitally on handheld devices when they attend an emergency situation.

What's next?

We will be continuing to deliver fire safety improvement works across our homes, with a focus on implementing all necessary changes to our practices under the new Fire Safety regulations coming into law later this year, including installing sprinkler systems in our hostels and sheltered housing blocks to enhance protection for some of our more vulnerable residents.

We will be continuing to engage with residents on fire safety through events on individual estates with the London Fire Brigade and getting residents involved in drafting fire safety materials for their local area, including resident-led fire safety videos such as the series we recently created with residents at Henry Dickens Court which is now available on our YouTube channel.



Complaints handling

We have improved the way we handle complaints, reducing from a three- to a two-stage process. Stage one complaints will be responded to by either an Assistant Director or a Head of Service, and stage two by me, as the Director of Housing Management.

This ensures that the progress of complaints is overseen at the most senior level in the Housing Management department and any lessons learnt can be identified and actioned.

We also now make initial contact with the resident who has made a complaint by telephone to better understand their issue and what has happened, and we have updated our complaints policy and made it publicly available on our website.

What's next?

A significant focus for us moving forwards is to fully embed a 'lessons learned approach' within complaints management. We have already made improvements in how we look at the learning from individual complaints - analysing trends in recently closed complaints, agreeing an action plan with service areas and reporting to senior officers in Housing Management more frequently – but we're committed to ensuring we are identifying the root cause of all complaints and taking steps to reduce the likelihood of it happening again. We are also delivering training to our staff on customer empathy to improve the level of service residents receive.

Resident involvement

We have developed a Resident Involvement Strategy in consultation with tenants and leaseholders to ensure we are putting resident involvement at the heart of our Housing Management service.

We run a Resident Safety Panel, a Housing Disability Forum, and a Repairs Panel. We use task and finish groups made up of residents and Council officers to develop and update our policies and procedures, and we provide the opportunity for residents to be involved in the recruitment and induction of new staff and the recruitment of contractors for Capital Works programme.

We conduct quarterly meetings on our big estates where all resident representatives are invited to come and meet our staff, review our performance reports, and raise key issues, and at Lancaster West, hundreds of residents have fed-in to a shared vision for the estate with many elements, especially around sustainability, being co-designed to reach our targets of the estate being carbon-neutral by 2030.

What's next?

We want to continue to have more residents involved and engaging with us on all aspects of housing management. Recognising that an ever-increasing level of interaction takes place over the internet, we are delivering digital training to support residents who are not already to get online and developing our community centres into effective hubs for involvement.

We are also working with residents to develop an effective system of resident-led scrutiny and, to accompany this, developing a whole series of training programmes for residents so they have a more in-depth understanding of how the Council works and how they can hold us to account.

Repairs and Capital Works

We are committed to delivering an ambitious Capital Works programme to improve your homes and work is underway across the borough with some estates already benefitting from new lifts, windows, CCTV cameras, door entry systems, emergency lighting and bin chutes.

As a priority, we began work to replace and upgrade fire doors in our homes across the borough and install and upgrade communal heat and smoke alarms.

We are also undertaking major works to many of our buildings which involves repairs to brickwork, guttering, roofs, insulation and walls.

On Lancaster West Estate, over a third of all tenants have had their homes refurbished to a standard co-designed with residents, and the first whole-block elements of the refurbishment are also being delivered.

What's next?

We are continuing to roll-out our programme of works with many new projects starting, including our programme of works to resident's bathrooms and kitchens which will begin in the next two years. This includes replacing kitchens and bathrooms in void properties and undertaking other necessary works so we can get more people off the housing waiting list and into homes of a new, modern, and safe standard as soon as possible.

We have also been reviewing ways, where possible, to incorporate sustainability measures into the works already planned, to make our homes future-proof and energy efficient. We have already installed double-glazed windows in some properties, LED lighting and upgraded wall insulation. Next on our green agenda is to upgrade our communal heating plants, install ventilation systems to improve air quality and address

overheating, and switch residents' energy supply from gas to renewable sources.

Throughout the Capital Works programme we have engaged with residents and sought their opinion on the works taking place to their homes. We will be continuing to invite residents to comment on our scope of works, monitor the works on site through project boards, and get involved in our procurement processes for contractors.



Employment support available for the community affected by Grenfell



Four new dedicated employment support programmes have been launched in North Kensington to help residents who have been impacted by the Grenfell tragedy to boost their skills, confidence, and career prospects.

The 'Community Works' project has been co-designed with North Kensington residents to identify and, most importantly, meet their employment needs, as part of the Grenfell Recovery Strategy. Through face-to-face meetings, workshops and two Grenfell Community Assemblies, two projects have been commissioned with local providers - **Into Work** and **Build Yourself Up**.

These will provide a total of four programmes over the next two years, with targeted support for different groups within the community.

Into Work is delivered by the St Giles Trust and provides personalised advice through dedicated advisers to give residents guidance and direct support into training or jobs.

Support is available for residents aged 16+, out of work or in a job and struggling.

To enrol on the programme, or find out more, please contact St Giles Trust:

intowork@stgilestrust.org.uk

07387 411 020

7 Thorpe Close W10 5XL

Build Yourself Up offers targeted, confidence-building programmes including:

The **Women's Confidence Programme** - delivered by the ClementJames Centre for North Kensington women who may be isolated and lacking support networks. To find out more or enrol, email **wellbeing@clementjames.org**.

Connecting with Confidence - delivered by Nova New Opportunities for all North Kensington residents of all ages and abilities with tailored support. Nova New Opportunities can be contacted on **020 8960 2488** or via email on **Alexander.Coackley@novanew.org.uk**.

Build your Confidence: Know Your Worth - delivered by ConnecMe2 in a series of workshops over eight weeks for young North Kensington residents of working age 16 to 24, including creative arts bootcamps for people who want to get careers in TV, Marketing, Graphic Design, Gaming, Music, Theatre, Radio, and Fashion. For more information email **hello@cm2.co.uk** or call **020 308 678 72**.



Pain into Purpose

A personal reflection by Jessica Jones, resident of Golborne Ward.

On the morning of 14 June 2017, an event unfolded that horrified and bewildered the world. Like so many, I went with my neighbours straight to Notting Dale to see how we could help. Police officers manned a barricade. Haunted but unable to provide any information, they waved us along. A friend in a hi-vis jacket had a better grasp of the situation than anyone in authority and directed us to the Westway Sports Centre. As with all the local community centres, volunteers got together in a frantic attempt to create a space that provided support and comfort. Donations poured in. Teams set up places to provide rest, and to distribute food, clothing and personal hygiene products. It was hot, oppressive. Rivers of donations became a flood. Everyone worked flat out, and all the while the tower loomed, flaming, smouldering, pumping out acrid, toxic smoke and ash that filled our eyes,

noses, mouths, and lungs. We kept our heads down, we did our best. Remarkable was the lack of anyone from the Council or anyone in any kind of authority. It was obvious, there was no plan or leadership; we had to do something, anything.

The media asked big questions: “how did it unfold?”, “who was in the tower?”, “how many died?” and, above all, “how could this even happen in the western world?”. Those of us who had lived for years in homes controlled by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) instinctively knew the answer to that last question.

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry continues to lay out a jaw-dropping tale of incompetence, venality, self-interest, laziness, and contempt, that infects from bottom to top the organisations responsible for building, managing, and ensuring the safety of our homes.

Hearing the testimonies of residents who survived, those whose family members and friends died, and fire-fighters who ran into the burning tower, has been painful and deeply moving. But the testimonies of many who worked at the Council and TMO transported me straight back to the years of living under what I can only describe as a regime of abuse. It provoked both feelings of rage and a determination that things must change in profound and permanent ways.

You see, the Grenfell Tower fire was not an accident, it was an inevitability. It was the culmination of policies and attitudes that all TMO residents had suffered for years. The consequences were sometimes fires, sometimes damp and mould, electrical, gas, or water failures, leaks, pest infestations, dilapidation... the list goes on, but always conflict, disempowerment, and despair.

After the fire, residents said "enough". On my estate, people were motivated for the first time to set up a Residents' Compact. We began to attend neighbourhood meetings and the Tenants' Consultative Committee (TCC), a group made up of leads of Residents' Associations who work with Housing Management and the wider Council on matters of policy and strategy.

No doubt, it's been a long time coming – but change is happening. The awful TMO is gone. A new Housing Management team, led by Doug Goldring and Bernadette Fry, is committed to understanding and acting upon the large and small concerns of residents. Although there's still a way to go, this co-operative attitude has begun to filter through the organisation. It's frustrating to note that positive change has been met with resistance from some Council and former TMO staff still in place. But I hope that, in time, the good may squeeze out the bad. And members of the Council, in their way, also show a new willingness to listen and solve problems together, rather than impose policies from above.



At policy level, we have seen plans to build some (not enough) new council homes, a comprehensive overhaul of the approach to fire safety, and a big push to repair and upgrade dilapidated buildings. On my own estate, the Housing Management team has worked with residents to create lovely communal gardens, put in a new lift, improve security, install high-speed fibre broadband, and handle fly-tipping. These improvements have gone a long way towards making us feel proud of our homes again, and that has, in turn, led to a strengthened sense of community and empowerment.

Watching the Inquiry has shown me how easy it is for cynical forces to make 'useful idiots' of residents willing to help. This is clearly what happened to those who tried to work with the TMO, and it is an ever-present danger. In recent years, the Council and Housing Management have turned over a new leaf. But what happens after one or two more election cycles, when different Councillors take over, or as members of the current Housing Management team retire? How do we ensure that a seedling culture of cooperation takes root and holds fast for generations to come?

We must remain vigilant. It is my hope that residents continue to work with the Council to embed constitutional safeguards and robust scrutiny processes designed to protect us from the quiet creep of old attitudes.

The 14 of June 2017 was a day of indescribable trauma for the survivors of Grenfell, their families and friends, residents of Lancaster West, and the whole community. I would go further and say that 20 years of living under the arrogant RBKC/TMO regime was a long, drawn-out trauma for us all. Trauma is never wanted, but once it has happened the question is, what do we do with it? For many people, horrific events may ultimately ignite a process of post-traumatic growth that can, in the words of Barack Obama, “turn pain into purpose”.

The pain and loss that Grenfell inflicted on our whole community will not, and must not, ever be forgotten. For the Council to ‘go back to normal’ is not good enough. ‘Normal’ was catastrophically inadequate. If you break a vase, you can glue it back together, but it will never be as strong. We can take the pieces of that shattered vase and use them to create something new and beautiful. What I hope for is a permanent new reality, where residents are empowered, communities flourish, and our homes are attractive, sustainable, and safe. This may be one way to try to make sense of the fire. I encourage everyone to step up and get involved, whether that be working with neighbours, being part of a Residents’ Association, or joining a working group or panel.

Together we are stronger.

