

UK: Camden residents speak of ill treatment during tower block evacuation

Our reporters
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Thousands of the poorest residents in north London's Camden borough were evacuated from their homes this weekend, after fire experts told the local council they could not guarantee the tower blocks they lived in were safe.

Cladding on the blocks was carried out by the companies involved in refurbishing Grenfell Tower, west London, which turned into an inferno when a fire in one apartment spread rapidly, resulting in the deaths of at least 79 people.

The Camden evacuation followed a meeting with tenants in which concerns were raised about many aspects of safety, including fire doors and insulation of gas pipes, in addition to the cladding.

The evacuation of Chalcots Estate began Friday at 8:30 p.m. after Camden Council leader Georgia Gould said that she had been told by the Fire Brigade there was “nothing to do to make blocks safe that night.” Four of the blocks—Taplow, Burnham, Bray and Dorney—were evacuated while one, Blashford, was deemed safe as it has different “design elements” and fire doors and is not as tall.

The evacuation operation was manned primarily by volunteers, mainly Camden Council staff, who had been contacted by text and asked to give their time for free. “Obviously I want to help the residents and that is why I am here,” one told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “but really it's a bit cheeky to ask us to come and give up our time to sort out a mess that they created.”

Residents complained that nobody really knew what was going on. While the volunteers were doing their best, there was no proper organisation, with people left in the dark for hours as to where they would be spending the next weeks while the building is made safe.

Michelle Gilmour, who has three young children and

lives in Bray, said, “I found out about the evacuation when a school governor called me because she had seen it on the news. At first, we thought it was only Taplow, but I walked down to Burnham and one of the fire people said he thought it was the same for all of them. I asked security, but they didn't know so I called Camden Council and they said ‘Yes, pack a bag.’ By that time I saw people start to go so I took my two older children and registered. At first they wouldn't let me register my baby and my dog, because I hadn't brought them with me. I got very upset. Eventually I took the children to my mum's small flat in another local estate and my partner and I spent the night at the sports centre.

“We were awake the whole night. We kept being told ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ ‘You're on a list.’ People kept disappearing. When I went back to the block to get something they wouldn't let me back in. I sat there for hours. Then I was told that they had lost my registration. Nobody knew anything. I got really angry and then had to apologise because the people there were just volunteers.

“They offered me a place in Docklands [east London]—without the dog, then Hackney, then Old Street. Finally at about 5-6 a.m. I was offered a place in Wembley, still with no dog. But what was I supposed to do? I have children who need to go to school and I have medication in my fridge in my flat, which I need to access for my rheumatoid arthritis. Then someone said, ‘Well, you keep refusing,’ and I said, ‘Don't you make out that you are doing me a favour. You lot messed our homes up in the first place.’”

Michelle was among those residents who were eventually placed in the Britannia Hotel in nearby Fellows Road. This was after an elderly resident, Shirley, had been interviewed by *Sky News* describing

her treatment.

Michelle continued, “When the council leader came down she had to sort Shirley because she had been on the news, so a number of us then got placed here.”

Many of the residents spent the day waiting in the hotel lobby. Although the council had said they would pay for the rooms, residents were worried about signing up until someone had come to guarantee it in case they found themselves having to foot the bill. They pointed out to us that just sitting in the hotel was expensive as drinks had to be bought there.

“They’ve told us we are here for at least two weeks,” Michelle, whose partner, children and dog have been given one room to share, continued. “We can’t wash our clothes and we can’t cook for the children.”

A meeting was held in Swiss Cottage library last Thursday with the Labour Party council leader Georgia Gould, a Fire Brigade leader, and two others. Despite the very late notice given of the meeting there were about 150 tenants present, Michelle said.

“People were giving facts about the blocks,” she said. “Some were saying Rydon—the company who oversaw the cladding at Grenfell and the evacuated Camden blocks—had stuffed newspaper in window sills, and a leaseholder who was an electrician was saying that the placement of plugs was illegal.

“Others said they had holes in the walls of their flats, exposed pipes or dodgy materials around them. We have smoke sensors that just activate a blinking light—recently a caretaker found one on the next morning after someone had smoked in the corridor. We had signs saying that we should leave the block in the event of fire. Someone from the Tenants Association said that the fire hose at the bottom of the block was a dud.

“Tenants were asking who had signed off on the refurbishment and the council representatives were saying they didn’t know and seemed to be trying to pass off the blame to Rydon. People were shouting, ‘Why didn’t you check? It’s your fault.’

“We were sent a letter the next day saying that a quality check of the cladding had found that, while it wasn’t the same as Grenfell, it wasn’t up to scratch.”

Michelle said another issue which caused anger at the meeting was that the local fire station—a grade II listed building—was sold off in 2014 for £7.8 million to Vulcan Properties Ltd, a company which includes a

donor to the ruling Conservatives. This was one of the 10 fire stations closed by then Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson in 2014. This week Camden Council agreed planning permission for it to be converted into 16 luxury apartments.

Other tenants who were waiting in the Britannia Hotel lobby praised the response of the local population and pointed out that volunteers from Grenfell had brought food and drink down to the sports centre. The granddaughter of a 72-year-old evacuated resident who had appeared on *Sky News* said a lady had contacted her from Hackney to offer her and her dog a room in her house: “The woman had cancer and said she couldn’t get around much but that my gran was welcome to come and stay as long as she needed to.”



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