

London: Ledbury estate residents speak about evacuation from their homes

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Residents of 242 flats in four 13-storey blocks on the Ledbury estate in Peckham, south London, spoke to the WSWs about Labour-controlled Southwark Council's telling them they will have to "temporarily decant the blocks over the coming weeks and months" for emergency works.

The council said safety checks carried out following the Grenfell Tower fire indicate the blocks are at risk of collapse in the event of a gas explosion. Workmen are now disconnecting the gas supply and residents are being given electric hotplates.

Safety issues were known at the tower blocks for many years. But Zola Nopondo, who has lived on the estate since 1998, said that it was only two years ago that fire alarms were fitted:

"I only heard about this last night, this letter was just posted through people's doors in the evening between 7 and 8. So others would have either seen the letter last night or this morning.

"It's confirmed that over the next few weeks and months Southwark Council will be evacuating us from the building to do more repair work and offering us temporary accommodation. We have been told that the council will buy a block in order to rehouse people that have been evacuated from this building and then the work will be carried out. They say those who want to move back into a refurbished building will be able to do so. That's what we have been told and that's the latest.

"I have not that many cracks in the walls of my flat, not like those that have been reported, but I do have some. Every flat is different and has a different severity. Mine do not seem to be as bad as my neighbour in the other block who can actually put her hand through the cracks, and that's what has kicked off this whole thing. She hired an independent structural

engineer after Southwark Council signed off the cracks as safe.

"She spent her own money to get an independent report carried out. They said, no way are they safe. They wrote a letter to the council and to her and it was this that sparked off this whole thing on fire safety. As is mentioned in the council letter, it was only because of this resident leading a movement that the whole thing started off.

"Only then did the fire service get involved and it's then we got the fire wardens on each block as well as a public meeting on this issue. It was also the time of the residents' AGM [annual general meeting] and the whole agenda changed because of the fire at Grenfell and our own fire safety concerns around the 1st or 2nd of July and it has all snowballed from then. But we have no idea where we are going to go—none at all."

Resident Glenn Holmes said, "It all started with the fire safety issue from the cracks in the block which undermined the compartmentalisation of the blocks. Our concerns go back as far as 30 years and have been reported many times, but the council have never really joined the dots up. All the council did was to redecorate to hide the water damage from general view.

"I have had cracks which let the rain in and all they did was to patch the crack up. I believe this was down to many years of incompetence from the council who downplayed and misunderstood all the fire safety stuff."

The Lakanal House tower block fire in Camberwell, south London, in 2009, in which six people died, resulted in a number of recommendations by the coroner, Judge Frances Kirkham, that should have been applied to thousands of similar blocks. Holmes explained, "Since the fire down the road there at Lakanal House six years ago they were supposed to

inspect all the council blocks in the borough.

“It is now obvious that they did not do this estate, which is only a short distance from the council itself. It was the tenants who threatened them with court action and getting the media involved and raised their concerns with the local fire brigade.

“That led to the situation where six weeks ago we now have these fire wardens placed on every floor who are here 24 hours a day and if there is a fire they are supposed to evacuate the blocks.

“The fire brigade ordered this and they have been put in place by the council who I believe has spent well over 200,000 pounds already.

“We only found out last night from the structural engineers that these blocks are of the same construction as the Ronan Point, which fell down in 1969. We were initially told repeatedly that it wasn't. I have just done a half hour of Googling to find out that it is. This was raised at the recent public meeting with an independent fire safety expert about four weeks ago. The expert has been on TV a lot since the Grenfell fire, Mr. Tarling.

“The council dismissed his concerns initially, but finally they have said he was right all along. Now they are turning the gas off. That is all the construction work around the blocks. We have been given these hobs to cook on but we have no hot water to wash with.

“We do not know where we will be going, but we have to bid on the council housing web site for a home and we now are supposed to have priority on housing over others.

“People have already started to do this and we are told we have the right of return. I do not know if we can believe them or not. I have a suspicion that the cost to rebuild the blocks, which is what is needed, with all the scaffolding and other cost will be far too much.”



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