

Grenfell Tower “independent” task force produces whitewash report

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The Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce’s first report, nine weeks in the making, confirms that the taskforce is neither independent nor intended to speak for survivors of the catastrophic June 14 tower block fire.

In the days immediately following the Grenfell Tower fire, amid conditions of immense suffering, anger and confusion, the British government set up a Gold Command structure to take over operations from the despised Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council. The council was widely viewed as guilty of creating the conditions for the disaster.

The recovery taskforce was set up at the end of July, with the aim of handing back all responsibility for dealing with the fire’s continuing aftermath to RBKC.

The report entirely avoids any reference to the fire’s origins in national and local policy decisions, including the wholesale deregulation and privatisation of fire safety and building control and fire service cuts. It avoids any reference to specific decisions within RBKC that might have contributed to the fire and does not cite a single complaint or comment from anyone, let alone those impacted. It does not name names or policies. The report is far more concerned with salvaging the reputation of local government in North Kensington and beyond.

The first of the taskforce’s 13 recommendations, following the worst fire disaster in Britain since World War 2 and whose terrible human cost is still emerging, is that a review should be carried out of “what good looks like in relation to the behaviours and performance in role of [council] Members.” The lessons of this should be included in the “induction for new Members, post local election in May 2018.”

The authors go on to express great concern that “few Council Members... have a firm grasp of the challenges that RBKC now faces.” They warn that “trust of the council in the North of the borough has been eroded to such an extent that to recover from this will require a

major shift in the members’ awareness and focus.”

The four person taskforce was appointed by the Conservative government’s Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Sajid Javid, a former vice president of Chase Manhattan and managing director of Deutsche Bank. Javid clearly sought out well connected operators, skilled in navigating large and lucrative projects through the political opposition and social tensions they generate—and no doubt versed in the language of “diversity.”

Task force members are:

* Aftab Chughtai MBE, a Birmingham business man, chair of West Midlands police independent advisory group, adviser to the Conservative Party and a Leave campaigner in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

* Jane Antoinette Scott, Baroness Scott of Bybrook OBE, Conservative leader of Wiltshire county council and its predecessors since 2003, supervising massive job losses and rationalisations across the county. She is also a member of the House of Lords.

* Chris Wood, former chief executive of Labour-controlled Newham Council in East London and currently running an international housing consultancy offering “first-hand knowledge of the economic and political pressures in your world.” Wood supervised Newham Council’s operation during the London Olympics in 2012 and the authority’s “regeneration” programme for neighbouring Canning Town.

* Javed Khan, chief executive of the children’s charity Barnardo’s.

The quartet’s cursory 20-page report reads like an internal report into a medium size business venture gone awry, not a mass killing. It aims to plump RBKC back into shape, minimising extra costs and political fallout by making a few recommendations and re-organisations before moving on. The language is vague—there is only one statistic, no evidence for any of the report’s

assertions is provided, there are no transcripts of interviews and only brief notes of discussions with resident groups.

We are told that RBKC was “distant from its residents; highly traditional in its operational behaviours; limited in its understanding of collaborative working and insular, despite cross borough agreements; and with a deficit in its understanding of modern public service delivery.”

There are no examples, even the most egregious, of RBKC’s behaviour. Instead, readers should be reassured that RBKC is now “working hard to develop and deliver effective support and services to survivors and the wider community.”

This claim is made despite the report admitting to the disorganised housing and support assistance for Grenfell survivors. But the answer is an anodyne suggestion that “Greater pace and focus needs to be added to the delivery effort. Promised actions must be delivered within agreed timescales.”

The report notes the “painfully slow” pace of rehousing the 320 households that are still, according to the report, in hotel accommodation. Even here there is confusion. RBKC’s written response to the taskforce report claims that “113 of the 203 households have been matched with new homes.” RBKC make no effort to reconcile this with the report’s figure of 320 households. Why this contradiction? How many households are affected?

Elementary information is still not easily available for all survivors. The authors “heard several times that there needs to be a leaflet or booklet with a comprehensive list of all services available to victims and survivors, and that this has been promised.”

It seems RBKC does not even have a coherent record of everyone impacted. The report comments that it is “hard to understand why the various responders continue to say they don’t have a common and comprehensive list of survivors and displaced residents, where they are currently living, and what their assessed needs are.”

Nor have individual “key workers,” to co-ordinate assistance and act as a point of contact, been appointed for all affected individuals. The report refers to a “discredited first attempt at a Key Worker programme, initially set up and run by London Gold.” This “left many survivors feeling let down at their time of greatest need.” There is no investigation of these failings or citation of examples.

The authors, speaking from experience, seize the opportunity to place blame on employees of RBKC, who are accused of “silo working.” This is corporate speak for not being allocated to multiple jobs at once. RBKC are

encouraged to look at “innovative ways that will increase capacity quickly, for example looking at re-prioritising work across RBKC.” In other words, cut provision in other hard-pressed areas of what remains of social provision in North Kensington by demanding greater staff flexibility, bigger workloads, redeploying staff and so on.

On the management of Lancaster West estate, the report recommends that the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) be closed down and control of the estate passed to another, as yet undefined group. No explanation of why another group would be more effective is given.

An October 14 posting from the Grenfell Action Group warned that efforts to prematurely close down the KCTMO could be designed to evade prosecution for corporate manslaughter, prevent legal disclosure and witness participation. After residents raised concerns, a KCTMO annual general meeting on October 17 was adjourned and no decision taken. Noting this, the taskforce authors cynically hinted at the need for “requisite choreography” for whatever new management structure was finally set up.

In the sole recommendation that goes beyond its remit, the taskforce proposes that Grenfell Tower, still a crime scene and under Gold Command, be covered over as soon as possible, commenting that “extended delays will further add to the ongoing trauma that the community is living with.”

This is not the only cover-up with which the report is concerned.



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