

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference and that’s how those in power view many in our society”

Grenfell fire: An interview with North Kensington resident Joe Delaney

Robert Stevens
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World Socialist Web Site reporter Robert Stevens recently interviewed Joe Delaney about a filthy attack mounted against him by the Sunday Times and other right-wing newspapers.

Delaney, who lives on the Lancaster West estate adjacent to Grenfell Tower, has a record of seeking justice for the victims and survivors of the fire that has earned him the respect of the entire local community in North Kensington. After the inferno that claimed at least 72 lives and left behind a toxic and burned-out shell, Delaney was evacuated and had been forced to live in hotel accommodation ever since.

In a spurious attempt to discredit him, the Sunday Times, Daily Mail, the Sun and Daily Express all ran with the claim that Delaney was living the high life on the public purse. The Sunday Times article on February 25 was headlined “‘Homeless’ Grenfell Tower activist Joe Delaney has flat.” It ran with a subtitle alleging, “A campaigner claiming cash for food while put up in a hotel is still using his own home.”

The Socialist Equality Party and Grenfell Fire Forum opposed the attack in an article published on the World Socialist Web Site on February 28. The interview in which Delaney opposed the attack by the right-wing media was published on the WSWWS on March 14 and received a wide readership. It was also read more than 5,000 times on the Facebook pages of the Socialist Equality Party and its Grenfell Fire Forum, as well as on other social media pages. The interview was retweeted by the Justice for Grenfell group to its almost 5,000 followers and the Sunday Times, Daily Mail and Daily Express. Many supportive comments towards Delaney and in opposition to the right-wing press were made online by those who read the interview.

In this interview, Joe Delaney speaks about his initial involvement in tenants housing issues in North Kensington and the Grenfell Action Group, his thoughts on the Grenfell fire and the official public inquiry.

Robert Stevens: How did you get involved in the issues of safe housing and the Grenfell Action Group (GAG)?

Joe Delaney: Although I’ve lived in the area all my life, I only moved onto the estate in January 2010, so just over seven years before the disaster happened. The reason I got involved with issues on the estate was, not to sound boastful, mainly that my reputation preceded me.

People on the estate came to know that I was someone who could get things done. I could reach parts of the council [The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea] and Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation [KTCMO, who managed Grenfell Tower] that it seemed no one else could and get them to do things. I had the knowledge from working inside councils. It was that reputation that got me in touch with people all over the estate, who were having issues.

I became quite involved with people in Grenfell Tower, particularly

when there was the project to demolish and rebuild the sports centre and build the new academy—the Kensington Academy and Leisure Centre (KALC) project.

One of the areas I worked on in councils was procurement. I was heavily scrutinizing the whole procurement process the council was using to commission the KALC project to try and throw any spanners we could into their plans because we could see they were trying to ride roughshod over local people’s wishes, so they needed to be stopped.

That didn’t work, but after work on KALC began there were serious safety issues in the tower, including power surges which blew up people’s electrical equipment. One of the first things I did with the GAG was when RBKC’s solicitor threatened to sue them for libelling the council. I pointed out that the council itself can’t sue for libel, which had been established since a court case in 1993, Derbyshire County Council V Times Newspapers Ltd and Others, that basically established the principle that public bodies should be big enough and strong enough to take any criticism thrown at them and therefore they have no standing to sue for libel.

Francis O’Connor and Ed Daffarn were the people behind the GAG blog, with Francis doing the bulk of the writing, while Ed would be the out-and-about investigator. When I was helping GAG avoid the threats of a libel suit, I helped Francis rewrite certain posts from a legal standpoint and we have pretty much kept in touch since.

RS: Can you give some background on the GAG blog posting warning that it would take a “catastrophic event” and a “serious loss of life of KCTMO residents” to expose what the council had done in terms of cuts in fire safety, etc.?

JD: That was the posting entitled “KCTMO – Playing with fire!” from November 2016. Francis was one of the loudest voices predicting that something like the Grenfell Tower fire was going to happen, but he was not the only voice. This was what people were widely saying at the time, but they were accused by the council of whipping up hysteria. Although Ed and Francis certainly bore the brunt, it was RBKC and the KCTMO’s standard tactic—if you can’t argue against the message then you just try to shoot the messenger.

RS: What do you think about the official inquiry into Grenfell? The terms were set last August and it formally opened last September. We’re now six months on and still not a single person has been questioned. It’s still in the procedural stage. The government has ruled out a panel involvement from the local community, so Sir Martin Moore-Bick is in sole charge.

JD: I’ve always said that ‘I’m cynically optimistic’ about it; I hope for the best, but also have prepared myself to expect the worst. When it came

to the inquiry into the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence, a lot of people felt the same about [Judge William] Macpherson; his beliefs and political outlook meant that he wouldn't be able to deliver a fair inquiry. He was quite well known to have extreme right-wing, neo-liberal type views. Yet his inquiry gave us a phrase that is associated with that inquiry and resonates to this day—"institutional racism."

The phrase that I'd like to see outlive this disaster is "institutional indifference," because that's how I see it. It's not that the people in power actively hate people in social housing, or the lower class. It's that they don't care about them one way or the other. The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference and that's how those in power view many in our society. We are an inconvenience and our feelings and needs are not even considered. People don't worry about how ants will feel if we destroy their ant hill. This is how those with power in our society view those who are directly affected by their decisions. We aren't even worthy of the passion that hatred requires.

The demand of locals is for "a diverse panel," and the media are trying to misrepresent this by saying that we want some kind of "United colours of Benneton" panel—one white, one black, one brown person on it. That's not what we mean by diverse! Look at some of the experts that have been appointed to this panel already, like Luke Bisby. He is heavily involved with the Building Research Establishment, which came up with the tests that said that the [Grenfell] cladding was safe to use. We just don't want people who are industry insiders and have links to organisations whose actions or decisions could be considered involved or even responsible for what happened, to be on this inquiry.

RS: Moore-Bick said he won't address any issues of a social, economic or political nature, and that was agreed with Prime Minister Theresa May. On that basis, how can the inquiry address any of the fundamental questions surrounding the fire?

JD: Well, if you said you were going to look at the political decisions then you've got an inquiry that is going to look back at least 40-odd years.

When you look at the Bloody Sunday inquiry, that took 14 years just to look at the events of one single day. I can see the logic of not having that in this inquiry. I do think that it's worth having an inquiry into that. I just don't think Moore-Bick's inquiry is the right forum.

However, one of the first statements Moore-Bick gave when the inquiry opened was that he wanted his initial report to be out by Easter, which is April 1 this year. This is somewhat ironic as I think that we'd all be fools if we thought he was going to have a report out by that date. There is no logical reason for all these delays. Remember that they had courts open 24 hours a day after the [2011] London riots, in order to ensure that all these "reprobates" who'd merely stolen or damaged property were seen to be punished. I don't see why that sort of political weight isn't thrown behind this matter.

RS: It's now 72 people who have died from the fire and no one has been arrested yet or charged. What's your view of the police's criminal investigation?

JD: I would have liked to have seen a few people arrested and placed on police bail, because that's what would have happened if this was a crime where the suspects weren't so well connected or rich. I do understand that these investigations will take time to ensure that any charges brought against those responsible stick, as they will have very expensive lawyers involved. However, I still feel that police bail would be justified as this is what the rest of us would have faced in such a high-profile situation.

RS: The *Sunday Times* stated in its attack piece on you that you are one of the most vocal advocates for the survivors and that you "represented former Grenfell residents on a key Kensington and Chelsea committee." Could you explain what that committee is and what role you've played?

JD: I was asked by local councillors to serve on RBKC's Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee; you can watch the videos of that online if you visit facebook.com/GrenfellSpeaks. Grenfell Speaks is a project run

by a dedicated local resident who wants to ensure that local voices and issues are broadcast, so he recorded every meeting and made them available online, which is more than RBKC have done. You will see that I'm one of the few people on that committee asking tough questions and trying to hold council officers and councillors from the ruling group to account. Many of the other councillors just seem to be there to waste time, or grandstand for their own benefit or that of their political party. They often seem too close to the officers of RBKC they are meant to hold to account and to be giving them an easy ride. I am not there to be elected and I am not there to make friends, so I have never done this.

On one occasion I had to ask Doug Goldring, director of Housing Management, the same question six or seven times to establish if any RBKC staff encouraged or coerced KCTMO to state that it was not fit for purpose and therefore wanted to hand services back to the council. I wanted a simple yes or no answer and was eventually told by the committee chair to explain why I kept asking or stop. In the end, I had to ask to the audience, like we were at a pantomime, "Has he answered my question?" Everybody said, "No!"

The council had already tried to take over the KCTMO in late 2017, but residents had blocked this because it would have meant that RBKC were able to control two avenues into the police and public inquiry—their own and that of KCTMO. This meant that they had the means to place as much of the blame as possible for the disaster on KCTMO, while allowing the council to emerge relatively unscathed. The KCTMO can then just be battered to death, blamed for everything, and wound up. RBKC could try to pretend that they are innocent victims, manipulated by the KCTMO and fed false information.

RBKC had always wanted to follow the policy of "managed decline," as it's known, and to eventually "regenerate" the entire area. KCTMO's actions before the fire were going to allow them to do so, and that's why they never really held it to account. It's really social cleansing.

RS: You will be a Core Participant [CP] in the public inquiry. Can you give some details on that?

JD: My solicitor applied for CP status for me not just as a resident but also as someone who'd dealt with the KCTMO before the fire. I could show the culture of the organisation, how negligent they were, and the fact that RBKC had not performed the duty of due diligence to inspect and police the behaviour and duties the KCTMO undertook on its behalf. I am one of the 500-odd people who have got CP status, despite many more than that applying for this.

I knew quite a few people in the tower who died. This might sound weird or callous, but one of the biggest groups I knew were dog owners as I would often see them walking in the area when I was walking my own dogs. I knew some of the children who were in the tower because they went to school with my nephews. I have known quite a few of the people since the time I first got involved the opposition to the KALC project and the safety issues residents in the tower experienced.

RS: You have been able to expose the council over their appalling response to the victims and bereaved of the Grenfell fire in not rehousing them or giving them legally mandated assistance.

JD: I have worked in the public, private and third [charitable] sectors. I began my working career after school in various areas of IT and then moved to insurance and risk management—I worked in a neighbouring London borough's insurance and risk management department for almost a decade, including as the insurance manager. I worked for several companies, some of which had a presence in several countries, in the same capacity. I've also kept my IT skills up to date, which has allowed me to offer my services to various charitable and outreach organisations on a voluntary basis so they could direct more of their funding to serving the community rather than paying for IT, legal, or insurance expertise and support. I still offer this to a couple of organisations in the area.

My wide experience in local government have meant that I have known

how to twist the knife on RBKC and ensure that as many of those as possible who've been a victim of Grenfell or RBKC's response to it have received help. I've worked at London boroughs including Ealing, Barnet, Camden, Westminster, Brent and even RBKC in various capacities. I have had the opportunity to see councils from both sides—as a service user and as an employee. I know exactly how they act from the inside, so I know where they try to 'bury the bodies' when things go wrong. This is something I have tried to ensure that RBKC have not been able to do since Grenfell.

Before the fire on June 14, 2017, I had just finished a work contract and planned to take a month off, but events took over and I have been working on Grenfell issues ever since, without pay.

RS: Just after the fire, you said to a reporter in a video that is online that the authorities responsible for the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower immediately began to delete documents.

JD: If you go on to the Internet Archive, or Way Back Machine, you will see that Rydon [the contractors who oversaw flammable cladding being placed on the tower] removed documents within hours of the fire. KCTMO removed pages from their website in the week the fire occurred. So there was already this PR exercise being undertaken by organisations who played a part in the events leading to the fire.

RBKC have behaved appallingly. They have tried to manage the PR disaster they feel they have suffered since the fire without any concern or regard for the humanitarian disaster which occurred that night, which they have worsened by their treatment of the residents affected since then.

RS: Can you explain your recollections of the night of the fire?

JD: It was five or ten past one on the Wednesday morning. I was on my way to bed. I could see that there were blue lights outside, but I did not really pay much attention because there are often ambulances turning up there as quite a few elderly people live on this estate, or fire engines turning up to rescue people when the lifts in Grenfell Tower malfunctioned. Despite spending £10 million supposedly regenerating Grenfell, RBKC certainly didn't regenerate the lifts because they were continually breaking down.

One of my neighbours knocked on my door and told me the tower was on fire around five or ten past one that morning. When I went out the fire was only burning on the fourth floor, but within about 20 to 25 minutes it had gone up the middle of the tower and was spreading rapidly. At first, many people who had come out to see what was happening threw things at the windows of flats on the side of the tower facing us to try to wake people. Because I saw how quickly the fire was spreading, I went back into my block to wake one of my neighbours to ensure that if things got really bad then she and her three-year-old boy would be able to get away from any danger.

I then decided to call 999, because all I had seen in attendance were fire engines and I thought the situation also required ambulances and police to attend. I told the operator that there was a "major incident" in progress, as I wanted to ensure the response of the emergency services would match the seriousness and severity of the incident in progress. I had left my neighbour's flat while making this call and returned to my own flat.

I then filmed things like the fire engines that couldn't make their way to Grenfell Tower because their only access via Grenfell Road was so narrow—meaning that people actually had to go downstairs and move their vehicles from the parking bays on either side of the road to try to make room for the fire engines trying to reach Grenfell Tower. It was absolutely ridiculous. People were trying to complete three-point turns on the narrow road so they could make space for fire engines to pass.

RS: What made you conclude the fire would be serious so early?

JD: Because of how quickly the fire was spreading and the fact that the cladding was raining down on the ground around Grenfell Tower and preventing the fire service personnel from accessing the tower. I went outside around five or ten past one and by one-thirty I knew that this was

going to be serious and people were going to die. Even at that time I was thinking 'I want those responsible for this to be blamed for their actions.' The instincts and experience from my work kicked in, so I wanted to try to film things that would prove that warnings made previously by locals were correct and people in the tower, as well as the fire brigade personnel trying to rescue residents from the fire, were being forced to deal with circumstances that were not only preventable but had been predicted by many.

That is why while many people were filming the tower burning, I was filming things like the fire engines having problems reaching the tower so they could deal with the fire. This was clear proof of the truth of the issues people had raised—about building a school, which cut off some of the avenues of entry to the tower should an emergency occur. At the time, I didn't think about the fact that the cladding was also seriously hindering the rescue effort, even though I could see and hear the problems it was causing.

No one in the tower wanted the cladding; no one worried about what it looked like externally and many were unhappy when they realised that the cladding would mean that the windows of their flats would now be recessed when they were previously flush with the building exterior. That cladding was basically building Botox to make it look prettier and served no useful purpose to residents. Because Grenfell Tower could be seen from so many precious conservation areas, the council spent money on how it looked rather than what was useful to residents.

It was around 2:15 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. that a police officer ran through my section of the block to tell us all to evacuate. At this point they were not sure if the fire would spread to our sections of the estate, or if the fire damage meant Grenfell Tower would collapse and risk the integrity of the parts of the estate that were physically attached to it. We were all told to leave via the doors at the end of the blocks furthest away from the tower. However, the blocks were split into sections and key fobs that allowed access to one part did not usually allow access through the internal doors leading to other parts of the block.

My key fobs did, as I had found the stairs at the other end of the block easier to navigate when I had broken my leg shortly after moving onto the estate and was using crutches. I used my fob to open one of the doors, then myself and other residents wedged that door open with door mats while a neighbour took my fob to do the same at the other door, so none of our neighbours had issues getting out.

My neighbours and I were sitting outside for quite a while. One of my dogs ran away and I had to chase her. It was at that point that I saw people fall from the tower. I don't know whether they jumped, or just fell. I saw a couple of people fall. They were at least half way up the tower.

Then a friend of mine contacted me. He's a construction worker and his firm was doing a job where they could only work at night. He was driving back on the A40 Westway flyover. He sent me a message saying he could see a tower on fire and asked if it was the one near my place. He offered to collect me, so I could stay at his place for the night. I grabbed my neighbour upstairs and her three-year-old boy and we walked up as far as Holland Park station. My friend picked us up and we spent the night at his house. We just watched the news all night, seeing the situation getting progressively worse and worse.

We stayed there for about three or four days. That was when I asked to be placed in a hotel. I was endlessly messed around and so were my neighbours. On the Saturday after the fire we held a meeting and I had to write a document, which explained to people how to insist on getting a hotel from the council.

RS: When you heard about the high number of deaths, what did you think as you were very conscious of the process that led to the disaster?

JD: Initially you don't think about that sort of stuff, as there was so much else that needed to be done that took all my time and attention. It was on the Wednesday, exactly two weeks after the disaster, that it hit me

for the first time, and I began to focus on everything that had happened. I had a bit of a breakdown that day.

In the immediate aftermath there was just so much that needed doing, so many people that needed help. People were sleeping rough on the grass around the estate. They had nowhere else to go because the council was invisible. RBKC weren't on the ground anywhere. It was places like a local youth club and one of the local social clubs that opened their doors and allowed people in. It was just appalling that people were being treated this way. I felt more spurred into action to try and help people get accommodation somewhere.

RS: On a video on YouTube, you were speaking to a reporter on June 16, two days after the fire, and at that early stage you were saying that several people in authority had to be questioned and they should be brought to justice.

JD: I knew who should be held responsible. The first person I was naming was Robert Black, then chief executive of the KCTMO. Another person I was naming was Nick Paget-Brown, who was then leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council. Another was Rock Fielding-Mellen, then deputy leader of the council, and Jonathan Bore, head of planning. That was the hall of shame and they were the ones who I felt should be arrested.

If any of them had any problem with what I was saying, none of them have contacted me about libel. Murder is too strong a word, but it is because of those people I named that those in the tower were unlawfully killed. They died in a brutal and horrific fashion, they were burned alive.

To imply murder would give them too much credit. We were an inconvenience, an annoyance, and that is why they were indifferent. It's this breath-taking arrogance and complete incomprehension. They have no feeling or regard for anyone other than themselves. It's corporate psychopathy.

RS: Grenfell was a national disaster and it quickly became clear that many buildings around the UK had the same or a similar type of cladding. There are residential council buildings, private sector blocks, student accommodation blocks, hospitals, schools. What do you think about the deregulation that could allow this to happen?

JD: Deregulation is a race to the bottom. When the Welsh and Scottish governments instituted tougher fire regulations and insisted that when any regeneration was undertaken sprinkler systems had to be retro-fitted into buildings [then Conservative minister] Eric Pickles tweeted, "Would the last person out of Wales please turn off the cement mixer." All they were saying is it's going to stifle the building trade.

Sajid Javid, now responsible for the department of Communities and Local Government, was the one undertaking the "bonfire of regulations" under [then Conservative Prime Minister David] Cameron at the time. You know a lot of companies offer a sop to "social and corporate responsibility," but if it comes to a choice between social responsibility and spending a few extra million quid on a building project, then corporate and social responsibility will go out of the window.

It's really a cliché now, but for them it's privatised profits, and socialised losses. They are the ones who should be responsible, and what good are corporate manslaughter charges? I want to see individuals charged, because this is the only way things will change.

RS: It's taking place in all cities, but social cleansing policies are rife in London where Labour is in power in most boroughs. You have similar policies going through and corporations and people heading Labour authorities who are reaping the financial benefits.

JD: This isn't just a Conservative problem. Labour have a lot to answer for as well. The Building Research Establishment was privatised under [Tony] Blair's first government and the behaviour of Labour councils I find more disgraceful. They were founded as the party of working people. It is the neo-liberals I cannot stand, and frankly neo-liberalism is in all the major parties.

That's what beggars belief, that we still have people who supposedly consider themselves to be left, or centre left, or in some cases would dare call themselves socialists. Yet they are climbing into bed with private companies that have absolutely no care or concern for the people that will be affected.



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