

Police to investigate London Fire Brigade over Grenfell fire: The real criminals remain at large

Paul Bond
9 June 2018

London's Metropolitan Police announced Thursday that the London Fire Brigade (LFB) is under investigation for the "stay put" strategy it implemented during the Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, 2017.

"Stay put" means advising residents to remain in their flat in the event of a fire in another flat in high-rise buildings. The police are investigating the possibility that the order could have breached health and safety law.

When asked by journalists whether senior LFB officers might face manslaughter charges, Matt Bonner, who leads the Met's criminal investigation into the fire, indicated that prosecutions would be more likely under health and safety legislation.

The announcement of a police investigation into the London Fire Brigade over the Grenfell fire is part of the cover-up by the state, aimed at shifting responsibility away from those responsible onto those who attempted to fight the blaze—the firefighters.

Almost a year after the inferno, no arrests have been made or charges laid against any individual or company for the social murder of at least 72 people.

However, simultaneously with their announcement of the LFB investigation, police made another nine arrests in relation to alleged fraud by people claiming to be Grenfell survivors. Three individuals have already been jailed for this, and another two are awaiting sentencing. These swift arrests of people on minor charges were made by the same team responsible for not making any arrests of those guilty of mass murder.

This is despite the police stating that 36 companies and organisations involved in the construction, refurbishment, maintenance and management of Grenfell Tower are of special interest. The local

council—the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC)—and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), responsible for managing Grenfell Tower, are also under investigation.

Reports to the official public inquiry by fire safety experts and family members of the Grenfell victims criticised the stay put policy, saying that the LFB continued to implement it long after the fire spread.

The "stay put" strategy has long been standard procedure for high-rise blocks, with the aim of containing fires in individual flats. But its effectiveness depends on effective compartmentalisation of the building, i.e., ensuring that the fire's spread is restricted by fireproof obstacles (doors, windows, etc.).

At Grenfell Tower, the use of inadequate and combustible materials massively compromised compartmentalisation, rendering "stay put" policy useless, with fatal results. Before firefighters had even extinguished the fire in its Flat 16 point of origin on the fourth floor, flammable materials used in window construction and external insulation and cladding in the 2016 refurbishment enabled the fire to spread to the outside of the building.

Fire expert Dr Barbara Lane said the "stay put" policy had "effectively failed" barely 40 minutes after the fire began, arguing that continuing to use the policy contributed to the loss of life.

Within the first half hour, concluded Lane, the stairs were free enough of smoke for escape by that means to have been viable. Most of those who fled the building did so during that period. Doors that were only fire resistant for 15 minutes rather than the half-hour they were supposed to be good for, coupled with the use of non-fire-resistant materials for the heating system in the

building's one staircase, ended the possibility of compartmentalisation.

Because of a switch fault, firefighters were also unable to use the building's lift to move equipment up the building. They could not evacuate residents down the last four flights by lift and had to use the stairway.

Lane was also critical of the water source arrangements available to the LFB. Grenfell Tower had a "dry fire main," meaning fire crews had to pump water into the building. A "wet riser" system, on the other hand, would have already been connected to the outside mains, meaning there would have been no need to connect internal pipes to fire engines. Wet risers also provide more water pressure, which might have assisted firefighters in getting to higher floors more effectively. Lane said the dry riser system was "non-compliant with the design guidance in force at the time of the original construction and... also non-compliant with current standards."

Lane expressed concern at the delay in formally ending the stay-put strategy for nearly two hours from the original emergency call to the fire brigade. However, while concluding, "There was therefore an early need for a total evacuation," she was careful to recognise the difficulties confronted by the firefighters.

She had found no evidence that the LFB knew the building's cladding was combustible and acknowledged that a call for evacuation was not "an easy decision to make during the unfolding and complex events that occurred."

José Torero, Professor of Fire Protection Engineering at the University of Maryland, told the inquiry that evacuation is not risk-free during the early stages of a fire, but "can be considered a better strategy than 'stay put.'"

He reported that 70 minutes after the fire had started, the Grenfell firefighters were "outside the bounds of conventional practice."

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) counsel asked, in his opening statement to the inquiry, "What alternative strategy might have been implemented" [that night]? There was, he said, "no obvious and safe alternative strategy nor detailed plan."

Given the "multiple" safety failings of the building, he suggested firefighters "were always chasing a sinister fire they had no realistic chance of defeating." The building was a "highly combustible death trap"

and firefighters were put in an "impossible situation."

Matt Wrack, the leader of the Fire Brigades Union, said that firefighters that night faced an "unprecedented catastrophe" and "did their utmost... to save as many lives as they could."

The BBC's recent *Panorama* programme about Celotex—who manufactured the insulation material used on the Grenfell cladding—broadcast footage shot by attending fire crews, who are heard to be in shock at the way the fire was rapidly spreading and engulfing the entire structure.

The LFB told the inquiry that it is "a fundamental misunderstanding" to believe that a "stay put" policy can be changed to evacuation just like that. Fire safety advice for tall buildings is not set by the fire service, but by the building's owners. The LFB asked, "If there is no policy applied by the building owner which provides for a policy of simultaneous evacuation and there are no evacuation plans and there are no general fire alarms—what is an incident commander on the fire ground to do?"

Firefighters were placed in an "intolerable" position and were unaware of the shortcomings of the building's maintenance and fabric.

Questions do need to be asked about the "stay put" strategy and its implementation, but the LFB noted that historically it has been generally successful. This depends, of course, on successful maintenance of the building's compartmentalisation.

The inquiry has already heard a plea of limited responsibility from Arconic (formerly Alcoa), the cladding manufacturer, who have claimed their panels were "at most, a contributing factor."

The company's argument is that if the window fittings had prevented the fire reaching the outside, then wrapping the building in highly flammable material would not have resulted in any deaths. Arconic withdrew the panels from use in high-rise buildings after the fire.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)