UK: Haringey Council tower block residents lived in danger for 30 years

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More than 200 families must leave their homes in north London as their tower blocks are at risk of collapse in the event of a gas explosion or even a vehicle impact. The decision was made by Labour Party-run Haringey Council.

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, 2017, which killed 72 people, the council conducted safety checks on the 12 tower blocks of the Broadwater Farm estate. Eleven of the buildings failed safety tests. Strengthening work is being conducted at nine of the blocks, but residents of Tangmere and Northolt blocks have been told the buildings must be demolished.

The council is calling for the immediate evacuation of Tangmere ahead of gas supplier, Cadent, cutting off supply to the whole estate in October.

The Broadwater Farm tower blocks were built using a large-panel system. This construction method was widespread across British council blocks and used at Ronan Point—the east London tower block which partially collapsed following a gas explosion in 1967, killing four. The Broadwater Farm estate was built after that disaster.

The structural problems of such building methods have been known for decades. But they were still used to speed up construction and encourage the use of cheaper, unskilled labour to assemble the panels. The cutting of costs in construction led to later safety investigations revealing problems such as mortar joints stuffed with newspaper to accelerate construction rates.

Architect Sam Webb, who conducted safety investigations at Broadwater Farm in 1985, told the *Guardian* that there were “gaps between the external wall panels and the edge of the floor slabs” that expanded with temperature changes: “If there is an explosion the building behaves like a pack of cards. Large panel system buildings are like a house made of dominos. If you move a structural member it will collapse.”

Large panel system buildings are at risk of progressive collapse in the event of a gas pipe explosion. Much of Broadwater Farm had piped gas installed around 1984, after construction.

Nine of the high-rise blocks failed higher threshold safety tests last December. The council was forced to replace gas cookers with electric cookers in all 725 flats and installed gas interrupter valves to shut off the gas in the event of a leak.

Across the UK, at least 554 blocks over eight storeys are known to have used this construction system. Independent researcher Hannah Brack has suggested there may be 1,000 more. Even this may be a substantial underestimation, given the perilous safety situation at Tangmere, which is a seven-storey building.

Other large panel blocks are already being evacuated because of safety concerns. This was the case at the Ledbury Estate in south London, where residents were evacuated for the replacement of the entire heating system.

The dangerous living conditions at Broadwater Farm are the product of decades of deregulation and indifference to basic safety standards. The Griffiths Inquiry set up by Harold Wilson’s Labour Party government following Ronan Point recommended “reinforcement of vulnerable buildings and the replacement of gas supplies by electricity.” These recommendations had been ignored for 50 years.

The type of tests these buildings failed were initiated after Ronan Point, yet the safety failings have only just come to light. The council acknowledged it has only partial archives and said it does not know the “exact nature” of structural and fire-stopping work conducted between 1984 and 1992.

It was initially thought that only the nine seven-storey blocks were at risk, as the two larger blocks had no gas heating systems. The other smaller blocks met lower threshold safety tests, but Tangmere was found to be

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unsafe if bottled gas or oxygen cylinders exploded, or if a vehicle struck it. Tangmere is to be evacuated immediately because it has a piped gas supply.

The 18-storey Northolt block had no piped gas but was also found to be unsafe for bottled gas, oxygen cylinders or vehicle strike. Its residents are not being evacuated, but the council has begun what it euphemistically calls a "concierge service" to ensure no gas bottles or oxygen cylinders are brought in.

Haringey council is calling for the demolition of both blocks. It estimates that strengthening the buildings will cost around £28 million. Remedial work would have to be paid for from the council's own housing budget, whereas grants would be available for new builds.

The council's pledge to consult with residents over the future has been met with widespread scepticism. Tangmere residents have been told that they will "only receive one suitable offer [of alternative housing] which they must not unreasonably refuse."

Jacob Secker, secretary of the residents' association, said the council was treating residents "in a callous and incompetent manner" as "second class citizens." He complained that Tangmere residents "are being told we must accept whatever accommodation the council gives us or face legal action. … Threatening us with no heating or hot water if we do not have suitable accommodation by then is wrong."

The council claims its "preferred option" is demolition and replacement of the blocks with "high quality, new council homes built on the estate." Residents argue that this may mean the land being sold to private developers.

Adding to the concern is suspicion that the council is using the failings to "gentrify" the area. Broadwater Farm was the scene of major riots in October 1985, when Cynthia Jarrett collapsed and died during a police raid on her home.

On Tuesday evening the Broadwater Farm Residents Association, with residents of both affected blocks, lobbied a Haringey council meeting at which the council's Cabinet voted unanimously to demolish the blocks.

The former dominant Labour group in Haringey, the Blairites around then-leader Claire Kober, proposed a £2 billion transfer of social assets to the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV), a 50-50 partnership with global private developer Lendlease.

The HDV's proposed redevelopment scheme entailed the demolition of 1,400 council houses on seven estates and their replacement by luxury developments and supposedly "affordable" properties, making vast profits for the corporations involved.

There was widespread local hostility. A legal challenge brought by a resident was rejected by the High Court, a decision which is being appealed.

Many councillors who supported HDV were deselected by their Labour Party branches but having become ineligible to run at May's local elections voted to push HDV through at their last meeting prior to the elections.

However, "Left" councillors affiliated to the Momentum campaign backing Jeremy Corbyn, who were selected because of their apparent opposition to HDV, absented themselves from that meeting to prevent conflict with the Blairites. This resulted in HDV being carried by two votes. Kober then resigned and took up a lucrative post with housing management group Pinnacle.

Haringey Deputy Leader, Joseph Ejiofor, led Labour into May's local elections on a manifesto cautiously distancing itself from the HDV: "We do not believe that the HDV provides the answer [on housing] and we do not intend to progress with it."

After the election, Ejiofor was elected Leader by Labour councillors, although some days before the Constituency Labour Party had voted overwhelmingly for councillor Zena Brabazon.

Ejiofor and Brabazon, as well as the cabinet member responsible for housing, Emina Ibrahim, are all associated with Momentum. During the election campaign, Ejiofor spelled out Momentum's role as Labour loyalists: "The reality is that Momentum is now part of the Labour Party. … It's important all views are heard, but let me be clear; there is no such thing as a [sic] Momentum councillors or candidates on Haringey Council, only Labour councillors."

No move has yet been made against the HDV by Momentum's Haringey council, with the issue to be discussed at July's council cabinet meeting. Ejiofor told the *Ham & High* paper, "Whilst we might be predisposed to making a decision, that decision has not been predetermined." Ejiofor admitted that he does not have the confidence of Stop HDV, who said his election as Leader "doesn't bode well for the end of social cleansing in Haringey."

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