

London's Grenfell Tower disaster: The cost of cuts and privatisation in firefighting

Paul Bond
3 July 2018

Evidence presented to the official inquiry into the Grenfell Tower disaster, which killed 72, reveals the devastating outcome of cuts, privatisation and outsourcing in the fire service.

Training to enable incident commanders to react to altered circumstances—including knowing when to abandon the “stay put” policy generally used for high rise blocks—was supposedly “fully embedded within all incident command training exercises” by outsourced training provider Babcock International.

However, Michael Dowden, the first incident commander on site at Grenfell Tower, told the inquiry he could not “remember any time when I’d actually been on a training course that would facilitate that.”

Dowden was questioned for three days. Evidence had to be halted when he broke down after watching mobile phone footage of the blaze.

Notwithstanding legitimate questions concerning safety measures and training, Dowden received popular support, with many on social media instinctively wanting to oppose the attempted smearing of firefighters. The hashtag #IAmMichaelDowden trended on Twitter.

The treatment of Dowden points again to attempts to shift responsibility for the events of June 14, 2017 onto the very people who faced impossible odds to control the escalating blaze. The Metropolitan Police have opened an investigation into decisions made by London Fire Brigade at Grenfell—an act that can only lead to holding the Brigade and individual firefighters responsible for not being equipped to deal with systemic failures of renovation and cost-cutting.

Dowden was watch manager at North Kensington fire station, with charge of two fire appliances there. As watch manager, he was authorised to take control of fires requiring up to four engines. He arrived with the first fire crews at 1:07 a.m.

Within 20 minutes of his arrival, six appliances were in attendance. He had already ordered eight pumps to the blaze. He said he had never “had to make that rapid increase in resource before.” At 1:28 a.m., half an hour after the first 999 call, the fire had spread so rapidly that Dowden had ordered 15 appliances. When he had declared it a 10-pump fire, another firefighter, Chris Secrett, said, “I would make it 15 to 20

because it looks like we’re losing it.”

Under London Fire Brigade (LFB) regulations, ordering 10-15 pumps requires a deputy assistant commissioner or higher, but Grenfell Tower was already beyond the previous experience of the firefighters attending. Dowden explained: “I had no previous knowledge on how that building was reacting. ... I did feel out of my comfort zone because I didn’t have any previous experience to fall back on in terms of how that building was behaving and reacting.”

If a fire requires more than four appliances, a station manager should take over as incident commander. Of course, “You have a degree of flexibility in that because of getting officers to the incident ground,” he said. The station manager who was to take over that night was delayed by road closures. Dowden remained as incident commander until 1:50 a.m.

Dowden was repeatedly questioned about his adherence to the “stay put” policy, asking residents of the tower to remain in their flats. In earlier testimony, fire expert Dr Barbara Lane noted that this policy had effectively failed in the first 40 minutes of the fire.

“Stay put” depends on containing fires within the flat in which the fire has started and isolating other apartments from the fire, a process known as compartmentation. At Grenfell Tower, compartmentation was fatally undermined by the flammable external cladding. The fire service was unaware of the materials used in the cladding, and so were unprepared for the results.

Dowden’s evidence revealed how fire crews were not equipped for, nor informed about, the situation they faced. He was grilled on fire safety regulation 7(2)d, which outlines “Information to be gathered in relation to highrise incidents,” including “construction features, such as ... cladding systems.” Dowden was asked whether he had inspected the cladding at a fire risk assessment visit to Grenfell Tower during the 2016 renovation. As he noted, not every element is inspected “because a lot of that information should already be there—the expectation is it should be there.”

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council *did* inspect Grenfell Tower 16 times during the refurbishment of 2014-16 and signed off on the work.

Firefighters responded based on information available to

them. Their advice was “borne out of the way a building should behave in a fire.”

The implication of the questions about Dowden’s 2016 visit is that firefighters should be made to take responsibility for the criminality and negligence of corporations and councils. Dowden told the inquiry, “I didn’t know at that point what I know now, in terms of flammable cladding. ... If we were aware of that risk and that hazard at that point, as we are now as an organisation, we would have put things in place, but I wasn’t aware of this cladding material put onto the external envelope of the building.”

This affected compartmentation, which, Dowden explained, refers to the interior. Fire breaching windows is not normally a cause for alarm: “I wouldn’t be too concerned ... because my assumption is we could tactically control that from the ground, particularly with a covering jet.” However, the flammable cladding prevented this.

The emergency water supply was also inappropriate for a building of that size. Grenfell Tower had a dry-riser, an empty pipe that can be externally connected to a pressurized water source by firefighters, which Lane described as “non-compliant” with current regulations or with regulations at the time of construction.

Current regulations recommend dry risers should not be used in buildings over 50 metres. Grenfell Tower is 67 metres high. Above 50 metres, said Dowden, “The water supply would be almost non-existent.” Lack of pressure also prevents using dry riser outlets on every floor, and a fault meant the lift could not be commandeered for emergency equipment. Firefighters had no alternative but to drag a hose through doors on the single narrow staircase—the only exit to residents available on the night—further jeopardising compartmentation.

Given the resources available and the layout of the building, evacuation would not have been possible. At the time, Lane argued evacuation was still viable, Dowden had only six appliances in attendance, most consumed with breathing apparatus resources, and no lift. Even if it had been clear that abandoning standard policy was necessary, this could not have been done: “We’re looking at 20 floors above the fire floor with just six fire engines in attendance, one central staircase.”

Dowden’s questioning was aimed at the shortcomings of the attending fire crews, particularly in relation to compromising the one escape route with hoses, but Dowden explained the realities they faced: “We only work with what we are given on the night. We have to have a water supply, we have to put water onto the fire, we can only work with the facilities that are given to us at that moment in time.”

Those facilities have been drastically reduced by waves of cuts over the last period. In 2012, then London Mayor Boris Johnson, now foreign secretary, imposed a 15 percent reduction of the LFB’s annual budget. He cut £65 million from funding on the grounds of “the declining number of fire deaths.”

In 2013, Johnson told a London Assembly member who

criticised these cuts, after protesting firefighters and residents had condemned him for it, to “get stuffed.”

In 2015, cutting 13 more appliances reduced the LFB to 142 engines, three-quarters of its strength two years earlier. Three stations near Grenfell Tower were closed over this period, reducing cover and increasing response times. Dowden spoke of having six appliances in attendance, but this was when he was already calling for 10 to respond. Fire crews had to tackle what the FBU called “the worst fire since World War Two” with fewer resources. It cost 72 lives.

Johnson privatised the LFB’s training programme in 2012, outsourcing it to Babcock International—in a move that was trumpeted for saving costs of £66 million. At the time, warnings were made widely that it would jeopardise safety. This was another lucrative deal for Babcock International Group PLC, an engineering support services organisation with an order book in excess of £12 billion.

Following the 2009 Lakanal House fire, in which six people were killed, the coroner’s recommendations to the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority included training Incident Commands “to analyse a situation, and to recognise and react quickly to changing circumstances” and “To anticipate that a fire might behave in a manner inconsistent with the compartmentation principle.”

Dowden reported that the question of breach of compartmentation had been dealt with in training solely in a “theory-based session,” rather than practical application. The theory was based on being able to control the external fire spread by a covering water jet.

Babcock claimed that monitoring their “Incident Management suite of training interventions (specifically relevant to high rise scenarios)” had “confirmed that [these and the coroner’s five other recommendations] are fully embedded within all incident command training exercises.”

The reality is that everything points to Babcock signing off a training programme as adequate that did not equip fire crews to respond appropriately. Counsel for the victims suggested, “The repeated view of firefighters was that this was a fire beyond their experience; but it is also clear that it was a fire beyond their training or indeed LFB’s strategic contemplation.” That no one seemed to have “trained or planned for this type of fire ... strongly suggests that Babcock did not properly place the issue on the training curriculum.”

Babcock have not yet provided lawyers with the training materials at issue.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact