

100,000 people living in unsafe UK tower blocks

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At least 575 tower blocks across Britain, 41,000 individual flats, have structural faults endangering the safety and lives of around 100,000 people.

These blocks were built during the 1960s and 1970s using the Large Panel System (LPS) method involving prefabricated concrete panels held together by bolted joints. Flats built using LPS have been found to have widening cracks in walls.

LPS was authorised by central government as it provided a quick and cheap method of delivering social housing. It provided lucrative profits for building firms.

The LPS system's faults have long been known, but the June 2017 Grenfell fire disaster has heightened public concerns. Tower Blocks UK, which coordinates information about tower block safety, not only warns that the structural design of LPS blocks "is weak, they could collapse in an explosion, high wind or serious fire," but also that gaps between floor and wall panels "prevent the flats from containing a fire for one hour and lead to the risk of serious fire spread. The highest risk blocks are those with gas in them."

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the collapse of Ronan Point in East London, built using the LPS technique. A gas explosion in a corner flat on the 18th floor of the 22-storey block blew out load-bearing walls and led to a progressive collapse of the south-east corner of the building. Four residents died and 17 were injured. The collapse took place in May 1968, only two months after the tower was officially opened.

Inside Housing published an article in May, "The tower blocks that time forgot."

It asked, "Fifty years ago councils were told to assess high-rise buildings that were similar to Ronan Point and strengthen them where necessary. So why are problems with some of the blocks still emerging?"

Following the Ronan Point disaster, landlords of large

panel blocks were told by the government to assess their buildings and strengthen them if necessary. "These blocks are still standing across the country, but it is by no means certain, 50 years on, that they have been modified in line with the government's requirement."

The Building Research Establishment (BRE)—the privatised former government national building research laboratory—published its LPS guide in 2012, stating that block owners have an ongoing responsibility to regularly inspect and assess LPS buildings. When *Inside Housing* sent a Freedom of Information request to councils asking when they had last carried out such a survey, many had not done so.

The Tower Blocks UK information sheet on LPS notes: "Originally it was expected that these blocks would have a life of 40 years, we are beyond that now...the bowing of the panels is likely to become greater with age. ... All large panel system tower blocks should be inspected as a matter of urgency. This needs to be led by experts who are familiar with these structures, it needs to be led by the government and the Building Research Establishment."

An article in the October 22 *Independent* cites building surveyor expert Arnold Tarling, who has examined LPS blocks across London. He described the LPS system as "a house of cards...stacked up and held together by a bit of simple bracing work. It's not just the risk of gas explosion like Ronan Point. A serious enough fire in an LPS building could result in collapse. The floor slabs would expand and push out the external wall panels and things would break up quite quickly."

Tarling insisted, "The government needs to...start facing up to the problem. You can't leave residents in potential danger."

The Ministry of Housing and the Local Government

Association have established a forum to discuss the issue, but an LGA spokesman told the *Independent*, “The issues...with LPS buildings are complex and technical ones. They require expert advice on what to do and the LGA is not placed to do that. We have...been pushing for the government to provide that advice.”

The *Independent* notes structural defects have been found at LPS high-rise blocks in Rugby, Leicester, and Portsmouth and in two London boroughs—the Ledbury estate in Southwark and on Haringey’s Broadwater Farm estate. Southwark Council has four LPS blocks on the Ledbury estate in south London deemed at risk of collapse. One resident, Danielle Gregory, had cracks in the walls of her 12th-floor flat big enough to put her hand through.

The blocks are being emptied and the council has yet to decide whether to demolish them. But in a consultation exercise, most residents expressed the wish that the blocks should be strengthened and refurbished. This reflects a growing awareness that London’s working-class estates are being socially cleansed and replaced with private, unaffordable luxury developments with a minimal number of supposedly “affordable units” that are much more expensive than existing housing stock. Gregory, who has been rehoused nearby, told the *Independent*, “My worst fear is all these [LPS] estates will eventually be demolished and replaced with mainly private apartments.”

Two blocks at the Broadwater Farm estate in north-east London—6-storey Tangmere House and 18-storey Northolt—have failed structural safety checks. The risk at Tangmere House is compounded by the fact it has a gas supply. The council wants to demolish them, but Jacob Secker, the secretary of the residents’ association, wants residents to be given the option of deciding if the blocks should be strengthened and refurbished. He told the *Independent*, “If there was a scenario where you had all these wonderful new council homes ... I would be less opposed to demolition... local authorities never seem to have the funding to rebuild their estates with new council housing.”

In Portsmouth, the council is to move out 800 residents from its 18-storey Leamington House and Horatia House following structural surveys. An *Architects’ Journal* article of June 7 noted that the

construction system used in Portsmouth is the “same used at two high-rises in Rugby where residents were moved out in April following safety fears.” Leicester City Council took the decision to demolish its 23-storey Goscote House, which contains 134 apartments, over fears about its structural integrity. It will cost around £3 million to demolish compared to around £6 million to refurbish it.

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, demands immediate government intervention to make all the LPS-constructed tower blocks safe, along with hundreds of other public and private sector building that threaten residents’ lives due to being covered in combustible material similar to that caused the Grenfell Fire inferno. Quality public housing is a social right. We demand an emergency multibillion-pound programme of public works to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century.

The Grenfell Fire Forum is holding its next meeting on November 10 at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday, November 10, 4 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

London, W10 6SW (nearest tube: Latimer Road)

For more information, visit:
facebook.com/Grenfellforum



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