

Fire destroys another residential tower block in London

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Another inferno has torn through a large block of London residential flats. Just over two years after the Grenfell Tower inferno, the raging fire completely destroyed an entire structure—this time the Richmond House block in Worcester Park in the borough of Sutton, in the southwest of the capital.

Residents of the four-storey building's 23 apartments in Sherbrooke Way—in what is known as the Hampton Estate—were forced to evacuate in the early hours of Monday morning, as 125 firefighters and 20 fire engines worked till dawn to tackle the blaze. Fortunately, no one was killed or injured. But as the building was completely wrecked, the homes and possessions of all its occupants were incinerated.

As with Grenfell, the local community, not the authorities, are at the forefront of relief efforts, with many already donating large amounts of items to those affected. Over £14,000 has also been raised through an online crowdfunding page.

Fire investigators are currently working to determine the exact cause of the blaze and the reasons for its rapid spread across the building. However, there are already serious questions raised about the safety of other buildings in the Worcester Park development and nationwide of a similar type.

The fire alarms in the building failed to warn sleeping families of the danger. Darren Nicholson told reporters that alarms were active in the community areas but not in his own flat. He was alerted by the sound of “crackling” and, opening his curtains, saw the flames. Nicholson said the fire may have begun on the wooden balconies of the building.

Dean Fowler, who lived on the top floor of the building, had to be woken by somebody banging on his door: “I then heard someone screaming ‘there’s a fire, get out,’ and I just got my boys and went.”

Stephen Nobrega, another resident, said, “I was woken up by my missus at about 1:20 a.m., screaming and shouting, ‘Fire! Fire!’

“I heard a lot of residents outside and by that point somebody was already banging on my window and pressing

my buzzer, so I knew it was quite serious.

“I got out of bed, got what you see me wearing on, got the kids with something on and managed to get us all out safely. ... The most important thing is everyone’s alive. There are no fatalities to my knowledge.

“But everything we had in there—from simple things like clothes to sentimental stuff which you’ll never get back—I’ve got photos of the kids on family holidays, sentimental bits and pieces, gone forever... it’s heart-breaking.”

He praised the efforts of the fire service, explaining, “Within about 20 minutes, fairly quick, [the fire] started ripping through, going from apartment to apartment, right to left, and then it started going down and caught alight on the other side.”

The massive scale of the fire is indicated in the comments of James Gurvin, who lives in a neighbouring block. Cited in the *Times*, he said, “My daughter came running in to my room at around 1:30 a.m. because she’d left her window open and there was smoke pouring in. The heat was unbelievable. I grabbed my kids and the missus and ran downstairs, knocking on doors and ringing buzzers. Within an hour the whole thing had gone up. It was terrifying.”

The burned-down set of flats was part of a 645-home estate, whose residents are fearful that their own homes might be at risk. Residents are now demanding that fire safety checks be carried out on all buildings. So far, only the block of flats nearest the building where the fire took place has been evacuated. The Metropolitan Thames Valley housing association has begun 24/7 waking watch patrols at the 15 buildings it administers on the development.

Safety concerns are not limited to the local area. Worcester Park—after the terrible death and destruction that took the lives of 72 people at Grenfell Tower—highlights the complete disinterest of the ruling elite in providing safe homes for the population.

The Royal Institute of British Architects issued a statement on the Worcester Park fire, warning, “This fire demonstrates the need for sprinklers in residential buildings, and fire

warning systems in individual flats, not just in communal parts.”

As of last month, 95 percent of 2,107 local authority-owned tower blocks taller than 10 storeys did not have any sprinklers fitted. Residents of a set of flats in Barking, east London, who suffered a severe fire just three months ago, said that neither the sprinkler system nor the fire alarm system had worked.

Weekly trade publication *Inside Housing* revealed that while the cladding used at Worcester Park was, according to the developer, Berkeley, made of a non-combustible concrete composite material, the building itself was constructed using a timber frame.

The potential dangers of constructing structures in this way were highlighted less than a month ago when scores of deaths were narrowly averted in a fire in a retirement home in Crewe. Over 70 firefighters were called to the scene, operating 16 fire engines. Assistant Chief Fire Officer Gus O’Rourke said he was “extremely shocked” at how quickly the fire had spread. This forced the incident commander to quickly override the “stay put” policy for the property and encourage the home’s 150 residents to evacuate—a decision the fire service said “undoubtedly saved lives.”

Commenting on the Crewe fire, surveyor and fire safety expert Arnold Tarling told *Inside Housing*, “The timber frame is the big problem ... When fire gets into the cavities there is not much you can do. You see it time and again with timber frames where the building is completely lost.”

Architect Sam Webb told the same publication, “What happens in a timber frame building, if you haven’t got sprinklers, is that you get flashover very quickly.” Flashover is the point at which all combustible materials in a room reach a temperature that causes them to spontaneously ignite, filling the room with flames.

In the last two decades, a series of similar incidents have given rise to the same concerns, which have never been addressed. In 2002, a fire in a Bedfordshire immigration centre destroyed half the building and injured six people. It was later revealed that the fire services had advised that sprinklers be fitted, in part due to the building’s timber frame, but that this had not been done.

In 2004, a timber frame structure in Barnet caught fire while under construction and collapsed within 20 minutes, requiring the evacuation of 2,000 residents from surrounding homes.

A fire in Peckham in 2009 forced 310 people to evacuate, another in Camberwell in 2010 forced 150 to do so, and blazes in Hackney and Greenwich took the number of major timber frame fires in London to five in a five-year period.

The London Assembly then launched an investigation into fire risks in tall, timber-framed buildings, which

recommended an immediate review of the relevant building regulations. But this was ignored by the incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. Significantly, the block of flats destroyed in Worcester Park was completed only in 2010 and built under conditions of the lax regulation regime demanded by the corporations and facilitated by central and local government.

Even if the additional risks of timber framing can be neutralised by proper design and installation, the state of building practices and mass deregulation carried out over decades means that such steps cannot be reliably ensured. Speaking to *Building Design*, an architecture magazine, Ash Sakula Architects founding partner Robert Sakula said of the use of timber framing in Worcester Park, “Fire shouldn’t be able to get into the cavity” in the first place. He and Annalie Riches, co-founder of Stirling Prize-shortlisted architecture practice Mikhail Riches, noted in this connection that there are serious problems with “design-and-build” construction contracts:

“In lots of design-and-build projects, the architects are not even wanted on-site,” Riches said. “If it was design and build, you wouldn’t necessarily know if what you specified had been used.”

That is, if developers fail to ensure the proper installation of fireproof external cladding or internal plasterboard—or use substandard materials—then safe designs can be made dangerous.

Events like the Worcester Park fire reveal that the whole fire prevention process—from building design, to construction, to safety checks, to the fire service—has been gutted by corporate cost-cutting and government cutbacks. Such is the profit lust of the corporate and political elite that not even the deaths of 72 people in Grenfell and those who have perished in other fires have moved them to reverse this trend.



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