

# Four years after Grenfell, millions live and work in unsafe buildings as the criminals remain at large

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Monday June 14 marked four years since the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire when 72 people perished in the middle of London in an act of social murder.

To this day, not a single person or organisation responsible in political and corporate circles has been brought to account for this terrible crime. Moreover, the risk of dying by fire in an unsafe building today is greater than ever. It was estimated last June that 56,000 people were still living in high rises with the same type of aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding that enveloped Grenfell. The ACM cladding was the main reason a small fourth-floor kitchen fire became an inferno in matter of minutes.

But this is only a fraction of the true number affected. According to an assessment last June by Inside Housing—and based on the average household size of 2.4—at least 600,000 people (equivalent to the population of Glasgow) live in unsafe tall buildings and millions more in medium rise towers. Grenfell was 24 storeys, 67 metres, tall. Inside Housing warned, “There are an estimated 100,000 medium-rise buildings—between 11m and 18m—across the UK and no work whatsoever has been done to establish the extent of dangerous cladding materials on the outside... Both the Barking Riverside fire in June last year [2019] and the Bolton fire last November occurred in buildings below 18m with dangerous cladding systems, and both came very close to causing loss of life.”

Many more buildings used by the public remain in use despite being unsafe. Since the Grenfell fire, over 70 schools have been built with the same combustible insulation used on Grenfell, as well as 25 hospitals, care homes and sheltered housing. Although combustible materials have been banned on facades greater than 18 metres, the Department of Education recently drafted fire safety proposals for school buildings allowing for flammable materials in structures below that height. In the last five years, 47 primary and secondary school buildings have been destroyed by fire in England alone.

Set up in September 2017, the government’s Grenfell Tower Inquiry has heard more than 200 days of evidence from corporate and government officials, as well as firefighters and numerous technical experts.

Over the last weeks it has finally taken testimony from survivors, including residents, who had voiced concerns over their safety, worries about the Tower’s refurbishment, and the hostile attitude

of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Association (KCTMO) which ran the Tower on behalf of the Conservative council. Among these was 16th-floor resident and member of the Grenfell Action Group (GAG), Edward Daffarn. Just months before the fire, GAG posted a November 2016 blog article reading: “It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders.”

It emerged that Daffarn was accused internally at the KCTMO of “scaremongering”. Rydon, one of the main builders on the “refurbishment” contract that ended with Grenfell being clad in flammable material described Daffarn and other residents who raised concerns as “rebel residents”. Daffarn presented the inquiry with a 127-page statement which included seven complaints relating to fire safety made before the fire. He denounced the authorities for treating residents with “hostility”, “neglect” and “contempt”, and for allowing the tower to deteriorate into a “slum-like condition”.

In 2010, a serious fire began on the 6th floor and spread to the 15th, injuring three people, including Sayeda Ahmed. Sayeda’s husband Shahid Ahmed made legal claims which revealed improper seals in the smoke ventilator system that spread smoke throughout the building rather than removing it. Nothing was done until the 2016 refurbishment and, even then, the “improved” system failed to work the night of the fire. According to Ahmed, who chaired the Grenfell Tower Leaseholders’ Association (GTLA), set up after the 2010 fire: “I thought that the complaints procedure was a way for the TMO to be judge, jury and executioner.”

When gas pipes in the tower were found to be improperly boxed in, GTLA Secretary Lee Chapman wrote in a March 2017 email, “I am seriously concerned about how I will get out of the building alive in the event of a fire with this added risk. If we cannot get out, people will die or at best suffer serious injury.” He joined other GTLA members in calling for an investigation. Their proposal was rejected just four days before the fire.

The testimony of KCTMO officials and others in the ensuing weeks substantiated claims of mistreatment and harassment. By

September 2015, the growing backlist of needed repairs in KCTMO properties had reached 2,300, growing to over 5,400 by January 2017. By 2014, some 1,400 of these were fire risk assessment actions, which they failed to disclose to the London Fire Brigade (LFB) because of a fear “this would result in more scrutiny from the LFB and also possible enforcement action.”

KCTMO Grenfell refurbishment project manager, Claire Williams, was questioned by Richard Millett QC over her failure to fix Grenfell’s automatic opening vent (AOV), which failed on the night of the fire. The LFB had issued the TMO with a deficiency notice for the system in March 2016, giving them six weeks to repair it. Nothing was done and residents were unknowingly left to live under these conditions for at least a year. Former KCTMO health, safety and facilities manager Janice Wray wrote Williams, “Let’s hope our luck holds and there are no fires in the meantime.”

In the same period, it took the organisation more than six months to fix a broken dry riser—the pipe used to connect to a pressurised water source for firefighters.

No personal emergency evacuation plans (PEERs) were made for residents with disabilities, despite 52 of the 120 flats having disabled occupants.

A few months before the blaze, the Conservative Party-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) decided against an inspection programme of borough fire doors despite being advised to do so by the LFB.

Amanda Johnson, RBKC’s head of housing commissioning, requested the TMO check on Daffarn’s tenancy after he raised concerns about services. KCTMO director of assets Peter Maddison wrote colleagues in April 2015: “Mr. Daffarn is continuing to agitate in Grenfell Tower. He is clearly distributing misleading information. I wonder if you could advise on the point at which his comments become libelous.”

The organisation also blocked its staff from accessing the Grenfell Action Blog on their servers from 2013 onwards. Some KCTMO employees discussed not including the broken AOV system in a Freedom of Information request initiated by Daffarn.

Officials continue to shed crocodile tears at the Inquiry. Quentin Marshall, RBKC’s chair of the housing scrutiny committee, felt obliged to bemoan his organisation’s pre-fire attitude toward the tenants: “I don’t think we addressed the emotional side and I think we lacked a little humanity.” Marshall, a private banker, should know. At the time he dismissed the residents’ complaints on the refurbishment as “grossly exaggerated,” describing himself as “not massively sympathetic to general ‘It’s all terrible’ complaints” and claiming Daffarn had made “wild and unsubstantiated claims.”

Another nauseating display came from Rock Feilding-Mellen, RBKC Deputy Leader and its Cabinet Member for Housing, Property, and Regeneration between 2013-2017. He admitted to having only “skimmed” LFB documents that spell out councils’ legal responsibilities for fire safety and did not act on an LFB recommendation to ask questions about the fire safety of council housing. The Inquiry revealed that, in 2014, Feilding-Mellen was involved in deliberations that saw plans for Grenfell’s new cladding switched from far more fire-resistant zinc cladding to

ACM. This was done to save the council and the private developers a few hundred thousand pounds.

Feilding-Mellen told the Inquiry that he was “shattered” by the loss of life and would “probably be haunted” by whether or not he could have acted differently for “the rest of my life”.

This week, Nabil Choucair, who lost six members of his family in the fire, expressed the concerns and anger felt by many: “Four years on I fear that those responsible for the fire are going to get away with murder. It’s a shame that the public inquiry cannot be stopped and the criminal investigation is completed and prosecutions put in place immediately.”

What is taking place is a systematic cover-up in which the Inquiry serves as the mechanism to protect the guilty. No-one is being prosecuted as the Metropolitan Police long ago declared that its own glacier-paced “investigation” would wait until the inquiry finished and produced its report before even considering doing so. The Inquiry may not even conclude next year, five years after the fire.

The corporate and governmental figures responsible for Grenfell know they can turn up at the Inquiry, parade their criminality and then walk away—after the necessary handwringing—with no further consequences.

The public investigation was organised by the government under the terms of the 2005 Inquiries Act brought in by Tony Blair’s Labour government. Under the Act, Inquiry head Sir Martin Moore-Bick “has no power to determine, any person’s civil or criminal liability” over the Grenfell events. Last year, representatives of major corporations and other institutions demanded and were granted even more protection, as the government ruled that “any individual who gives evidence to the Inquiry... cannot have that evidence used in any prosecution against them in the future.”

All those fighting for justice for the Grenfell victims must demand an end to this charade and the immediate arrest and prosecution of the government and corporate officials responsible for social murder.

*For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page*



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