

Questions that must be answered after Relay Building fire in central London

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8 March 2022

Residents were forced to flee in terror from a fire in a residential/office tower block in London.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) was called at 3.53pm Monday afternoon after a blaze broke out on the 17th floor of the 21-storey Relay Building in a part of the Houbion Apartments. The building is in Whitechapel in central London, situated at the junction of Whitechapel High Street and Commercial Street.

Around 60 people had to be evacuated from the building, with the London Ambulance Service taking two patients to hospital and treating two occupants at the scene. A woman who was trapped by the fire was saved by firefighters who rescued her using a fire escape hood.

Luckily, no-one died or suffered serious injuries, with firefighters using a 64-meter turntable ladder, the tallest in Europe, to put out the blaze. More than 125 firefighters and 20 fire engines from more than seven stations all around the capital were required. The fire was extinguished at 7.07pm, around three hours after it started, leaving the windows of two floors destroyed.

Another nearby building was evacuated with its residents sent to a local park.

LFB has not yet established what caused the blaze. Firefighters were still examining the wreckage Tuesday, as seen in this *World Socialist Web Site* video .

Witnesses took to social media to describe what they were seeing. Jamie posted footage of the fire on Twitter writing, “Huge fire in Aldgate. Huge glass panels falling hundreds of metres to the ground, awful scenes.”

Spencer Carter, a broadcaster from local Phoenix FM, shot footage showing debris, including a large section of the building, falling the full length of its structure and crashing down on the street in front of Aldgate East tube station.

The London World Twitter page posted a video clip taken as the fire escalates, with sheets of glass tumbling twenty storeys into the street. One person exclaims, “They haven’t even evacuated the building.”

Owen Willis told the *Daily Mirror*, “From the eastern view, on Commercial Road, we can see a row of windows

blown out with fire burning on the ceilings still. It’s very windy so it looks like the smoke and flames are blowing all over the place.”

There appear to have been safety problems with the building, evident in the fact that residents heard no fire alarms and were left trying to contact each other as best they could as the fire spread to their floors. Andrew Meikle, a 58-year-old who has lived on the ninth floor of the Relay Building for five years told *My London*, “I can’t believe we had to message each other on WhatsApp groups and knock on each other’s doors just to tell each other that there was a huge fire in our own building.”

The *Mirror* quoted a 61-year-old man who has lived on the seventh floor of the building since 2012 saying, “If I did not hear the persistent knocks of my neighbours, I would probably still be asleep... I can’t understand why the alarms didn’t go off, it’s ridiculous. I had just come off the night shift and I was asleep—if it wasn’t for neighbours knocking on my door I wouldn’t have heard anything. I’m asthmatic and I live alone so that’s another concern. It’s a miracle there were no fatalities. They (building owners) need to get their act together—I haven’t had electricity in my bathroom for 8 weeks.”

The *Guardian* reported London School of Economics student Lynn Ling, 25, who shares a 20th floor residence with her husband Yuri, “I did not hear an alarm. I think there was a fire alarm on the ground floor but I could not hear it clearly on the 20th.” She was only alerted about the fire by a friend who called her from the street at about 4.30pm. Ling saw a firefighter on the 19th floor knocking on doors telling people to leave. “I went out of my door but I found there was smoke in the corridor so I went downstairs. I forgot to take my coat. It was very scary.”

Had the fire not been contained, the loss of life and injury could have been enormous.

The Relay Building is a mixed-use block with residential flats from floor seven and above (comprising 207 apartments) and offices in the floors below. The ground floor of the building incorporates one of the western

entrances to Aldgate East London Underground station.

How catastrophic a fire engulfing the entire building would have been is seen in the fact that the Underground station was deluged with smoke. Sabrina Chevannes, managing director at Complex Creative, with offices near to the Relay, left the area via the tube station as the fire broke out. She said, “It was scary because we heard a scream when we were on the streets and that was when the debris was falling down. I don’t know if people were hurt but that’s when the police came and cordoned off the streets. People were panicking and worrying as they didn’t know what was going on. The whole street was just filled with people.” At Aldgate East Tube station “the whole platform and underground was filled with smoke”.

While the Relay Building was not covered in the highly dangerous flammable cladding which turned the Grenfell Tower into an inferno within minutes five years ago, it is already known that residents had complained about its wooden balconies being a fire risk. Some of these caught fire during the blaze. Residents have been asking the managers of the block for years to address this and other fire safety and basic maintenance issues such as electricity supply. Three different companies manage the building—John D Wood, Network Homes and Rendall and Rittner.

Speaking to PA news, resident Andrew Meikle pointed out, “There have been complaints about fire alarms, the ‘stay put’ policy and the high risk of fires on the wooden balconies, and guess what was burning today? The wooden balconies... Someone needs to go to jail for this.”

London’s *Evening Standard* reported, “Mr Meikle said there had been previous small fires including one in December where the fire alarms were also not heard.” He added, “When the ‘stay put’ policy fails alarms should be put in to tell people to get out. Why is someone running around banging on doors saying ‘get out, get out get out’ or a WhatsApp group telling the residents that there is a fire, the evacuation process we had?”

Meikle and other residents have complained about the tortuous and “scrambled” process of having complaints dealt with, as the result of a complex ownership and management structure of the block. One firm, Rendall and Rittner, manages the inside of the building and explained there were no audible smoke alarms. A stay put policy was in place and “It is for the fire brigade to decide on whether the building needs full or partial evacuation depending on the situation they find on arrival.”

Housing association Network Homes is a leaseholder in the block, with *Inside Housing* reporting that it “understands the flats belonging to Network Homes stretch across the seventh and 11th floors.” Network Homes said, “Overall responsibility for the building lies with the freeholder, and

we actively engage with their managing agent on fire safety measures.”

Yet another company involved in the management of the Relay Building is the estate and lettings agents, John D Wood & Co.

In 2018, Harbor Group International, LLC, along with affiliates of joint venture partner ZC Ronogil, bought the Relay Building for £90.75 million.

The poor treatment of its lowest income residents has been a scandal since its construction. Originally called One Commercial Street, the site was first proposed as a 17-storey office building. It was then decided to transform most of the development into upmarket apartments. Opened in 2014 by developer Redrow, the cheapest accommodation available at the time were studio flats priced at £500,000. In 2014, according to the *Vice* news site, one of its penthouses was going for \$5.5 million. For the delight of its richer residents, the entrance lobby of the then renamed Relay Building incorporates a section of a withdrawn from service London Underground C Stock train, used as a seating area.

Due to planning requirements, the development had to include some affordable housing. In order not to offend its rich tenants, the developers installed a “poor door” in an alleyway, around the corner from the main smoked-glass-windowed and concierge-attended front entrance.

The prices paid by Network Homes residents are still sky high. A statement to residents in 2019 says, “Network Homes owns 74 flats in the Houlton apartments building in Aldgate, London. The homes were built by Redrow which sold its interest and ground rents to Homeground in April 2016. Ground rents at the apartments are set to double every 10 years up to the 50th year of the 125-year term, and some high street lenders are not accepting these terms.”

The *Financial Times* reported that tenants in the Relay Building, as with many thousands nationally, are not able to sell their properties, identified as possible fire risks, due to the owners of the block refusing to bear remedial costs. It quoted one leaseholder explaining, “no one in the building had been able to sell properties as post-Grenfell checks had identified flammable materials in balconies on the building’s exterior. ‘No one will give a mortgage on these flats,’ she said.”

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum.



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