

Pete Apps – Feature writer of the year

Special investigation – the lost lessons of Lakanal: how politicians missed the chance to stop Grenfell

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/special-investigation--the-lost-lessons-of-lakanal-how-politicians-missed-the-chance-to-stop-grenfell-61834?Preview=1>

This special investigation is among the longest features *Inside Housing* has ever published and represents the culmination of almost a year's work. The story, published the day before the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, sheds new light on the political failure to stop the disaster. It includes two key new revelations: a document proving government officials encouraged KCTMO not to act on the coroner's advice into a previous fire, and a stash of correspondence which lays bare the extent to which former housing minister Gavin Barwell ignored warnings. Also released as an audio longread, the story was hailed by survivors of the fire as a "great insight" into how the tragedy happened, with Pete's tweets about it attracting thousands of retweets and hundreds of thousands of views. It has since been submitted to the Grenfell Inquiry as evidence and was cited point by point by Labour's shadow housing in an emergency debate about Grenfell in the House of Commons, with *Inside Housing* specifically praised. Overall, the piece demonstrates Pete's best attributes as a journalist: investigative skill, rigorous detail and the ability to present a clear, sharp narrative from complex strands.

What sort of politician will Boris Johnson be for the housing sector?

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/what-sort-of-prime-minister-will-boris-johnson-be-for-the-housing-sector-62373?Preview=1>

As Boris Johnson was appointed prime minister, much of the focus was naturally on his views on Brexit, but Pete was able to give his readers crucial insight into the new leader's views on housing policy. Written ahead of time and published on the day Boris took over as PM, it was a hit with subscribers and became one of Inside Housing's best read 'insight' pieces of the year. It demonstrates Pete's wide range of contacts built up over several years at Inside Housing and the trust they have to brief him 'off the record' about stories. This allowed for a detailed look at Boris' attitudes gleaned from those who worked with him at City Hall. It also showed off Pete's flair as a writer and demonstrated once more his grasp of a sector he has now covered for several years.

How tweaked guidance led to combustible insulation on high rises

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/how-tweaked-guidance-led-to-combustible-insulation-on-high-rises-57877?Preview=1>

This story filled in a key gap in the post-Grenfell inquest into how the fire was allowed to happen: the change to regulation which led to combustible insulation being installed on hundreds of high rise towers. With the help of expert sources, Pete forensically tracked through changes to the official guidance to settle on a small alteration to the wording in 2006, which allowed insulation onto tower blocks if it passed an official test. This loophole then led to widespread use. But Pete followed this up by securing the consultation documents which advised on this change – and revealing that the organisation which had asked for it was the lobbying arm of the combustible insulation industry. The story shows Pete's investigative and rigorous skill in tracking a complex narrative which simply was not being told elsewhere, as well as his power to uncover new information through sources as well as Freedom of Information requests. The documents which underpinned this article have since been

shared with lawyers representing survivors of the fire as they prepare for the second phase of the inquiry.

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Special investigation - The lost lessons of Lakanal: how politicians missed the chance to stop Grenfell

INSIGHT 03/07/19 8:20 AM BY PETER APPS

On the 10th anniversary of the fatal Lakanal House fire, here again is our in-depth piece by *Pete Apps* revealing how warnings from the tragedy were not heeded.

Photography: Rex Features, Jon Enoch



Lakanal SINGLE USE REX

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 The failure to act on the warnings from the fatal Lakanal House in 2009 in time to stop Grenfell represents one of the greatest policy failures of our time. @PeteApps tells the inside story #ukhousing
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 In this special report, @PeteApps presents shocking new evidence about how and why politicians missed the chance to prevent Grenfell #ukhousing



Inside Housing Spotlight is a series of pieces showcasing the best of our investigative and data journalism.

The below piece was originally published on 13 June.

Catherine Hickman lived immediately above the source of the fire. The 31-year-old fashion designer, who had previously raised concerns about fire

safety in the council-owned block, called 999 about six minutes after the fire broke out.

She told the operator that smoke was entering her flat, but was nevertheless told to stay put and await rescue.

The emergency services assumed that she would be safe in her home – they did not expect the flames to spread from the flat below.

But what they did not know was that the tower block had recently been refurbished, and combustible panels had been added to the outside of the old building.

The fire burst out of the window of the flat where it started, lit the combustible panel, buckled Ms Hickman's window, set fire to her curtains and spread through her home. All the while, she was told to stay in the property and await rescue.

She endured a terrifying 40 minutes on the phone to the emergency services before she stopped responding and died.

The fire went on to trap and kill her neighbours, as major flaws allowed flames to rip through the building.

In the aftermath of the fire, *Inside Housing's* front page carried an image of the burned-out block and the words "Never again". Politicians and industry leaders promised to learn the lessons necessary to prevent a future tragedy. A major public inquest was convened.

Ms Hickman's story sounds familiar. Some of you may have assumed that she died in Grenfell Tower. But she did not. In fact, she and five of her neighbours were killed eight years before and six miles away from Grenfell on the other side of the Thames at a block called Lakanal House.

That this tragedy was repeated less than a decade later and on a scale previously unimagined must be considered one of the greatest public policy failures anywhere in the modern world. Today, *Inside Housing* reveals the untold story of how it happened.



Inside Housing's front pages in 2009 after the Lakanal House fire and 2017 after Grenfell

There were six victims at the Lakanal fire. Alongside Ms Hickman were Dayana Francisquini, 26, and her children Thais, 6, and Felipe, 3; and Helen Udoaka, 34, and her daughter Michelle, who was just 20 days old.

Ms Hickman died in her flat after flames spread up the outside of the building via the high-pressure laminate window panels. The other five victims all died in Ms Francisquini's home, where Ms Udoaka had fled with Michelle.

Smoke entered the flat through the ventilation ducts, which carried it up from lower floors, and through various other breaches that allowed it in from the corridor, including a defective fire door with no smoke seals.

A major, jury-led inquest into the tragedy was held in 2013. After 50 harrowing days of evidence, the jurors returned narrative verdicts for all six victims.

Listen to an audio version of this story here:



The coroner, Judge Frances Kirkham, then sent a series of letters to public bodies containing recommendations "to prevent further death". This included a letter to the government – specifically to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), which was responsible for housing and building regulations and led by Eric Pickles.

Over the course of the inquest, the coroner had heard evidence that sprinklers could have put out the fire and saved lives. So she told Mr Pickles to "encourage providers of housing in high-rise residential buildings... to consider the retrofit of sprinkler systems".

She had also heard days of dense and confusing evidence about the necessary fire rating for the window panels that had helped the flames rip up the outside of the tower.

The required legal standard for the panels was a rating known as 'Class 0'. This standard mainly considers the spread of flames over the surface of a material. Dangerous composite materials can meet the standard if they have a non-flammable surface, like aluminium, despite containing highly flammable plastics.

"Even if the composite panels were Class 0, they would not have prevented the spread of fire" – Lakanal House inquest jury verdict

When Lakanal House was built in the 1950s, building standards were stricter: the walls of buildings had to provide one hour's fire resistance and combustible materials were effectively banned. But when the building was refurbished under the Decent Homes Programme in 2007, the applicable standard was the lower Class 0.

The jury had found that the panels, made by Trespa, did not meet even this Class 0 standard. But there was an important line in their verdict that suggested they did not think Class 0 was tough enough anyway: "Even if the composite panels were Class 0, they would not have prevented the spread of fire from flat 65 [where it started] to flat 79 [where Ms Hickman died]."



When Ms Kirkham wrote to the government, she told it to review the official guidance "with particular regard to the spread of fire over the external envelope of the building".

Given this recommendation and the jury's comments, it is fair to say that the government should have urgently looked at whether Class 0 was appropriate.

Mr Pickles (above) replied to the coroner's letter on 20 May 2013. In his response, he said he had recently written to social housing providers about sprinklers. He said new official building guidance would be published by 2016/17. And he assured the coroner of his "commitment to ensuring that the safety of residents in high-rise buildings continues to be a priority".

And that was that.

But in the years that followed, there was no review of building regulations and neither pressure nor funding were applied to require the retrofitting of sprinklers.

When Grenfell burned, the official guidance on building regulations was the same as it was in 2013. The cladding wrapped around the outside of the tower was certified to Class 0.

And there were no sprinklers to be found anywhere in the tower. In fact, fewer than 1% of social housing towers had sprinklers inside flats, according to *Inside Housing* research in 2015.

To understand why so little had changed, we need to take a look at the political forces that defined those crucial years.



In January 2012, prime minister David Cameron spoke to a small audience of business leaders in Maidenhead. He announced that the government was “waging war against the excessive health and safety culture that has become an albatross around the neck of British businesses”.

“This coalition has a clear New Year’s resolution: to kill off the health and safety culture for good,” he said.

To that end, he introduced a new rule: one in, two out. This meant that for every new regulation introduced, two had to be stripped from the statute book. In practice, this was measured financially: civil servants first assessed the cost to business of any new regulation and then had to remove rules that would cover twice that cost.

“This coalition has a clear New Year’s resolution: to kill off the health and safety culture for good” – former prime minister David Cameron

A former senior civil servant has told *Inside Housing* that the rule made it “almost impossible” for officials to introduce new regulations that would place significant costs on industry – such as sprinklers.

Mr Cameron’s approach was not new. It built on a one in, one out rule introduced by Tony Blair’s government, which itself built on the deregulation and privatisation agenda of Margaret Thatcher.

It is evident that his new resolution was instrumental in the failure to introduce sprinklers in the aftermath of Lakanal.

In 2014, housing minister Brandon Lewis was asked in parliament why he would not make sprinklers mandatory. He said: “In our commitment to be the first government to reduce regulation, we have introduced the ‘one in, two out’ rule for regulation.

“The Department for Communities and Local Government [responsible for housing] has gone further and removed an even higher proportion of regulations. In that context, members will understand why we want to exhaust all non-regulatory options before we introduce new regulations.”

When Wales introduced mandatory sprinklers in new builds in 2013, Eric Pickles wrote a letter to the Welsh government accusing it of being “over-zealous” and adding £13,000 to the cost of building new homes.

“It is a matter of fact that the Welsh government is increasing the cumulative burden on regulation in the housing market in Wales... By contrast, the coalition government in England is removing excessive and unnecessary regulations,” he wrote. The letter was sent on 23 May 2013 – just three days after he had replied to the Lakanal House coroner.

“There was a deregulation focus that cut right across everything that was going on in the department” – source with knowledge of the DCLG at the time

One source with knowledge of the DCLG at this time suggests that the department was particularly intent on removing regulations – even for a government already obsessed with “cutting red tape”.

“There was a deregulation focus that cut right across everything that was going on in the department,” the source says. “It would have been very difficult for officials to suggest new regulations, because of what was going on in the department and the mood music.”

Multiple sources have told *Inside Housing* that when they lobbied the government to introduce tougher rules during this period, the main counter-argument they encountered was that the annual number of deaths from fire was falling, so more stringent regulations were unnecessary.

David Sugden, then chair of the Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF), had issued several warnings about fire safety, but said: “The number of deaths in fires had been coming down very nicely. The [Cabinet Office] could not be convinced that there was sufficient danger to the public for major changes in regulation.”

Arnold Tarling, a chartered surveyor and fire safety expert, specifically warned ministers about the risk from fires involving aluminium composite material – the material used on Grenfell Tower. He recalls: “Their argument was that year-on-year the number of people dying in fires is falling and therefore buildings are safe.

“And then when you would say, ‘yes but we are not building like we used to, we are covering them with all these combustible materials that would go up like a horror movie’, they would say ‘well it hasn’t happened yet’.”

It is true that the number of deaths from fire had more than halved since the early 1980s. But this was never about regulation: the government’s own analysis put this down to factors such as reductions in smoking and the use of chip pans, as well as an increase in the use of smoke alarms.

And the warnings did not only come from people like Mr Tarling and Mr Sugden. They also came from inside the Houses of Parliament. *Inside Housing* has obtained a cache of letters that shed new light on the extent to which they were ignored.



Above: the aftermath of the Lakanal House fire

Within Westminster, the only body that seems to have taken serious notice of the coroner's findings at Lakanal House was the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety & Rescue Group (APPG), chaired by Conservative MP Sir David Amess.

Shortly after the Grenfell Tower fire, the BBC's *Panorama* obtained letters from the group that showed it had called on four ministers – Eric Pickles, Stephen Williams, James Wharton and Gavin Barwell – to carry out the review of regulations recommended by the coroner and push harder for the retrofitting of sprinklers.

But *Inside Housing* has seen documents and obtained a number of previously unreleased letters that show these warnings were much more frequent and specific than had been previously realised.

Between 2014 and 2017, the APPG wrote to ministers no fewer than 21 times, calling for action to be taken to implement the findings of the Lakanal House review.

The MPs were particularly concerned that the rejection of the use of sprinklers was based on research carried out in 2005, which had since been superseded by new research in 2012 suggesting sprinklers were now far more cost-effective.

They were also concerned about the slow pace at which guidance was being reviewed following the Lakanal House inquest.

In particular, they wanted the Class 0 standard replaced with a higher category of fire resistance for materials on the outside of walls. They said this could be dealt with immediately by "simple amendments" to official guidance, rather than waiting for the full review due in 2016/17.

But these messages were not received well by ministers – who would frequently reply to lengthy letters with a brief two or three paragraph response.

On 9 September 2015, following several letters urging him to act, the minister then in charge of building regulations, Stephen Williams, wrote: "I have neither seen nor heard anything that would suggest consideration of these specific potential changes is urgent and I am not willing to disrupt the work of this department by asking that these matters be brought forward."

Sir David responded in a letter that *Inside Housing* has obtained, in which he said he was "at a loss to understand how you had concluded that credible and independent evidence which had life safety implications was not considered to be urgent".

He added: "As a consequence, the group wishes to point out to you that should a major fire tragedy with loss of life occur between now and 2017 in, for example, a residential care facility or a purpose-built block of flats, where the matters raised here were found to be contributory to the outcome, then the group would be bound to bring this to others' attention."

The group never received a reply to this letter.

"I have neither seen nor heard anything that would suggest consideration of these specific potential changes is urgent and I am not willing to disrupt the work of this department by asking that these matters be brought forward" - Stephen Williams, minister in charge of building regulations at the time

It picked up the conversation with Mr Williams' successor, James Wharton, in 2015, after Mr Williams lost his seat in the 2015 general election.

But it continued to hit a brick wall, with Mr Wharton at one stage citing the government's desire to "reduce the burden of red tape" in his refusal to act.

During this time, the warnings over fire safety continued to mount: the death of 23-year-old architect Sophie Rosser at a fire in Canary Wharf, and the resulting inquest in 2014; the destruction of 15 homes in a devastating blaze on the Tannery complex in Canterbury in 2015; an arson-related fire at a tower block in Westcliff-on-Sea in Essex that killed a pregnant woman. All these incidents were raised with officials, but none of them were enough to stir the government into action.

And it was not just the APPG issuing warnings. *Inside Housing* revealed last year how DCLG officials were specifically told at a meeting in 2014 that

combustible aluminium composite material cladding of the exact kind used at Grenfell was being installed on high rises because of the Class 0 requirement in building guidance.

In this case, the minutes say that officials agreed to add a 'frequently asked question' to the website where the documents were stored, making it clear that this type of cladding was banned. But this was never done.

In addition another coroner's inquest – this time investigating the death of 23-year-old Emma Waring in a housing association property – also wrote to the department advising the installation of sprinklers in September 2015. His letter called for "immediate and positive consideration" of the compulsory inclusion of sprinklers in residential properties.

But the government never even replied. In fact, it did not send a response until *Inside Housing* put in a Freedom of Information Act request asking for the response, months after Grenfell. It apologised profusely for responding 784 days after the legal deadline, but still declined to mandate sprinklers.

Despite this lack of action from ministers, the APPG persisted. And in 2016, a new minister took over the brief: a man called Gavin Barwell.



Mr Barwell (above) would later go on to become Theresa May's chief of staff – a position he retains to this day as she prepares to leave office, putting him in a position of political authority as the response to Grenfell has played out.

The group first contacted him on 12 September 2016, inviting him to lunch and sending a copy of the correspondence with Mr Wharton.

It noted that the post-Lakanal review was promised "shortly" in November 2015 but had still not taken place. "Regrettably, we have yet to receive any announcement on this, which is of such importance to the fire and construction sector," the letter read. It also referred to fire that caused the death of the pregnant woman in Essex – which was in Mr Amess' constituency.

Mr Barwell did not reply. He was sent another letter requesting a response on 17 October. Again, it was ignored.

The group persisted with a letter on 7 November, pointing out that Mr Barwell had now made a statement in the House of Commons saying the government had "publicly committed ourselves to a reviewing Part B of the building regulations". It asked for a meeting to discuss this planned review.

The APPG finally received a reply a week later, in which Mr Barwell said that the original letter never arrived. He refused the offer of a meeting as "you had a similar meeting with my predecessor" and brushed off their concerns about the ongoing delay to the review of building regulations, saying "our intention is to make a statement in due course".

The group replied on 22 November, referring to "the frustration which the fire and construction sector has over this matter". Once more, it did not receive a reply.

In early 2017, the MPs decided to go over his head. In two lengthy letters to chancellor Philip Hammond in January and February, they warned that the regulations had not been reviewed for a decade and warned that "there is uncertainty as to whether a [post-Lakanal] review of building regulations is even going ahead".

The chancellor replied, thanking the group for "bringing this issue to my attention", but told them to keep "engaging with the lead departments" – in this case, the DCLG and Mr Barwell.

"It is now over 11 years since part B was last reviewed, and I trust that the matters... will now receive your due consideration. The group firmly believes that it is now time to get on with the promised review" - APPG

But Mr Barwell was still proving difficult to contact. The APPG wrote to him again in February, seeking a response to its letter from November requesting an update on the start of the review, and saying it was "extremely concerned" that the residents' association from the block in Southend had not received a response.

Mr Barwell replied on 5 April, finally agreeing to meet the group – some seven months on from their first letter. He accepted that it was "clearly unacceptable" that two previous letters had been "lost in transit".

The group responded on 18 April. By now, they were so frustrated with the minister's failure to respond that they had resolved to contact him by recorded delivery. Since the previous letter, there had been a fire in a care home with no sprinklers, which killed three residents.

"It is now over 11 years since part B was last reviewed, and I trust that the matters... will now receive your due consideration," the group wrote. "The group firmly believes that it is now time to get on with the promised review."

More letters were exchanged without Mr Barwell making any commitments for a review. He did finally address the fire in Southend on 2 May, brushing off concern by saying: "Each flat is designed to prevent fire spreading to adjacent flats... experience of this approach to fire safety over many years has showed this to be an effective strategy."

But this ignored the six deaths at Lakanal and the warning from the coroner that action was necessary to prevent it happening again.

Perhaps the group would have been able to explain this to Mr Barwell at their meeting. But now it was too late. After the group's last letter on 19 May, once again calling on him to write to the Southend residents, prime minister Theresa May called a snap election and the meeting was cancelled. Mr Barwell would go on to lose his seat.

A week later, a fridge would catch fire in west London. The fire it started would ignite cladding that had been attached to the building in the years that ministers had been prevaricating. It had a Class 0 rating.

As the flames spread, no sprinklers were present to stop the spread of the flames as they tore around the tower. The lives of 72 Londoners were avoidably lost.

But this is not the end of the story about the missed warnings from Lakanal. A further document obtained by *Inside Housing* proves that they were heard and ignored by the very body responsible for the management of Grenfell itself.

Agenda Item 10

THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA TENANT MANAGEMENT ORGANISATION LIMITED

OPERATIONS COMMITTEE – 2nd MAY 2013

REPORT BY JANICE WRAY – HEALTH, SAFETY & FACILITIES MANAGER

CURRENT TMO POSITION ON FIRE RISK ASSESSMENTS & RELATED FIRE SAFETY MATTERS

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1. | Purpose of the Report |
| 1.1 | The purpose of this report is to appraise the Operations Committee of the TMO's current position in relation to Fire Risk Assessments. |
| 1.2 | Specifically, the Operations Committee is asked to note – |
| | • progress with the Risk Assessment Programme |

On 2 May 2013, the operations committee of Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) gathered for a meeting. KCTMO was the company that managed the 9,000 council homes in Kensington and Chelsea on behalf of the council. These homes included Grenfell Tower.

The meeting was held a few weeks after Ms Kirkham had sent her letter to the DCLG. Janice Wray, then health and safety manager at KCTMO, prepared a report on the findings, but this was never previously made public. *Inside Housing* has obtained a copy.

This report reveals that KCTMO was aware of Ms Kirkham's recommendations. It lists them in some detail, including the points about encouraging the retrofitting of sprinklers and new guidance relating to the spread of fire over "the external envelope of a building".

The report says: "If these recommendations were to be implemented – generally, this would only be possible after a change in legislation – they would have a significant impact on all landlords with responsibility for high-rise blocks."

It goes on to note that a further fatal flat fire (at Shirley Towers in Southampton) also led to advice to social landlords to encourage the retrofitting of sprinklers in blocks higher than 30m. However, the report goes on to say that "initial indications from [D]CLG are that these recommendations are unlikely to be taken up" and that officials have said that the recommendations "will not become mandatory".

This report was written 18 days before Mr Pickles sent his response to the coroner and suggests that officials were quietly indicating to social housing providers that it was acceptable to ignore the coroner's findings.

This is especially troubling, given the timing. The meeting notes make clear that this was before the refurbishment of Grenfell had begun.

"These measures would have prevented Grenfell," adds Mr Tarling. "But this document shows they got a nod from Mr Pickles that they didn't have to do anything, and so why spend the money?" The chance was missed.

In response to the documents revealed in this article, a spokesperson for the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government – as it is now known – insists the government "took action" on the coroner's findings.

In a sign of how little has changed since Grenfell, the spokesperson adds that government still "believes an appropriate level of fire safety can be achieved without the need to retrofit sprinklers".

On the failure to review the guidance, they add it was "underway but had not been completed" by the time of the Grenfell fire.

In fact, the spokesperson goes on to say that the long awaited review of Approved Document B – now six years on from the coroner's

recommendation - remains underway and incomplete. The government has now, finally completed a consultation on changes. The spokesperson adds, without irony, that it will publish its response "in due course".

And sadly, two years on from Grenfell, these are not the only echoes of the failure to act on the lessons of Lakanal.



The government remains reluctant to enforce the retrofitting of sprinklers. A letter leaked to *Inside Housing* in September 2017 shows that the government refused to provide funding for Nottingham Council's retrofitting programme, with then housing minister Alok Sharma describing sprinklers as "additional, not essential".

Research by the Labour Party in November last year revealed that just 4% of council-owned tower blocks in London are fitted with the life-saving devices.

With regard to the use of Class 0 combustible materials on high rises, the government's approach was not to explain why the warnings had been missed, but to deny that is what the guidance said. Philip Hammond went on television just days after the fire to claim that the guidance should instead have been interpreted to require the use of materials of "limited combustibility".

But this interpretation is widely disputed. It also does little to explain why hundreds, perhaps thousands, of buildings have Class 0-rated cladding on their walls.

Last year, ministers did belatedly act to ban the use of combustible cladding and insulation on new builds.

But this was only done following powerful lobbying by survivors of Grenfell, which called for a rejection of an official review that had advised doing the opposite, and nothing has yet been done to make this law retrospective.

While aluminium composite material cladding is being removed from high rises, an estimated 1,700 buildings have other forms of dangerous materials – including many with the high-pressure laminate panels present on Lakanal House.

What happened after Lakanal proves the danger of such a slow response. The next disaster will not wait until politics is ready for it.

End Our Cladding Scandal: campaign aims

**END
OUR
CLADDING
SCANDAL**

- Government provides a fund to cover the cost of cladding removal and remedial works on private blocks
- A firm timescale is set out of no more than two years for the work to be carried out
- Residents are reimbursed for the interim fire safety costs incurred, and funding is to be provided for necessary internal fire safety measures identified by a competent fire risk assessor

Please email peter.apps@insidehousing.co.uk if you want to support the campaign

End Our Cladding Scandal: campaign backers

- Martin Hilditch, editor, Inside Housing
- Manchester Cladators

- UK Cladding Action Group
- Natasha Elcock, chair, Grenfell United
- Kate Henderson, chief executive, National Housing Federation
- Terrie Alafat, chief executive, Chartered Institute of Housing
- Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester
- Lord Gary Porter, chair of the Local Government Association
- Polly Neate, chief executive, Shelter
- Jane Duncan, chair of the expert advisory group on fire safety, RIBA
- Andy Dark, assistant general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union
- Christina McAnea, assistant general secretary, UNISON
- Sir Peter Bottomley, Conservative MP and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Leasehold and Commonhold Reform
- Jim Fitzpatrick, Labour MP, and member of All-Party Parliamentary Group on Leasehold and Commonhold Reform
- Mark Amesbury, shadow employment minister and Labour MP for Weaver Vale
- Emma Dent Coad, Labour MP for North Kensington
- Lucy Powell, Labour MP for Manchester Central
- Rushanara Ali, Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow
- George Howarth, Labour MP for Knowsley
- Graham Stringer, Labour MP for Blackley and Broughton
- John Biggs, mayor of Tower Hamlets
- Paul Dennett, mayor of Salford
- Suzanne Richards, councillor and executive member for housing and regeneration on behalf of all Manchester's Labour Councillors
- Sir Richard Leese, Labour councillor and leader Manchester City Council
- John Leech, Manchester Liberal Democrat leader on behalf of all Manchester's Liberal Democrat councillors
- Darren Rodwell, executive member for housing at London Councils and leader of Barking and Dagenham Council
- George Clarke, TV Architect
- David Walker, bishop of Manchester
- Graham Tomlin, bishop of Kensington
- John Roberts, founder of AO.com
- Josh Beaumont, professional rugby player, Sale Sharks and resident of affected building
- Bill Beaumont, former England rugby captain
- Jeremy Dyson, co-founder of the League of Gentlemen
- Andy Moss, actor who has appeared on Channel 4's Hollyoaks and resident
- Ross Mullan, actor who has appeared in Game of Thrones
- Get Cape Wear Cape Fly, musician
- Nour-eddine Aboudihaj, spokesperson for Justice4Grenfell
- Mike Leonard, chief executive, Building Alliance
- Kate Kendrick, founder, National Leasehold Campaign
- Martin Boyd, chair, Leasehold Knowledge Partnership
- Paula Higgins, chief executive, HomeOwners Alliance
- Mark Henderson, chief executive, Home Group
- Ben Clay, founding member of the Tenants Union
- Hilda Palmer, acting chair of the Hazards Campaign
- Susan Bright, professor of law, University of Oxford
- Gill Kernick, consultant and former Grenfell Resident
- Phil Murphy, fire safety expert and tower block resident

This list will be updated. Please email peter.apps@insidehousing.co.uk if you want to support the campaign

Inside Housing Spotlight



Inside Housing Spotlight is a series of pieces showcasing the best of our investigative and data journalism.

Spotlight pieces:

14 December 2018: Starting to bite - how Universal Credit is making people homeless: we reveal new figures showing a clear link between Universal Credit and homelessness

9 November 2018: First Priority - the inside story of a housing association which almost went bust When a small supported housing provider entered into a series of leasing deals with investment funds, it nearly spelled disaster for its vulnerable tenants. We investigate why.

12 October 2018: The ballad of Knowsley Housing Trust the inside story of the first housing association made non-compliant by the sector's watchdog for fire safety issues

13 September 2018: How tweaked building guidance led to combustible insulation on high rises: an investigation shows how lobbyists from the plastic insulation industry supported a quiet tweak to building guidance to permit combustible insulation on tall buildings

31 August 2018: The true cost of homelessness Freedom of Information requests reveal the soaring costs of temporary accommodation

30 August 2018: The forgotten threat to high rise tenants We investigate the threat posed by combustible window panels on social housing high rises

13 June 2018: The Biggest Ever Survey of Fire Risk Assessments Data journalism revealing widespread fire safety issues in more than 1,500 tower blocks across the country

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Grenfell: two years on



Picture: Rex Features

We have published a number of articles to mark the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June:

How politicians missed the chance to stop Grenfell: A special investigation looking into the government's failure to act on the warnings from the fatal Lakanal House fire in 2009 in time to prevent the Grenfell tragedy.

Listen here to an audio version of the article:



Barking fire shows many fire safety gaps remain two years after Grenfell: This week the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy was marked by fire destroying another block of flats. This is why it is time to step up efforts to improve fire safety, writes Martin Hilditch.

Grenfell's forgotten victims: life on the Lancaster West after the fire Residents of the flats surrounding Grenfell Tower have been through a housing crisis like no other – many diagnosed with PTSD as a result. Luke Barratt hears some of their stories.

Have the promises made after Grenfell been kept?: After the Grenfell Tower fire, people in power made a number of pledges. But two years on from the tragedy, have they been true to their word? Peter Apps finds out.

Grenfell management company ignored Lakanal recommendations after government said they would not be mandatory: A previously unreleased report shows that Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation ignored advice from the Lakanal House fire coroner after Department for Communities and Local Government officials said they would "not become mandatory".

Barking fire makes the urgent need for action only too clear: The horrific fire in Barking on Sunday is a reminder that there is much to do when it comes to residents' safety, writes Jules Birch.

We got the Grenfell rehousing process wrong and it is time to apologies to survivors:

The rush to hit arbitrary deadlines in the rehousing process put pressure on survivors, when pressure was the last thing they needed. It's time to say sorry, again, writes Kim Taylor-Smith, deputy leader of Kensington and Chelsea Council.

Fire safety



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POST

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Ken Jones 13-Jun-2019

Well researched and written article. What an indictment of those Ministers since 2013, the Coalition Government, its successor post 2015 and the whole thrust of deregulation. Ironical and worrying in that behind some of those advocating Brexit is a zeal to further deregulate health and safety in a post EU race to the bottom nirvana.

Reply

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What sort of prime minister will

Boris Johnson

be for the

After Boris Johnson won the Conservative leadership contest, *Peter Apps* analyses the new prime minister's track record on housing

housing sector?

In 2015, in front of a room full of housing association chief executives, Boris Johnson launched into an expletive-strewn tirade about David Cameron and the housing policy coming out of Westminster.

It was during the passage of then-prime minister Mr Cameron's notorious Housing and Planning Act - which among other things sought to force councils to sell off their most valuable housing to pay for the Right to Buy extension to housing associations.

"He made it very clear that he didn't agree with the agenda being set by [Mr Cameron's advisor and former head of policy at Policy Exchange] Alex Morton," recalls one chief executive, present at the meeting.

"The exact words were, 'This is all Alex What's-his-fucking-name's fault,'" says another source.

Read this and you might think you are getting an idea of Boris Johnson's politics on housing. Mr Cameron's party was at this point pursuing an ultra right-wing, free-market policy agenda which Mr Johnson, then mayor of London, was actively lobbying against. But can anyone ever be sure of anything when it comes to Boris Johnson?

Right to Buy

Last October, he gave a speech to the Conservative Party conference which seemed to adopt the exact philosophy he was angry about in 2015.

Singing the praises of the Right to Buy policy, he told delegates Labour likes to keep people in social housing because "they know that as soon as you get a mortgage, as soon as you have a stake in society, you are less likely to go on strike and you are more likely to vote Conservative".

This week he will walk into Number 10 Downing Street and become prime minister. As he does, the housing sector is asking: what does he really think about housing? And what will he do? *Inside Housing* has spoken to a number of people who worked closely with him during his time at City Hall to try and shed some light.

The first thing to say is that pinning down Mr Johnson's personal philosophy is extremely difficult. This is not just because he is prone to change his mind and contradict himself. It is also because he relies heavily on the teams which surround him to lead. There is a general consensus that during his eight years in City Hall, housing policy was really coming from his

two deputy mayors - Sir Ed Lister and Richard Blakeway.

"The idea that he's a man who delegates to people is true," says one source close to City Hall. "Housing policy was very much left to Ric [Blakeway]. I wouldn't say that means he's lazy as such but he wasn't the most focused politician I ever worked with. He tends to drift over the surface of things and only really focuses in if he needs to."

Not everyone saw this as a bad thing. Paul Hackett, chief executive of Optivo, describes Mr Johnson's approach as "chairman like". "I think his approach worked quite well. He set a broad direction and trusted people to get on and deliver it," he says.

"He didn't have the antipathy towards social housing that others in his party had at the time"

But what was this broad direction? One clear theme cited by everyone *Inside Housing* speaks to is a focus on overall numbers of housing which was less concerned with percentages of affordable homes.

"Like most politicians it was numbers rather than tenure," says Brendan Sarsfield, chief executive of Peabody.

Soon after taking control at City Hall, he dropped predecessor Ken Livingstone's target of 50% affordable homes per development. This target had never been met, and Mr Johnson argued it was a blockage on delivery.

More controversially, he was often willing to call in and approve planning applications with minimal levels of affordable housing after they were refused by London boroughs. Among the most controversial was the sign-off for the Mount Pleasant former

Boris Johnson addresses the Conservative Party conference as mayor in October 2015



post office site in Islington - which Mr Johnson approved with just 98 of the 681 homes for affordable rent, despite the local authority trying to dig its heels in for more.

"Boroughs found it quite difficult to get affordable housing out of developers because they knew if they appealed to Boris he would wave it through," says Tom Copley, a Labour London Assembly member.

"He was less interested in quantities of affordable housing," recalls one source. "There was some evidence of that if you look at the planning applications he let through, which made concessions to the minimum amount of affordable housing to get the scheme as a whole built."

While there was no Garden Bridge-style vanity project with housing, there were a number of policies which were developed during his time at City Hall. These include the Housing Zones programme, which saw grant funding applied to bring complex housing developments to the market. While this was well received and oversubscribed, it was also difficult to track exactly how much housing was being delivered. It also involved directing affordable housing grant to schemes that were in some cases only delivering a small percentage of affordable homes.

London Housing Bank

A London Housing Bank was also set up to provide loans to build affordable housing. This was far less successful and was grossly undersubscribed. Mr Copley recalls the difficulty in scrutinising the effectiveness of policies of this kind.

"He was congenitally incapable of giving a clear answer," he says. "It was immensely frustrating trying to scrutinise him - he just used to joke around and try and make people laugh."

From 2011 onwards, Mr Johnson also took control of housing grant programmes in London - which meant funding the controversial affordable rent product of up to 80% of market rents.

While this was imposed on London by central government austerity, the mayor did little to publicly challenge or

criticise the policy.

Nonetheless sources say he did ameliorate it - average affordable rents under his programme were 65%, not 80%. There were also fewer conversions of former social rent homes in London than other parts of England, with housing associations generating profits through market sale schemes instead.

"Affordability did matter to him," says one housing association chief executive. "I remember him saying in a number of meetings that he didn't want London to become like Paris - with all the poorer residents living on the outskirts. He didn't have the antipathy towards social housing that others in his party had at the time."

This became apparent, sources recall, as he pushed back against the policies developed in Westminster by David Cameron's majority Conservative government in 2015.

But did this represent a genuine dislike of the policies or was it political calculation? "To be a successful Conservative mayor in London, you need to take a different view from the mainstream party at times. It may have been politics," says one chief executive.

Homeownership

So what should we expect from Mr Johnson as prime minister?

One source suggests there will simply be little change - he will focus on Brexit and will not have the time or interest to push a new direction on housing policy. "He is pro-homeownership, but actually most of the government funding is already directed to homeownership so he doesn't need to change much," they say.

Another notes that given his propensity to delegate, it is his choice of housing secretary that will be crucial.

Mr Sarsfield says it is the team he assembles around him at Number 10 that will be crucial: "Ed Lister was crucial in delivering his vision when he was mayor. If he keeps that team around him and adds to it he can build on what Theresa May has started."

Mr Copley is more sceptical: "The thing about him is he's an opportunist. It will be whatever advances the cause of Boris. I wouldn't be surprised to see him resurrect the forced sale of council housing if he thought it would help him win an election. Either that or it will be some sort vanity project like Boris bungalows."

Whatever he has in store for the sector, we will soon find out. ■

COMBUSTIBLE INSULATION:

A sentence swap in building guidance was hardly noticed but had huge consequences. *Peter Apps* finds out who was asking for it

In 2005, John Prescott’s office considered a tiny change to the wording of official building guidance and almost nobody paid any attention. The change - to Approved Document B, the official guidance to rules on fire safety - was to move a sentence on large-scale testing from one paragraph, 11.5, to another, 11.7. This tiny alteration was to have huge ramifications, opening the door for the widespread use of combustible insulation on the outside of high rises across the UK. So, what was it? In short, the change - as it was finally included in the guidance from 2006 onwards - permitted the use of combustible insulation materials on tall buildings, provided they passed a large-scale test known as BS 8414. This replaced the previous position which had simply banned their use on buildings

over 18m in height. “Once the door was opened in 2006 by that subtle change in wording in Approved Document B, the whole thing just unravelled,” an industry source says. What has never been previously reported is why this change was made, and who was asking for it. *Inside Housing* can finally answer that question. After an eight-month wait, which required the intervention of the Information Commissioner’s Office, we have received the submissions to the 2005 consultation on this guidance. These reveal that the alteration in wording was supported in a consultation response submitted by the British Rigid Urethane Foam Manufacturers’ Association (BRUFMA), a lobbying group set up to represent the interests of the plastic insulation industry.

This landmark change, in the guise of a quiet tweak to a complex document, must be placed in context to be understood. This is really a story that begins with the government of Margaret Thatcher in 1985 (see timeline). In that year, the government passed the Building Control Act - which swept away some 300 pages of prescriptive regulation and replaced them with just 24 pages of headline ‘performance’ standards. In the context of the fire safety debate post-Grenfell, the crucial line was that the walls of the building “adequately resist the spread of fire”. To support this high-level guidance, the government also committed to publish ‘Approved Documents’. These would contain guidance notes, approved and altered by ministers without the scrutiny of parliament, which set ►

THE WAY IN

THE RISE OF LARGE-SCALE TESTING

1985
A new system of national building regulations is introduced, replacing regional systems in London and the four countries of the UK.

1999
A fire at Garnock Court, Scotland, spreads via combustible materials in window panels, killing a disabled man. At a parliamentary inquiry, a new system of large-scale testing is proposed to clear combustible cladding systems for use. This is introduced, but initially only for cladding.

2000s
A series of climate change agreements leads to new insulation targets for residential properties, leading to an insulation boom.

2005
Official building regulation guidance is quietly changed to permit combustible insulation on high rises if it passes an official test.

2014
The insulation used on Grenfell Tower - Celotex RS5000 - passes one of these large-scale tests when combined with cement fibre cladding. The test would later be withdrawn for “inaccuracies”, but Celotex immediately markets the product as “suitable for use” on high rises.

2015/16
The refurbishment of Grenfell fits Celotex RS5000, a small amount of Kingspan insulation and styrofoam window panels to the outside of the 24-storey building.

14 June 2017
A fire starts in a fridge-freezer on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower, igniting the cladding and insulation and engulfing the building in flames. Seventy-two people are killed.

out how to meet these regulations. They are minimum standards in all but name.

Standards tested

In 1999, what these standards said about cladding and insulation came under the spotlight. This was because of a fire at a tower block in Scotland, Garnock Court, which spread rapidly up the building via combustible window panels, killing a pensioner with disabilities.

A parliamentary inquiry decided against banning combustible cladding systems. Instead, it accepted the recommendation of the Building Research Establishment (BRE) that if combustible materials are to be used to clad a high-rise building, they must be subjected to a large-scale test which the BRE had designed. The newly privatised organisation - until 1997 a nationally run laboratory - would charge manufacturers to run this test on their products.

By 2005, this test - which was set out in British Standard 8414 and became known as the BS 8414 test - was an established part of the system of building regulation. It was a means to clear combustible cladding materials, but it could not be used to give a pass to combustible insulation.

This changed in the 2006 version of Approved Document B. This came at a time when climate change treaties were setting increasingly tough standards for insulation - creating a booming market for the sale of insulation products. The document was updated to change the wording around large-scale testing - to make it an option for combustible insulation as well as cladding panels.

The consultation on the 2006 version of the document ran in 2005. *Inside Housing* first requested the responses to this consultation submitted from the industry in January. In February, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government responded to other questions but did not provide this information.

Inside Housing appealed and in mid-August, following a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office, the information was finally released.

Towards the end of the BRUFMA submission is the following line: "Paragraph 11.7 - we support the introduction of BS 8414-1 2002 where BRE conducted a test programme to support the introduction of a large-scale test for facades."

The BRE designed the test for combustible materials



BRUFMA was responding to a draft version of Approved Document B which the consultation respondents were being asked to assess.

This draft version, available through government archive websites, shows the reference to large-scale testing crossed out in paragraph 11.5 - where it would have applied to cladding only - and introduced in 11.7, where it applied to insulation.

This change was never listed on the summary of significant changes, nor did the consultation document itself draw attention to the change.

“Once the door was opened by that subtle change in wording, the whole thing unravelled.”

BRUFMA's support of it - the only response seen by *Inside Housing* to even mention it - was a throwaway line towards the end of its response in the 'any other comments' section.

But its effect would be significant. When the final version of the document was published in 2006, it gave even more backing to the BS 8414 test, applying it to cladding materials and insulation.

This was not all the response from the plastic industry asked for. BRUFMA and the British Property Federation all submitted responses supporting a document recently published by the BRE titled *The Production of Smoke and Droplets From Products Used to Form Wall and Ceiling Linings*.

This document, written for the government in 2005, assessed the neces-

sity of introducing limits on the amount of smoke and burning droplets which could be produced by materials used in internal walls and ceilings. All European countries bar the UK and Ireland, the report said, had some sort of standard. While this would not have impacted cladding systems, introducing one would limit the use of plastic insulation products inside buildings.

But the report advocated against doing so. It said the standards would "have a significant impact on product sales".

"The most demanding option could potentially affect sales with an annual value upwards of £249m," it said. This was weighed against the impact on safety. "The benefits in terms of lives saved or reduced injuries... are considered to be low," it reads. "Using accepted valuation techniques... the annual benefit is estimated to be £174,000 per year."

A BRE spokesperson says: "The outcomes of the cost benefit analysis in the BRE report (a government prerequisite to introducing any new regulatory provisions) are a snapshot in time. They relate to the information that was provided/available then. As with any such analysis, the balance of costs and benefits changes with time as they require revisiting on a regular basis. The results from 2004/05, when the work was carried out, will not be valid today."

But without these standards and with the newly expanded testing regime post-2005, the use of combustible insulation boomed inside and outside buildings.

A process known as 'desktop studies' was formalised by guidance from the Building Control Alliance in 2014.

That same year, a company named

Celotex was able to secure a pass for its polyisocyanurate insulation through the BS 8414 test when combined with cement fibre. It responded by marketing the product as "suitable for use" on high rises.

In 2016, this plastic insulation was fixed to the walls of Grenfell Tower and covered with polyethylene-cored cladding panels. A year later, the worst fire in this country in modern times killed 72 people.

Alternate combinations

Did the change in 2005 contribute to the environment that allowed this to happen?

The BRE has always rigorously defended its testing regime.

It points out, correctly, that no system passed through a BS 8414 test has ever been involved in a deadly fire. The problems arise when materials cleared through BS 8414 are combined with other combustible products.

Simon Storer, chief executive of the Insulation Manufacturers Association - to which BRUFMA changed its name last year - says: "We would still support BS 8414 and large-scale testing as the best route to ensure the fire safety of buildings. If the alignment used on Grenfell had been tested to BS 8414 standards, it would not have been allowed."

He adds that BRUFMA was "extremely small" in 2005 and it would be "remiss" to imply that it was particularly influential in lobbying for change to regulations.

Nonetheless, the government is now preparing to ban combustible materials from the walls of high-rise buildings outright. In doing so, it will be reversing the position suggested by the sellers of plastic insulation 13 years ago. ■