

New journalist of the year

Broadwater Farm: a large panel system case study

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/broadwater-farm-a-large-panel-system-case-study-57010>

Luke's coverage of this story was heavily informed by his 18 month-long period covering the Haringey Development Vehicle. As a result of this coverage, he had extensive contacts on the affected estate and in the first 'Corbyn council', for which this was the first real challenge.

Through the people he knew on the estate, he was able to fill the article with interviews with residents, a vital part of showing the human side of the story. This was crucial given the overwhelming human impact of there being two tower blocks at risk of potential collapse.

His contacts on the council, meanwhile, helped him deliver exclusive news lines on the story. In this feature, Luke revealed that the estate would be balloted before any decision was made, a crucial issue for residents and one that plays into a wider conversation in London about regeneration ballots.

I've got frustrated with people wasting their opportunity: Nick Walkley interview

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/ive-got-frustrated-with-people-wasting-their-opportunity-an-interview-with-nick-walkley-55267>

As the chief executive of the government's housing delivery agency, Nick Walkley is a crucial figure when it comes to solving the housing crisis. This profile interview, his first since taking the job, was invaluable to our readers in sketching out a portrait of the man in charge of their grant finance and revealing his ideas about housing.

Mr Walkley emerges as a vivid character thanks to some lively writing from Luke, who delves into his background and personal life to uncover ideological and internal motivations.

Luke also manages to deliver insight on the current housing situation and the government's plans to solve it. This includes the exclusive revelation that there was "definitely" scope for some of the £8bn guarantees announced in the Budget to be used for affordable housing.

This was only officially confirmed in the Social Housing Green Paper five months later, so Luke was leading the conversation.

Fire safety tests of cladding examined

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/fire-safety-tests-of-cladding-examined-56111>

This feature was the final word on a story that Luke had been leading for almost a year, with multiple exclusives. Here, he set out to the sector exactly what the differences were between official cladding tests and the alternative ones being done by insurers.

This was a highly technical subject, but one that *Inside Housing's* readers – many of whom own multiple tower blocks and were worried about the safety of their cladding – needed to understand. Luke's explanation of it was highly readable but immensely detailed at the same time.

He used various contacts he'd built up over a long period of covering fire safety to build up a full understanding of the implications of the results and what they meant for landlords who had already formed opinions based on the government tests, which may have been flawed.

To whom it may concern:

RE: Luke Barratt, reporter, Inside Housing

Luke Barratt joined Inside Housing in his first B2B reporting role in June 2017. Previously had had completed several shifts at Inside Housing. On 31 August 2018, he had 14 months' experience of writing on built environment issues, so I am happy to confirm that he is eligible to enter the new journalist of the year category.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emma Maier', with a long horizontal flourish extending from the end of the name.

Emma Maier, editor, Inside Housing



THE FUTURE OF



Broadwater Farm, a housing estate with a notorious past, is the latest case study of problems with large panel system buildings. *Luke Barratt* finds out how residents are affected

The sun beats down on the concrete of the Broadwater Farm Estate in Haringey, north London, when *Inside Housing* visits. Parents are making the school run, and the first sign that something is amiss comes almost immediately. A young mother with a pushchair in one hand says into her phone: “They’re knocking down two blocks on the estate.”

This decision hasn’t been made yet, but the council has determined that two blocks containing around 250 homes have failed structural tests and are unsafe to live in, and says demolition is preferred.

Northolt and Tangmere

The blocks - 18-storey Northolt (left) and six-storey Tangmere (overleaf) - are both large panel system (LPS) blocks, the same kind of construction as Ronan Point, which partially collapsed in 1968 after a gas explosion, killing four people. This disaster led to a requirement for re-enforcement work on similar towers. But this was not completed everywhere. In Southwark, four LPS towers on the Ledbury Estate were found to be unsafe last year. They were evacuated and stripped of their gas supply.

In December, it transpired that Broadwater Farm was also affected. All 11 blocks were built with LPS construction. Nine had gas heating and gas cookers, which the council decided could not remain. Cookers were removed but the gas supply was not. The buildings - and their residents - entered a state of limbo where

it was not clear how safe they were, or what the next steps would be.

The backdrop to these events was a febrile political climate in Haringey relating to the council’s plans to hand over its housing stock to a new company, the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV), which would have seen the entire estate knocked down.

Under the glare of the national media, many councillors were deselected, leader Claire Kober stood down and a new Labour council was elected, which some have dubbed the country’s first ‘Corbyn council’.

Under the previous regime, the issue had rumbled on slowly, but in the past couple of weeks, Tangmere and Northolt failed new structural tests, making evacuation necessary. Why, some have questioned, were these issues not detected before?

According to papers submitted to Haringey Council’s cabinet, the gas supplier to the building - Cadent - has said it will turn off the tap for all nine blocks in October, when the council plans to install temporary boilers and then an estate-wide district heating system. Tests have confirmed this will make eight of the blocks safe, but for Tangmere, an unusual building with a ‘ziggurat’ style construction, it won’t be sufficient. According to cabinet papers, the block must either be strengthened or demolished. The same goes for Northolt, which houses a similar number of residents. Tests have determined neither building would be safe in the event of a gas bottle or oxygen cylinder explosion, or a vehicle colliding with the block. ▶

BROADWATER

News analysis



Above: the ziggurat-style Tangmere block

“They’ll say a ballot is for regeneration but they’re moving people out for structural reasons.”

With the gas supply set to be switched off, Tangmere must be evacuated urgently, while Northolt cannot wait much longer. Already, a fierce debate has sprung up about the best way to deal with the situation. Should the blocks be demolished or strengthened? And what is the best way to rehouse the residents?

Fighting for a ballot

The HDV saga was a key driver in the wider Labour Party’s adoption of a policy of ballots for estate regeneration, so it is hardly surprising that a central question has become whether or not residents of Broadwater Farm will be balloted on demolition versus refurbishment.

Chris Hutton, chair of the Broadwater Farm Residents’ Association, tells *Inside Housing*: “We’re fighting for a ballot. Whether we get one or not is a different matter, but we think it’s only fair that we do have one.”

This would not seem unreasonable given the political backdrop. Not only were Haringey Labour councillors the ones who proposed ballots for estate regeneration at last year’s Labour Party conference, but the current crop of councillors have also been elected on a manifesto including that policy. But none of the papers submitted to the cabinet so far mention

the ballot, instead referring to a planned consultation with tenants.

Jacob Secker, secretary of the residents’ association, was involved in the campaign against the HDV and clearly is not yet sold on the new council. “They’ve got ways of getting around it, because they’ll say that a ballot is for estate regeneration but they’re moving people out for structural reasons,” he says. “I don’t see the difference at all. You can still have a ballot for different options.”

A Labour source, however, tells *Inside Housing*: “My understanding is that there will be a ballot. I think that has to happen, assuming there was a decision taken to knock the properties down and rebuild them. A lot of Labour Party members and councillors are of the opinion, if we’re going to win the trust of residents, you’ve got to have a ballot, particularly given that it’s the same council that had all the high-profile stuff on the HDV.”

Ballot or not, cabinet papers are explicit that the council would prefer to demolish both blocks. The papers acknowledge that demolition and rebuilding would be more expensive in absolute terms than refurbishment but add that the council’s strained Housing Revenue Account would have to cover the full cost of refurbishment. New build homes, on the

other hand, would “likely be eligible for external grant which would reduce the cost to the council”.

Emine Ibrahim, cabinet member for housing, who was a prominent campaigner against the HDV and directly replaced previous cabinet member for housing Alan Strickland in his Noel Park seat, says in the report: “We don’t like the idea of demolishing homes, and would always want to minimise disruption to an estate which many have called home for decades.

“However, we have been elected to deliver on a promise of safe and decent homes. As a council, we also have a duty to maintain the long-term health of the council’s finances, and to consider the direct impact such a cost would have on our ability to maintain the rest of our existing homes, many of which are in desperate need of investment.”

Mr Hutton remarks: “In real terms, it might cost more, but because they might get a bit of money from somewhere else, they want to do it. That’s almost a criminal waste of public money.”

Alan Goodall, 67, who has been a council tenant in Northolt for 30 years, says a ballot is important. He adds: “I’d be inclined to let them refurbish it, with the option to come

back. It’s important for me to keep the housing because the chances are, if they demolish, I don’t think they’ll rebuild. Or if they did, would it all be social housing? Would it be part-private, part-buy, part-rent and 10% social housing?”

Even if the blocks are strengthened, residents will still have to be rehoused while the work is done. This has been the centre of another controversy, with some residents objecting to elements of the plan.

The policy set to be passed by cabinet is to move residents temporarily, with the option of making it permanent in the event a resident’s original block is demolished or they wish to stay in their new home. But some residents have complained about how homes will be allocated. The council intends to match each resident’s preference with a specific home and then offer them only that home.

Receiving an offer

The report reads: “Given the urgency to move tenants, households will only receive one suitable offer which they must not unreasonably refuse.”

Mr Secker, who lives in Tangmere, says the council should follow Southwark’s example and use a choice-based lettings system, allowing residents to choose from several options.

He also suggests that some residents have been given incorrect information. He tells *Inside Housing*: “I’ve just been to my meeting with my housing officer who’s responsible for my move-on and the information I was given was misleading, because she was implying, ‘don’t worry, we’ll move you to accommodation somewhere else, and then if you want to move on from that - anywhere in the borough - you’ll have that option’.”

Another resident of Northolt, Grace Tenkorang, says: “If they will send me to a very nice place, I don’t mind staying there until they finish this work. But I don’t want them to take me to a very remote place.”

Ms Tenkorang, like most residents *Inside Housing* spoke to, understood that safety was the most important concern, but she was worried about where she might be sent and placed great importance on her attachment to the Broadwater Farm community.

Balancing this desire with the need for safety and the allocation of stretched resources is a challenge for any council. But many will be watching with interest to see how the country’s first ‘Corbyn council’ copes with its first dose of real politics. ■

LUKE BARRATT TAKES A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CLADDING TESTS

One hundred degrees hotter, four times longer and with a far greater risk of spreading: the flames that consumed cladding in independent fire safety tests are described in worrying terms, compared to official tests.

The insurers who commissioned the tests say they reveal the “utter inadequacy” of the existing test regime, so *Inside Housing* has decided to compare them directly to the various government-commissioned cladding tests that have been done since the Grenfell Tower fire to understand the differences.

In the aftermath of the fire that tore through Grenfell Tower and killed 72 people, the government commissioned seven large-scale tests from the Building Research Establishment

(BRE), which would look at whether, despite failing those first tests, the materials used might be safe if combined with other, less combustible materials.

The tests, known as BS 8414 tests, and designed by the British Standards Institution (BSI), involved setting a fire at the base of a nine-metre model wall to see whether fire spread up the side.

As *Inside Housing* reported at the time, the Fire Protection Association (FPA) - the fire safety wing of the Association of British Insurers (ABI) - lacked confidence in the results of these tests.

On behalf of the ABI, it carried out a series of new cladding tests on six-metre high walls designed to be more realistic. The aim was to examine the adequacy of the BS 8414 test, looking

at five key areas. It's worth going through these in turn.

Areas of concern

The first area of concern was the fuel load. A BS 8414 test sets fire to a crib made of wood at the base of its model wall. According to the FPA's test report, however, 20% of the fuel for a flat fire is usually plastic-based.

The FPA did two almost identical tests, except that one used a fuel load including 20% plastic. In the latter, flames were one metre longer and the temperature was 100 degrees hotter.

Aluminium, the report notes, loses integrity quickly when it heats up. A 100 degree difference in temperature caused by the presence of plastic could, the FPA concluded, cause tests done on aluminium to fail that might otherwise have passed.

The second area was vents and ducts. In a BS 8414 test, the cladding system is perfectly smooth and intact, without: windows, vents, ducts or pipes. This, of course, is not what a real wall is like, and the FPA suggested that such additions could make it easier for fire to spread.

This suggestion gained greater importance a couple of weeks ago, when a leaked report provided by the BRE to police investigating the Grenfell Tower fire - seen by *Inside Housing* - revealed that when the fire escaped from the flat where it started, the window frame provided “fuel” and there wasn't “any substantial barrier to fire taking hold on the facade outside”.

When the FPA added a bathroom-type vent into the wall, flames spread into the cavity immediately. In fire

“Fire tests are a way of comparing one form of construction with another.”

CLADDING

ISSUES THAT HAVE CAST DOUBT ON OFFICIAL FIRE SAFETY FINDINGS

safety, it is considered vital to avoid, as far as possible, fire spreading into the cavity of a cladding system, as this can lead to a 'chimney effect'.

This chimney effect was the FPA's third concern. Its report suggests that BS 8414 tests, in which edges are often sealed, are unrealistic.

The association again compared two tests, one with cladding with sealed edges and one without seals. In the first, fire climbed 1.5 metres up the open face before burning out and self-extinguishing, as happened in the government's passed tests.

When edges were not sealed, fire spread six metres, to the top of the model wall, four times further.

The fourth area of concern for the FPA was cavity barriers, designed to expand when they detect flame to stop it spreading.

In a BS 8414 test, barriers are heated from an early stage when flames touch the outside of the system. If the cladding holds for long enough, they expand before fire gets into the cavity.

As the FPA has already shown, though, fire can spread into the cavity through other routes. When it simulated these means of spreading, it found that cavity barriers could not expand quickly enough to block the spread of flame.

The FPA's fifth and final concern is perhaps its most concerning. Its report states: "There is concern that some testing has allowed significant reinforcement of the system with features that may benefit its ability to pass the test but might not be design features of end-use applications."

To examine this, the FPA replicated

one of the government's tests and compared it to an identical system with what engineering firm Arup said was a "typical on-building design".

In the latter test, panels fell away from the wall and fire spread horizontally as well as vertically. These things were both seen to happen at the Grenfell Tower fire, but did not happen in any of the government's BS 8414 tests.

What now?

The FPA has provided its report to the BSI, which will examine and decide whether it needs to review the BS 8414 standard.

Though many have responded with shock to the FPA's findings, one leading fire safety expert is sceptical, telling *Inside Housing*: "I take their point that fire tests on external

wall construction don't always reflect reality, but I'm not sure what they're trying to prove. Fire tests are a way of comparing one form of construction with another. At the end of the day, I'm not sure there's any evidence that the BS 8414 test is broken.

"The FPA have their own agenda in trying to push their testing. I'm not entirely convinced. The thing I was slightly sympathetic to was the vents going through, because you can't simulate that with a BS 8414. It's occurred to us on several occasions, what about these vents going through the cavity? How do you allow for these? I'm not sure where that leaves us, to be honest."

The BSI has said if the FPA's findings and evidence are "technically feasible" then the two will work together to amend the standard. ■

"Fire tests on external wall construction don't always reflect reality."

CONCERNS



**“I’ve got
frustrated
with people
wasting their
opportunity”**

Government has placed Homes England at the “heart of building new homes”. Its chief



Chief executive Nick Walkley tells *Luke Barratt* how he plans to do this

All the picture frames on the walls of Nick Walkley's office, in the housing ministry's Westminster building, are empty.

"It's a silent protest," says the chief executive of Homes England, the government agency for housing delivery.

Mr Walkley has postponed adding some personality to his workspace until the organisation gets its own office in Victoria, London. It's a waiting game that has already lasted the nearly 12 months since Mr Walkley took on the job, and should finally go ahead in two weeks.

"Every change process needs symbols of change," the 48-year-old explains. Change is the word of the day at the agency. It was part of the Homes and Communities Agency until the start of the year, when it launched with a new name and a new strategy.

The plan is to move towards a more collaborative style of working with housing associations, lending providers expertise and help with land assembly and financial arrangements, as well as traditional grant.

Mr Walkley will be the one to steer Homes England in this new direction, and ensure the body makes a mark. *Inside Housing* has come to find out what that will entail - but also to discover more about the person behind what will be one of the most important organisations for the sector.

Mixed reception

Before coming to the agency, Mr Walkley worked at Barnet Council, then Haringey Council.

As the chief executive of Barnet Council, he oversaw a huge outsourcing programme, leading the authority to be dubbed 'easyCouncil' - comparing it to the well-known cut-price airline. Some Labour councillors, local campaigners and one independent report reacted to a programme some considered extreme.

In many others, though, he inspires great loyalty.

Tracey Lees, chief executive of housing association Wandle, was chief executive of the ALMO Barnet Homes for three years of Mr Walkley's tenure at that council.

She enthuses: "He understood what a good housing service looked like. He's not a housing professional, but he valued and appreciated people who are, and allowed them and enabled them to get on with it.

"He recognises people who can get stuff done. That's why I like working with him, because I want to get stuff done, and he wanted to get stuff done - so he left me to get stuff done."

Four of his closest advisors at Barnet followed him out of the council, when he left in 2012 to become chief executive of Haringey.

They worked for him there for the



next four years, where he again unveiled plans that stirred up opposition. This time, he proposed to transfer a huge amount of the council's housing stock into a development vehicle that would be jointly owned with the private developer Lendlease.

One Haringey councillor, who was a cabinet member during Mr Walkley's tenure, says: "He's quite a political operator for a civil servant. He knows how to charm. He's the sort of person who, if you wanted something done, he'd get it done, but it would be quite difficult if he didn't agree with you. But even when people are against him, they end up being charmed by him, which is why he's able to get stuff done."

Perhaps his approach dates back to his time at the Improvement and

Indeed, he is at his most uncomfortable when talking publicly about his family. He fiddles with an elastic band as he tells me in short sentences: "I'm a family man. I do the school pick-up. Woe betide people who come between me and the precious time I can get. That stuff's very important to me. I have walked out of meetings. It was parents' evening last night. That stuff is very important."

Last half-term, Mr Walkley says, he took his eight-year-old daughter to a record shop. "We spent an hour-and-a-half in there, and I somehow managed to end up buying '80s electro-influenced Brazilian dance music."

Music is one of Mr Walkley's favourite subjects, and though the passion is real, he sees it as a useful way of communicating with people as

"Asking questions about the kind of funding to support affordable homes is important."

Development Agency (IDeA), designed to change the way local government was run, when it was first formed in 1999. The creation of this agency was part of New Labour's attempt to force councils to introduce elements of competition into all their services.

"It was the making of me," Mr Walkley says of his time there. "Everyone was young, dynamic and motivated." He punctuates each adjective by hitting the table with his hand.

Everywhere he's been, Mr Walkley has worked to accomplish his goals at breakneck speed.

"I'm now older than my father when he died. And that's a freaky phase to be in," he explains. "I've got deeply frustrated with people wasting their opportunity to make a difference. That's what matters to me."

His father, a clog-maker and then a lorry driver, died when he was 21.

This is a difficult subject, and the Liverpoolian insists: "I'm from a fairly straightforward background of people who kind of get on with it."

well. "Music's a great way of engaging people in quite a safe space," he says. "It tells a lot about you, without having to speak about who your wife is, or where your kid is at school."

That might be true, but when Mr Walkley does talk - uncomfortably - about his background, it is revealing.

Losing his father at an early age does seem to underpin his attitude to life in general. "I have a profound sense of urgency about getting shit done," he says.

So, how will he be wielding that motivation and dynamism at Homes England?

"It's about the balance between making the right commitment in the medium term to support confidence and increase supply, but also about being a bit disruptive as well," Mr Walkley says, clasping his hands together. "Because the housing market is broken. You're not just going to fix it with a few sticking plasters and a bit of salve."

Strong words, but it's all a little vague at the moment, and Mr Walk-

ley keeps his cards pretty close to his chest.

He insists, nevertheless, that people will have to sit up and take notice soon. The government, it is clear, has placed a lot of trust in his agency, with secretary of state Sajid Javid saying it will be "at the heart" of building new homes in the UK.

Lending route

Despite an improved policy environment, sources of funding can still be hard to come by, as banks and institutional investors become more risk-averse.

In this environment, Mr Walkley is keen to get Homes England involved in the lending market.

The chancellor announced £8bn of loan guarantees in the Autumn Budget. It was initially trailed as being aimed at small builders, but following the speech the Treasury said the door was still left open for the money to be used for affordable housing.

This would be hugely significant for housing associations, many of which are preparing to mourn the demise of the Affordable Housing Finance programme. It provides government-backed loans at low interest rates but will run out of money soon.

Is there scope to use these new guarantees for affordable housing?

"Definitely," says Mr Walkley. "Asking questions about what is the right kind of funding to support affordable homes, and how we could encourage more people to be financing that stuff, is really important."

Getting on with solving the housing crisis, Mr Walkley believes, will involve offsite construction.

Modern methods of construction have struggled to get off the ground in recent years, with delays at housing factories owned by Legal & General and Laing O'Rourke, and the collapse of a partnership between housing association Your Housing Group and a Chinese state-owned developer. But Mr Walkley thinks Homes England can use its resources to help such projects.

He even reveals that the agency is interested in "investing in facilities", which could be a huge show of support from the government, depending on the level of commitment.

A housing factory with explicit government support could benefit not just from extra funding but also from the other forms of support Homes England can provide.

Whatever definition is later given to the ideas Nick Walkley sets out, his history and attitude both suggest they will be impossible to ignore.

He's obviously got a clear picture in his mind of where the housing sector is going. Maybe he can use it to fill one of the frames on his wall. ■