
Another Fire Safety Scandal

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When we published our two recent items on Fire Safety in the Grenfell Tower area we expected to see some serious repercussions. Our earlier complaints to Siobhan Rumble had, of course, been copied to senior figures at RBKC, including the Director of Housing and the Cabinet Member for Housing, so we fully expected to see evidence of some kind of seismic upheaval following our revelations.

Nothing of the sort happened. There wasn't so much as a peep out of Coleridge or his deputy Laura Johnson.

We did get a reaction from Rumble herself. Following her earlier failure to provide us with contact details for Steve Cunningham, the Station Manager at North Kensington Fire Station, she did so immediately, once she had been publicly embarrassed by our first blog.

Unfortunately, and for reasons that we don't fully understand, we got a very poor response from Mr Cunningham, who seemed inclined to cut Ms Rumble and her cronies rather a lot of slack. He even suggested that we call the police next time we saw vehicles parked illegally in the Grenfell Tower area. Perhaps someone forgot to tell him that the enforcement authority for fire safety issues is not the Metropolitan Police, but the London Fire Brigade, which has the power to issue an enforcement notice requiring the Lancaster West authorities to comply with their own fire safety rules.

Imagine our consternation, therefore, when we then saw the recent report in the K&C Chronicle of a special fire safety exercise organised by the London Fire Brigade, not at Grenfell Tower, which we had been desperately trying to flag up to anyone who cared, but at Trelick Tower, a mile up the road from us.

kensington.londonfire.gov.uk/2013/02/17/fire-safety-exercise-at-trelli.html

Ironic don't you think?

BUT WE'RE NOT FINISHED YET!

Below is an extract from the most recent Fire risk Assessment of Grenfell Tower, conducted in November 2012, which TMO Health and Safety Officer Janice Wray was kind enough (?) to provide us with.

On Page 28 the following is recorded:

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"From the asset records provided to me by the TMO the emergency lighting and fire alarm systems along with the dry riser, fire fighter lifts and the hose reels installed in this building are all subject to a maintenance contracts. Testing, servicing and maintenance is being carried out by professional third party contractors on a planned preventive maintenance programme with records kept centrally by TMO at the "Hub" and by the contractor for all these systems, no test certificates have been seen to confirm this.

RGE Services are under contract to TMO to provide portable fire fighting equipment, testing, servicing and maintenance, the fire extinguisher in this building, the basement boiler room, the lift motor room, the ground floor electrical room plus other areas were out of test date according to the contractors label on the extinguishers. The last test date was on the 8th August 2011. Some located in the roof level areas had "condemned" written on them in large black writing with a last test date of 2009 or 2010. This seems to indicate that monthly occupier inspections are not being carried out.

It is not known if the caretaker is undertaking the monthly occupier's tests of the installed emergency lighting system, fire extinguishers and structural items as per the caretakers check list this would include the external stairs and lift checks with the results being kept as a record of testing having been undertaken."

On the face of it this is alarming evidence of serious negligence over several years, and it is rendered all the more alarming when seen in its true context, as part of a history of negligence that in all likelihood stretches back to 2004 and beyond.

It just so happens that one of our members chaired the EMB Property Management Committee in 2004 when that committee received information that the Grenfell Tower emergency lighting system was in very poor condition. Two thirds of the battery packs were completely dead, and the entire system would have failed in an emergency. The committee then fought a protracted battle with the TMO for more than a year, during which time the TMO repeatedly denied that there was a problem, or any negligence with regard to inspection and testing of the system. Eventually the EMB committee succeeded in badgering the TMO into ordering an independent investigation. This was conducted by Peter West of Capita Symonds. His report, when it was published in May 2005, was a shocking indictment of TMO mal-administration and failure of oversight, and of the electrical contractors whose duty it had been to inspect and test the Lancaster West emergency lighting system.

The report recommended that all batteries be replaced urgently, and this was done immediately. However, other recommendations appear to have been largely ignored, one of which was that the TMO urgently consider options for replacing the whole system, which was virtually obsolete and unfit for purpose. Another crucial recommendation that appears to have been ignored was that the TMO initiate and enforce in future a far more rigorous testing and inspection regime for fire safety equipment at Lancaster West.

The implications of the Capita Symonds report went far beyond Lancaster West and led to a wide ranging review of TMO fire safety procedures throughout the borough, but unfortunately, the lessons of 2004/2005 appear to have soon been forgotten – if indeed they were ever learned at all – and the culture of negligence at the TMO appears to have reverted to type and to have continued unabated to the present

Anyway, the one bit of good news is that when we queried the perverse LFB decision to run their fire exercise at Trellick Tower, despite our complaints about the obstructed access to Grenfell Tower, a similar exercise was hurriedly arranged for Grenfell Tower.

At that time we copied the Grenfell Tower Fire Risk Assessment to Councillor Blakeman (and various others including the LFB) and she replied on 18th February informing us that she had asked for;

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"...a full and comprehensive report once the emergency fire test at Grenfell Tower has been conducted and also for this to be an item on the Lancaster West EMB meeting agenda... (and) also asked for the likely timeframe within which we can expect a response."

As expected we got no reply from anyone else in authority, so we'll just have to wait and see what develops out of this. Needless to say we won't be holding our breaths while we wait.

In the light of this official report, which is strongly suggestive of years of ongoing neglect and criminal negligence of the fire safety systems at Grenfell Tower, we would suggest that the managing authorities need to take a long hard look at themselves, and how they manage this estate. We would also strongly suggest that they seriously reconsider their earlier facile dismissal of the concerns we raised regarding their lax attitude to the emergency access arrangements also.

We note from the account of the Trellick Tower exercise that four fire appliances attended on that occasion. We would be very interested to see whether LFB can fit four appliances into the Grenfell Tower emergency access zone, particularly if it is obstructed with multiple parked service vehicles, as it so often is during working hours.

Given that Lancaster West management and LFB have both dismissed our concerns about such obstructions, we would even dare to suggest that arrangements are made to ensure that a minimum of six service vehicles are deliberately parked in this area, for the duration of the Grenfell Tower exercise, including three in the gallowsgated area, to test access and manoeuvrability of fire appliances under emergency circumstances.

ONE THING IS CERTAIN – THEY CAN'T SAY THEY HAVEN'T BEEN WARNED.

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