

SOME SUGGESTED LEARNING POINTS FROM THE GRENFELL TOWER PROJECT

Communications must be delivered honestly and transparently to all residents and if anything changes, this should also be communicated immediately and with clarity.

Example

A common complaint from residents is that, having been told that the HIU (boiler unit) could be sited either in the kitchen or hallway, they were then told it could only be in the hallway. The TMO says this change of plan was fully communicated but residents continue to say they were unaware.

The TMO highlighted the change of plan in a residents' newsletter that stated: "Come along to our drop-in consultation session from 3pm to 5pm on 29 January in Flat 145. We'll show you the proposed layout of the new pipes, radiators and heat interface unit (the main point of control for the new system). This layout has changed from the one shown before because the new heat interface unit will now be in a different place. It has been changed so as not to interfere with the existing layout in your kitchen."

This tortuous statement would have been hard even for fluent readers of English to comprehend. It could have been delivered far better in simple sentences along the lines of "we are very sorry but for practical building reasons, we can only put the HIU boiler in your hallway. Please come and see how this will work in Flat 145 between 3 and 5 pm on 29 January".

Tell residents everything they need to know at the start of the project, not during it or at the end.

Example

A number of residents have spent money on materials to make good works with which they were not happy, have incurred travel expenses going to friends and family for respite, have had to take unpaid leave from work, and many are significantly out of pocket. They are unable to substantiate much of their financial loss and were not told to keep a record as they went along, including the need to retain all receipts. Telling them this at this late stage is unacceptable and the promised £50 means many will remain significantly out of pocket. Furthermore, at least one resident has been told that she is not eligible even for the £50.

Make sure the TMO knows and understands the personal circumstances of every resident and ensures it makes special arrangements where these are needed.

Example

Two babies were born to families with the refurbishment works in full swing. I spoke to one mother who told me that she is very concerned for her baby's hearing and lung development because of all the dust and loud hammering and banging going on every day. As a result she takes her baby to family and friends every day for peace and quiet. This costs money as well as time and effort and she doubts that she will be recompensed. My colleague Cllr Lasharie spoke to the other mother, who said that her situation is very embarrassing because she is unable to breastfeed her baby in peace with Rydon workers coming in and out of her flat. Both mothers said that the respite arrangements were not suitable for them as they cannot care for their babies in the company of strangers. In any

case, the conditions in the respite flat are unsuitable for new-borns.

Make sure that respite facilities offered are off site and are really welcoming and comfortable

Example

Respite is only available in Flat 145. This means residents cannot escape the noise and general disruption in the Tower. Neither, as previously indicated, is it suitable for the needs those who need special arrangements. Furthermore, some residents have said that the flat was not open when they wanted to use it.

Use a range of different consultation mechanisms so that the TMO is not accused of picking residents off one by one; and ensure that language and literacy issues are addressed.

Example

At the start of the project the open consultation meetings became very fraught, with the result that fewer and fewer people attended. The TMO surveyed residents and reported that over 50% wanted one-to-one consultation. However, this then led to a situation where residents felt people were being told different things and some felt that they were being picked off one by one. This was at the time when the TMO was refusing to engage collectively through Grenfell Community Unite and led to a significant level of antagonism towards the TMO. Future projects should run both individual and collective consultations to avoid this situation emerging again.

Keep all lines of communications with residents open and respond swiftly to representations.

Example

At the start of the Grenfell project the Lancaster West Residents' Association was moribund. The Grenfell residents therefore decided that the best way to engage collectively with the TMO was through Grenfell Community Unite, serviced by an officer from Unite the Union. She wrote a number of letters on behalf of residents (an example attached), but received neither response nor acknowledgment. This caused a stand-off with residents lasting several months and a significant number of householders refused access to their homes, undoubtedly contributing to some works being delayed. The Unite officer and I then met in June, when I advised her that the correct way for the residents to engage collectively was through the Residents' Association, or through a Grenfell Tower Compact, or through their elected representatives – their councillors and their MP. This broke the deadlock and at a meeting in July with Victoria Borwick MP it was agreed that residents would set up a Grenfell Compact. This deadlock and delay could have been avoided had the TMO replied to Grenfell Community Unite.

Appoint an independent residents' advocate, with direct access to senior TMO management, who can expeditiously collate and progress residents' concerns, especially matters of general concern.

Example

My e-mail box shows over 300 e-mail exchanges with the TMO in 2015 alone on Grenfell Tower matters. My two ward colleagues and I also attended 20 meetings concerning Grenfell Tower. This is extremely inefficient, involves a lot of duplication, causes confusion and is very time consuming. The

amount of correspondence and enquiries from residents to the TMO must also have been immense. If all enquiries, visits and meetings could be channelled through one independent advocate this could save a huge amount of effort for everyone involved.

Respond quickly to all enquiries and do not expect residents to use the cumbersome and time-consuming complaints procedure for simple requests.

Example

Investigate resident complaints thoroughly and do not rely solely on information provided by the contractor.

Example

One flat was badly flooded and while the damage was being cleared up, one of the operatives stole a front door key from the hall table. He subsequently tried to enter the flat while the tenant's daughter was alone in the flat. Fortunately she had the door on the chain, so the man ran away. She called the Police, who came and changed the front door lock and also immediately reported the incident to Rydon. Rydon were unable to identify the man concerned (he may have been an employee of OCS). Subsequently I submitted a formal complaint on behalf of the family. The response to the Stage One complaint said only that "Rydon inform me they have never had any keys to this property". On 6 December I submitted a Second Stage complaint, including the Police crime reference number. I have not as yet (2 January 2016) received a response to Stage Two, so it is not clear whether this is even now being investigated.

Investigate all elements of a resident's complaint.

Example

One resident came to a Compact meeting in great distress. She described a range of problems which I referred to the TMO the following day. I received no response but was then told in passing that "it is a matter for TMO Repairs Direct". In fact two matters related to the Grenfell Tower project. I had to send two reminders before I received a written response, which did not address the matters relating to the refurbishment project. That was several months ago and I still do not know if all her problems have been resolved.

Given the proliferation of absentee buy-to-let leaseholder landlords on the TMO estate, the TMO should engage with all residents and not require sub-lessees to submit concerns through their landlord.

Example

One resident had a concern about the HIU location and damage while works were carried out to his flat. The TMO said they could not deal with his complaints as he was neither the tenant nor the leaseholder. This was eventually resolved – but it should not happen again. Some of the buy-to-let landlords with properties on TMO estates are very difficult to contact and sometimes even live abroad. If their sub-tenants are precluded from raising complaints, there can be no guarantee that works will be undertaken properly.

Do not mislead.

Example

Residents complained bitterly about the state of one of the lifts, The TMO sent a photograph of the other lift, claiming there was no problem. Ward councillors asked how many residents were refusing access to their flats and were given a very under-stated figure. We reported this in good faith and immediately were subject to very nasty comments on local blogs.

This approach destroys trust between the TMO and residents, between the TMO and elected representatives and between residents and their councillors. This must not happen again.

Accept that sometimes the resident may be right and the TMO and/or contractor may have erred. Do not assume residents are not telling the truth when they complain and do not respond in a defensive/aggressive mode. This is counter-productive and leads to mistrust and ill-feeling. Be prepared to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them.

Example