

SOME SUGGESTED LEARNING POINTS FROM THE GRENFELL TOWER PROJECT

Communications must be clear and if anything changes, this must be communicated immediately and with clarity.

The issue that prompted the most significant distrust of the TMO at Grenfell Tower was when the decision was taken at Rydon's behest that the HIU (boiler units) could only be put in the hallway. Earlier consultations gave residents the option of either a hallway or kitchen installation.

The communication of this change was via a 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."

Residents with difficulty reading English, or other literacy issues, say these newsletters are of no use to them. The TMO say that the Rydon Resident Liaison Team are aware of the particular needs of all the households in the Tower and the TMO will provide translation and interpretation on demand. Unfortunately no one recognised that the information in this particular newsletter was very important and needed to be conveyed to all residents in language they could understand. Those who did not or could not read it could not recognise its importance and know that they should ask for it to be translated or interpreted.

The newsletter could have said something simple in plain English, such as "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".

Many residents who preferred the kitchen option then engaged in a stand-off with the TMO, including over 40 who refused access to their flats. This undoubtedly delayed the project and led to the TMO having to issue solicitors' letters, causing complaints of harassment and bullying and a further deterioration in the relationship with the TMO.

Respect residents' issues and deal with them fairly, quickly and suitably.

There is a lot of ill-feeling about residents being out of pocket through the project. Some have raised this through the TMO complaints procedure and remain dissatisfied with the outcome. For example, one resident incurred significant damage from a major flooding from the flat above. This case raised a number of issues, including loss of expensive items, including an expensive new sound system. The resident was told that reimbursement can only happen on production of the receipt. As the resident could not anticipate that the flat would be flooded, this is unrealistic.

A number of residents have lost pay by taking time off work to arrange access, only to have appointments cancelled, sometimes without any notification. The TMO offers £20 for missed appointments, but this does not meet actual financial loss.

Some residents have spent money on materials to make good works with which they were not

happy. They cannot 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 unhelpful and many will remain significantly out of pocket.

All residents thought they would receive £50 at the end of the project to cover general loss and inconvenience. At least one resident has now been told it is discretionary and this resident does not meet the criteria. If this is a change of policy, this has not been communicated. If this is a change of policy, it will not be well received.

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

Two babies were born to families with the refurbishment works in full swing. One mother was very concerned for her baby's hearing and lung development because of the daily excessive dust and loud hammering and banging. She had to take her baby to family and friends for peace and quiet, incurring costs and time that cannot be recompensed. The other mother said that her situation was embarrassing because she was unable to breastfeed her baby in peace with Rydon workers coming in and out of her flat. Both mothers felt the respite arrangements were not unsuitable as they did not wish to care for their babies in the company of strangers. The TMO did not know of these two babies and said proper respite would have been made available had they known. But if the Rydon Liaison Team are aware of every household's needs, they should have ensured that the special needs of new-borns were addressed.

Access to the respite was by request only, but residents thought it was a drop-in offer and were disappointed not to find the flat open when they wanted to use it. Again how to obtain respite was poorly communicated.

Ensure that formal collective consultation arrangements are in place at the start of any project, either through a Resident's' Association or through a TMO Compact.

At the start of the Grenfell project the Residents' Association was moribund. Residents 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 to the TMO on behalf of residents, but received neither response nor acknowledgment.

She asked to meet me to break the deadlock. We met in June, when I advised that the correct way for residents to engage collectively was through a Residents' Association, or a Compact, or elected representatives - councillors and the MP. This broke the deadlock and at a meeting in July convened with the MP, the TMO and residents agreed set up a Grenfell Compact. This deadlock, delay and ill-feeling could have been avoided had the TMO told Grenfell Community Unite at the start the correct way to engage collectively.

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. Dedicate one complaints officer to matters arising from the project to respond swiftly and effectively.

Expecting residents to use a cumbersome and time-consuming complaints procedure that many do

not understand for simple requests is not sensible. I have had over 300 e-mail exchanges with the TMO in 2015 alone on behalf of residents exasperated with the way the TMO was dealing with their concerns. My ward colleagues and I attended 20 meetings and the MP has also had two on-site with residents. This is inefficient, involves a lot of duplication, causes confusion and is unnecessarily time consuming. The amount of correspondence and enquiries from residents to the TMO has also been immense. If all enquiries, visits and meetings are channelled through one independent advocate this could save a huge amount of effort for everyone involved.

Access to the TMO should be open to all residents, including sub-lessees of buy-to-let landlords. They cannot always go through their landlord, so some concerns may not be heard, leading to sub-standard or problematic works that have to be resolved at a later date.

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.