

SOME SUGGESTED LEARNING POINTS FROM THE GRENFELL TOWER REFURBISHMENT PROJECT

- 1. Communications must be delivered honestly and transparently to all residents and if anything changes, this should 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".

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

Example

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, etc and many are significantly out of pocket. Many cannot quantify or substantiate their financial loss and were not told to keep a record as they went along, or to retain all receipts. Telling them they should have done this at this late stage in the project is unacceptable. The promised compensation of a mere £50 per flat 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. Where a resident can clearly demonstrate loss, for example, loss of a day's salary because of waiting in for an appointment that is not kept, without forewarning or explanation, then the full loss should be reimbursed, not just "£20 for a missed appointment". If not reimbursed in full, residents will be reluctant to remain at home for appointments.

- 3. 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. One mother told me that she is very concerned for her baby's hearing and lung development because of 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. 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 as it is inappropriate to care for their babies in the company of strangers. In any case, the conditions in the respite flat are unsuitable for new-borns.

4. 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 those with special needs. Furthermore, the flat was not always open when residents wished to use it.

5. Keep all lines of communication with residents open and respond to all 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 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 met me in June about this, when I advised her that the correct way for residents to engage collectively was through the Residents' Association, or through a Grenfell Tower Compact, or through 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.

6. 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 led to a situation where residents felt they were being told different things and some felt 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. Several residents whose first language is not English said the newsletters were of no use and the TMO is over-dependent on them for communications.

7. Appoint an independent residents' advocate with direct access to senior TMO management, together with a dedicated member of TMO staff to collate and progress all enquiries and concerns about the project while it is running.

Example

My e-mail box shows that I had over 300 e-mail exchanges with the TMO in 2015 alone on Grenfell Tower matters. My two ward colleagues and I also attended 23 Grenfell meetings in 2015. This is inefficient, involves much duplication, causes confusion and is time consuming. The amount of correspondence and enquiries directly from residents to the TMO is also vast. I was told that the TMO does not have the resources to deal with all the enquiries received. The TMO should consider whether it is sufficiently well staffed to deal with everything that a major refurbishment project will inevitably generate. If all enquiries, visits and meetings were channelled through one independent advocate and a dedicated TMO officer, this could save a huge amount of effort for everyone.

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

Example

Residents are told in newsletters to raise all enquiries not resolved by Rydon's liaison staff through the TMO Complaints Procedure. This is inefficient and time-consuming. The 15 day frame for replies means that issues are not dealt with immediately but left to fester, causing frustration. In any case, few residents understand how to use the Complaints Procedure. Cllr Borwick MP has urged the TMO not to require all enquiries to go through the complaints process but to deal with them immediately and as they emerge.

9. 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, an operative 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. She 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 unhelpfully 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 (4 January 2016) received a response to Stage Two, so it is not clear whether this serious matter is being investigated.

10. Investigate and respond to all parts 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. That was several months ago and I still do not know if all her problems have been resolved.

11. Given the proliferation of absentee buy-to-let leaseholder landlords on all TMO estates, the TMO should engage on refurbishment matters 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 issues as he was neither the tenant nor the leaseholder. Matters were eventually resolved - but it should not happen this way. Some buy-to-let landlords with properties on TMO estates are very difficult to contact and some even live abroad. If sub-tenants are precluded from raising complaints, there can be no guarantee that works will be undertaken properly.

12. Do not mislead.

Example

There are many examples of misleading information, for example:

- * residents complained about the state of one of the lifts and the TMO sent a photograph of the other lift, claiming that it showed there was no problem.
- * the new floor numbering was first said to be at the request of Royal Mail, then the Council Planning Department - but enquiries to both showed that the decision to re-number was taken by the TMO
- * ward councillors asked how many residents were refusing access to their flats and were given an under-stated figure. We reported this in good faith and as a result were subject to abusive comments on local blogs.

This sort of thing destroys trust between the TMO and residents, between the TMO and elected representatives, and between residents and their councillors. This should be avoided.

- 13. Finally, 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 defensive/aggressive mode. This is counter-productive and leads to mistrust and ill-feeling. Be prepared to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them.**