

RBKC Housing and Property Scrutiny Committee 16 July 2013

COMMENTS FROM NOTTING BARNES WARD COUNCILLORS ON PAPER A5

The Grenfell Leaseholders' Association

This Association is not allied to the Grenfell Action Group and has no responsibility for any local blog. It is a *bona fide* organisation and all leaseholders in Grenfell Tower are in membership. It has been recognised by the TMO as competent to speak on behalf of those leaseholders. The Grenfell Leaseholders' Association welcomes and supports the development of the Kensington Aldridge Academy, the redevelopment of the Kensington Leisure Centre and the allied improvements on the Estate as a whole. The objective of this Association is solely to obtain the best possible outcome for the residents of Grenfell Tower.

Petition

I shall be presenting tonight a petition organised by the Leaseholders' Association and signed by the occupants of 94 of the 120 flats in the Tower. This represents almost 100% coverage, given that one flat is currently void, some residents are away and others work at night and are not easily contactable. The prayer of the petition reads as follows:

"Now more than ever, the KALC project has made it absolutely necessary for improvement works to begin on Grenfell Tower. We will fight for this to begin immediately! We, the residents, demand Leadbitter to carry out the GTRP (*Grenfell Tower Regeneration Project*) as it was approved by the RBKC. We reject the idea in the strongest possible terms that the TMO needs to find another contractor through the tendering process, instead of going with Leadbitter who were approved by the Council.

"In this latest debacle, our wellbeing and lives were put in danger, so enough is enough. We demand robust changes how the KCTMO/EMB (*Estate Management Board*) run as a tenant led organisation. So far nobody has come forward either from the council or TMO/EMB to take responsibility. The bureaucratic games with the residents of GT must end. The council's appointed Managing agents are destroying our community of LWE (*Lancaster West Estate*).

"On behalf of the residents of Grenfell Tower at Lancaster West Estate."

Commentary on the Petition

The wording of this petition expresses the intense and deep frustration felt by the residents of Grenfell Tower - but it also reflects a range of misunderstanding of the situation, which demonstrates that neither the council nor the EMB has been able to keep residents fully informed of what precisely is and has been happening.

It also reflects the fear that residents experienced at the time of the power surges, when flats were filled with smoke. This was extremely frightening for everyone and sadly the EMB/TMO did not recognise this fear nor respond quickly enough or adequately enough. The power surges affected every single flat, so it was crass of the EMB/TMO to claim initially that only 7 residents had been affected. Neither is the revised figure of 45 residents accurate.

Insurance Claims

I have not seen the claim form that tenants are being asked to complete, but I am told that it includes, for example, a question to the effect that residents must state who they believe is responsible for the damage - the Council or the TMO. This question is quite unacceptable. How on earth are residents supposed to express a judgment here? If they fill in the "wrong" answer, will this invalidate their claim for reimbursement for their damaged possessions?

I still do not understand why the Council has told residents to contact their own insurance companies about their losses. I suspect few residents may have insurance, but for those who do, their loss is through no fault of their own and they should not be invited to lose no claims bonuses they may have by involving their own insurers.

The response to the damage to property has also been extremely slow. Residents still do not have replacement goods. Why do they have to wait so long for compensation or replacement? How are they expected to cope if they need their laptop or computer for work purposes or for their children's study, for example?

There has been no clear explanation of the reasons for these power surges, although it is acknowledged that the actual cause may still not have been identified. Consequently residents have no guarantee that they will not happen again and given what happened previously, some are still very nervous indeed. Residents need greater re-assurance and as quickly as possible.

The Planning Application

Paper A5 contains for the first time an explanation of why the planning application has been delayed. Although as ward councillor I have been provided with more information than residents, which I have attempted to share with them, the request from the planners for amendments to the applications submitted in November 2012 have come as a surprise.

I note that the Grenfell Design Team is developing a revised and updated design "ahead of a revised planning application" but this in itself does not constitute grounds for delaying submission of the application for almost a year. There must be another reason. I suspect I know what it is but the council must be open and transparent with residents. This may then enable them to understand why the council (not the TMO) has now opted to put the GTRP out to tender rather than going ahead with Leadbitter, for example.

I note with concern the planners request for removal of the canopy at first floor level. Has the council explained to the planners that this canopy is there to prevent death or serious injury to people walking beside the Tower from falling objects, whether they have fallen accidentally or were wilfully thrown? Given also that the new children's playground will be significantly closer to the Tower and the new crèche, the council and the planners must ensure that any updated design includes alternative measures to protect the safety of the residents and the general public if the canopy is to be removed. Has the Design Team been asked to take this on board?

I also have a concern about "alternative colour schemes". Residents of the Tower were given an assurance right at the start of the GTRP that they would be involved in choosing the colour scheme of the cladding. Is this assurance still active?

Lines of Responsibility

The wording of the petition demonstrates clearly that residents still do not understand what the responsibilities of the council are and what the responsibilities of the TMO/EMB are in relation to the project, which again demonstrates that communication with residents has been very poor.

The Role of the Ward Councillors

As ward councillors we have tried very hard indeed both to represent the needs of everyone on the Estate but more particularly the residents of Grenfell tower and Verity Close since they are at the front line of the KALC development.

We recently put a leaflet around the whole Estate trying to explain what residents can expect from the finished KALC project. Consequently, we feel let down by both the council and the TMO, because residents of both Grenfell Tower and Verity Close frankly no longer believe that the benefits promised to them will ever materialise. We have asked for better and more frequent information to be provided to residents, without effect. The explanatory panels on the hoardings around the KALC development, for example, have still not appeared. Will they be put up to coincide with the end of the project?

A Catalogue of Problems

The problems at Grenfell Tower are well-known to the council and the TMO and are very long-standing.

Paper A acknowledges the problems with the windows. It was however tragic that it was only the death of a child that led to the windows being examined and some repairs effected.

For many years the heating and hot water system has been defective and residents of the Estate have paid excessively high utility charges as a consequence - almost double the charges levied at the nearby Silchester Estate, which also includes tower blocks. This was caused in part by the fact that the gas meter serving Grenfell Tower had not worked since at least the year 2000 (that is as far back as my correspondence on this matter goes) as well as the defective nature of the heating and hot water system. These defects were recognised a long time ago and indeed the predecessor of this scrutiny committee indeed undertook a detailed review of these problems around November 2007.

This review led to the ludicrous quotation obtained by the then TMO of £12 million to replace the heating system at Grenfell Tower. As a result, alternative remedial measures were undertaken but no clarification has ever been provided of precisely what these measures were, nor whether they improved and impacted upon residents' hot water and heating difficulties and the excessive charges.

In fact, very little has changed from the residents' perspective - the heating remains on throughout the summer and only opening windows provides relief - relief which is currently denied because of the noise, dust and intrusion of the KALC works.

While these works are unavoidable, it had been our hope that the double glazing could have been installed at Verity Close and Grenfell Tower as

quickly after the commencement of works as possible. The current barbecue summer offers little joy and enormous discomfort for residents in the absence of the double glazing.

We recognise that the double glazing was originally offered in response to concerns that the Academy would cause significant noise pollution for residents, so a delay in installation is better than nothing. However, residents remain to be convinced that the Grenfell Tower Regeneration Project will ever actually happen

Insult to Injury

I do hope that the Scrutiny Committee will not use the investment of £58,000 per property as opposed to the borough average of £47,000 per property to justify the very serious difficulties that Grenfell Tower residents have faced and are continuing to face. It has been acknowledged that the Lancaster West Estate was built to a poor standard and without state of the art mechanical systems. The residents are now facing the consequences but these problems are not of their making.

Some recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee

- The Committee should set up a working group to monitor the progress of the Grenfell Tower Regeneration Project and the works to Verity Close to completion.
- The council and the TMO/EMB must ensure that every resident of Grenfell Tower who has suffered loss is reimbursed as quickly as possible. The council and the TMO/EMB should not expect residents to prompt a claim - some do not have English as a first language and many find bureaucracy extremely intimidating. Perhaps a resident liaison officer could be dedicated to this task.
- Both the council and the TMO must communicate better with all the Estate's residents via leaflet, website and face-to-face in a much more frequent and comprehensible manner. Sophisticated public relations leaflets are not the way to do this.
- The explanatory panels should be installed on the hoardings as a quickly as possible.
- An apology to residents would not go amiss.

Councillor Judith Blakeman

On behalf of the Notting Barns Ward Councillors

16 July 2013