

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | JUNE 2019



STILL NO JUSTICE FOR GRENFELL

OVERVIEW

On 14 June 2019, it will be two years since the horrific fire at Grenfell Tower claimed the lives of 72 people and devastated a close-knit community in the heart of London. The social housing tower block that was their home was wrapped in materials that ignited faster than petrol (according to one of the distributors of the cladding found on Grenfell Tower). Yet, as the second anniversary of the fire approaches, no-one has yet been found responsible for their deaths and the public inquiry set up to investigate the causes of the fire has yet to publish any findings.

THE INQUIRY

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) was granted Core Participant status in the Inquiry. We have been actively involved in the proceedings, submitting evidence and making interventions, as well as supporting our members in their role as witnesses. Through our participation we hope to secure justice for the victims by ensuring that those responsible are held to account and that nothing like this ever happens again.

The Inquiry is divided into two parts. Phase 1, which focuses on the night of the fire, heard evidence from firefighters, experts and from the bereaved, survivors and residents. Phase 2, which looks into the background 'causes' that led to the fire, the regulations in place and the construction and refurbishment of the tower, is due to open in January 2020, although evidence is already being disclosed to the core participants. Over 450,000 documents are expected to be disclosed for Phase 2, with 20,000 already disclosed in Phase 1.

The scope of the Inquiry is unprecedented. There are currently over 600 core participants, of whom 576 are individuals, 20 are commercial bodies and seven public bodies. The FBU is the main trade union core participant in the GTI.

The fire and the Inquiry have been a major focus of our work over the last two years. Over 1,000 of our members were interviewed by the police and 668 submitted evidence in the form of a witness statement to the Inquiry. In order to support members through the process, an FBU representative was present for each interview. Some 88 firefighters, control staff, officers of the London Fire Brigade (LFB) and other brigades gave oral evidence and statements from another 262 fire and rescue personnel were read into the record. Most were from the LFB, but some were members from other fire and rescue services assisting on the night. FBU officials and our legal representatives attended every day of the proceedings.

THE REACH OF THE INQUIRY

Although we are actively participating in the GTI, we have held concerns from the outset. We have questioned the rationale for starting with the lengthy, exclusive focus on the fire and rescue effort, and only subsequently an investigation into the companies and laws that allowed Grenfell Tower to become a death trap.

We have argued that the Inquiry's terms of reference are too narrow. In our submissions and contributions to the Inquiry, we are making the case for an overhaul of the fire safety regime in the UK. Over the last three decades, fire safety has been undermined by deregulation, the scrapping of professional standards and the fragmentation

of fire and rescue services, resulting in a postcode lottery of fire safety standards and procedures. We have called for a national review of the 'stay put' policy and for a ban on combustible materials in cladding.

We are clear that no person or organisation should be immune from criticism, including the LFB that has questions to answer around its preparation for similar fires. However, there is no escaping the deep flaws in a fire safety regime that allowed, and continues to allow, people to live in buildings that could burn with the speed and ferocity we saw at Grenfell.

DANGEROUS CLADDING AND 'STAY PUT'

The only attempt, since Grenfell, to adapt the 'stayput' policy which remains in place for most high rise residents, has been the National Fire Chiefs Council's (NFCC) Simultaneous Evacuation Guidance. This requires a system of waking watches to provide 24-hour surveillance to buildings clad in ACM awaiting remediation. In London alone, 209

residential buildings have changed from 'stay put' to evacuation, according to a recent report by *Inside Housing* magazine. We are deeply concerned about what we understand to be the realities of this temporary measure. We have heard of a growing industry of unaccredited surveillance companies charging residents exorbitant fees for their services forcing some residents to have to perform the watch themselves. This situation is deeply troubling.

THE SLOW PACE OF CHANGE

The GTI was expected to produce a report of its findings in Phase 1 and any urgent recommendations to the Prime Minister, by this spring, but this has now been delayed to October. Meanwhile, the Met Poice have said there will be no changes arising from its criminal investigation until at least 2021. With the glacial pace of action to remove flammable cladding from similarly affected buildings, it's not hard to see a clear pattern of government complacency in effecting change and in bringing those culpable for this atrocity to justice.

THE FBU'S CAMPAIGN 'GRENFELL: NEVER AGAIN' IS CALLING FOR:

A BAN AND REMOVAL OF ALL COMBUSTIBLE CLADDING

All combustible cladding must urgently be replaced on all buildings, irrespective of height. This would require a major national programme to assess and prioritise the scale of the risk and adopt interim safety measures which residents, other building users and firefighters would have confidence in.

A DEMOCRATIC AND INDEPENDENT TENANT ORGANISATION

Social housing should be held to the highest health and safety standards. Tenants of Grenfell were repeatedly ignored - their voices, and those of others in social housing should be heard loud and clear through democratic structures.

NEW ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES FOR THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Our fire and rescue service needs urgent investment and overhaul and a structure which is accountable to Parliament. For too long the fire service has been left to rot. As a vital public service, fire and rescue needs central oversight, including UK-wide standards and structures, minimum response times and a commitment to five firefighters on every fire engine.

INCREASE THE NUMBER OF FIREFIGHTERS

We need urgent investment in a new generation of firefighters and fire safety officers, after the loss of 1 in 5 firefighter jobs and 1 in 4 fire safety officers since 2010. Fire safety officers are absolutely critical in preventing fires.

NATIONAL REVIEW OF PROCEDURES WHEN COMPARTMENTATION FAILS

We are calling for an urgent, national review of the 'stay put' policy. This must involve all stakeholders, including representatives of firefighters, tenants and residents.

Join us on Sat 15 June, 12pm, Portland Place, London, W1A 1AA for the Grenfell Solidarity March.