

Public Sector Focus

Leadership and Management of Fire and Rescue Services

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The Grenfell Tower disaster's direct cost in human lives has become clearer over recent weeks. Yet mounting evidence to Dame Judith Hackitt's *Independent Review of the Building Regulations and Fire Safety* following the Grenfell disaster last June suggests that the causes and contributory factors to the disaster are complex, enduring and multi-faceted.

Independent evidence from experts such as the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Fire Sector Federation strongly suggests that Grenfell was a symptom of a much deeper malaise – a disaster waiting to happen. What emerges from the submissions to-date is a consistent view that fire safety in England has been taken for granted for the last 30 years, with systematic failures and political disinterest transcending successive government administrations.

Politicians, both local and national, have for too long relied heavily on falling headline figures for deaths from fires to resist calls from the fire sector to improve safety. Tackling this complacency, and persuading politicians to mandate the installation or retrofitting of sprinkler systems in schools, care homes, high-rise buildings, or multi-occupied dwellings has been met first with prevarication and then with absolute intransigence.

It is no surprise to find that the all-party parliamentary Fire Safety & Rescue Group, now nearly 20 years old, is one of the largest in parliament, but arguably also one of the least effective.

Over the 30 years, all political parties and governments have pursued a relentless march towards deregulation. Conversely, the sector's regulators have responded with ever more complexity and fragmentation in official guidance and standards. These inadequate and confusing regulations appear to have achieved little apart from persistently reducing competence and compromising consistency.

Do 'self-compliance' and 'self-certification' suggest themselves as appropriate principles for a regulatory regime that is meant to deliver public protection and assurance?. When did 'limited combustibility' become acceptable as a replacement for 'non-combustible' for external building materials on properties?

The current building regulations and fire safety regimes have become nothing less than a 'dog's breakfast'.

Real world challenges generated by the use and combination of new materials, changing design and building processes, and complex ownership and occupancy of buildings have overwhelmed a system that is now hopelessly out of date yet governed by a political cadre that is both intransigent and intent on avoiding blame.

The number of fire risk assessments being undertaken in this country is rapidly falling, their scope has been reduced, the process for undertaking them has been simplified and they are now able to be carried out by less competent assessors. Yet we know from insurers that, while commercial fires are reducing, the losses resulting from them are up four-fold per incident, reflecting this increasing complexity of modern construction and occupation.

Inspection and enforcement have been consistently undermined, with the goal of putting business first and safety second. The government has known for over three years that the current furniture

regulations covering fire spread and toxic fumes are both inadequate and ineffective but has failed to act.

It is not as if lessons aren't easily available. The Ronan Point disaster was started by a small gas explosion, Lakanal House by an electrical fault in a television and Grenfell by a fault in a refrigerator. In each case, poor building work in both original construction and later adaptations facilitated collapse and/or fire spread. The exterior cladding panels at Lakanal House burned through in under five minutes and external fire spread was the critical element of the 'Summerlands' disaster as far back as 1973.

Looking beyond the UK, high rise, multi-story fires have been increasingly common in places like Asia, Australia, and Russia experiencing high rise building booms. It is the reduction and avoidance of loss of life that sets these incidents and countries apart from Grenfell and the UK.

Dame Judith's interim report is shortly due out and may have already been published before you read this article. But it will almost certainly suggest that the current building regulation and fire safety regime in England is not fit for current or future purpose.

The regime will require a back-to-basics, root-and-branch overhaul in order to re-establish the principles of safeguarding life and property that, globally, all other fire services have retained.

The basic principles established by the Building Act 1946 were: preventing and reducing outbreaks of fire; protecting and limiting the spread of fire; and providing for safe exit by properly protecting means of escape; these remain the cornerstones of international fire safety.

As society and the built environment changes more rapidly than ever, we are encouraging more people to live longer and more independently in their own homes. Innovations such as Airbnb, self-storage and fragmenting ownership means we know less and less about what is actually within our buildings and premises. The consequences of innovation and complexity demand a more appropriate and sophisticated system of regulation, not deregulation.

The Grenfell Inquiry and Dame Judith's review of the Building Regulations will only examine parts of the story and should only represent part of the response. Successive governments' objectives and policy, local and central governments' emergency preparedness and the inadequate response to supporting the recovery of the local community demand much wider and more fundamental answers and changes.

In our recent book*, written before the Grenfell disaster but recently published, leading academics contend that the last 30 years has been a period of major change in the leadership and management of emergency services and Fire and Rescue Services in particular. It illustrates the complex challenges generated by operating within our national and local political contexts but emphasises the need to look at the wider picture and acknowledge historical antecedents. This is essential if we are to develop a truly robust and enduring system of fire safety fit for our future.

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**Fire and Rescue Services: Leadership and Management Perspectives* edited by Pete Murphy and Kirsten Greenhalgh is available now.