

Where are we two years on from Grenfell?

Dame Judith Hackitt – Chair of the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety.

Despite the fact the Review is complete and the recommendations are being implemented – all of them – I’m delighted to say by the Government, I think it’s really important we keep this dialogue going because the longer we go post-Grenfell, the more concerned I become that we will allow this to fall away and we will not respond appropriately to change this broken system or ours. We must rebuild the trust that residents, and the public more generally, no longer have in us and in the system to provide them with somewhere safe to live.

In addition to talking to different audiences about the Review I do still have a formal role in its implementation; my role now is to chair the Industry Safety Steering Group. The Group is comprised of senior people from industries other than the construction industry, and our task is to focus those who build and manage the buildings we’re all concerned about to drive culture change and change the way they see their role. At the heart of what we’re talking about here is the need for them to recognise that they are responsible for delivering buildings that are safe for people to live in. That’s not their focus at the moment, but that is where we have to drive the change to, that is where we have to get the construction and building management industry to focus its attention.

But let’s talk about residents, because I think this is a really, really important area, and certainly during conducting the course of my Review back in the latter half of 2017, I spoke to a lot of residents.

Let’s be positive first of all. I heard some very good practice. I spoke to some groups of residents for whom being part of a community in a high rise building was actually a very positive experience, they felt engaged, they felt their landlords cared about them – or their managing agents – whatever the managing structure was, they felt involved.

But equally I spoke to many other residents who had truly heart breaking stories to tell. Stories about being afraid, for their own safety, concerned about the state of the building, frustrated because they’d raised concerns and no one had listened to them, and concerned because they didn’t know where to go for answers.

SO, THERE IS A LOT THAT WE NEED TO DO.

I also feel that we have to recognise that as a result of Grenfell, people’s attitudes to fire safety have changed, and changed, forever.

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I will always remember the resident I met in Manchester who told me she had been out, since Grenfell, to buy a cat box, that is now by the front door. She said: “I don’t care what anyone tells me anymore. That cat box is there because if there’s a fire in this building, I’m not staying put. The cat’s going in the box, and we’re getting out.”

That I think reflects a change we’ve seen in people.

If we ask them to do things that don’t make sense, that doesn’t resonate, that’s not a good idea, they’re simply not going to do it. It’s really important that we recognise that this isn’t just about us satisfying ourselves that we have done the right things it is truly about rebuilding confidence and trust.

So what did my report say about this? It said, residents must be listened to. But more than that, they need to be engaged in the process. Also, and we must not forget this either, that they also have responsibilities. If we are going to make a new system more effective and better for everyone, part of our dialogue with residents must not just be about giving them the information that they need but is also about getting them to realise they are an integral part of that system and there are things that they can do, things that they can’t do, and things that they must do. So we really do need to make them part of keeping their buildings safe.

They have a right to know about the condition of the building they are living in and that will be an integral part of the process of regular reporting, on the condition of the buildings and sharing that information with residents. They need to know what the critical safety features are and there needs to be a system in place for them to raise their concerns and to know that they’re going to get them listened to and acted upon.

As I said, I have heard about good practice already. But there’s not enough of it. So the more we can build up these stories of good practice the more we can demonstrate, not just that things are possible, but that they are practical and they work, so the harder it will be for the laggards in the system to continue to sit on their hands and not do anything.

We are all going to have to challenge those who continue to perpetuate bad practice and the best way to do that is to show them what is possible and hold them to account when they are not doing similar.

There is a new regulatory regime coming that will be based, in the case of high rise buildings, round the safety case and make no mistake the new Regulator, the Joint Competent Authority, will involve residents in that process.

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Anyone who has ever been involved in an inspection by the Health and Safety Executive will know that they never take your word for it when you tell them that your management system for Health and Safety is good. They check with employees, whether what they've been told is actually happening in practice. They will do the same as part of that Joint Competent Authority when it comes to checking out whether what's written in the safety case is actually there in practice and whether the people who are part of the system, including residents, understand that, have been informed about it and know what they have to do.

ENGAGEMENT OF RESIDENTS WILL BE INTEGRAL IN OUR NEW REGULATORY SYSTEM.

For me what's most important is we shouldn't be doing it because the law tells us we have to. The reason we should be doing this, and the reason we need to engage and involve residents is because we've let them down and we have to rebuild trust and confidence in all of us, and in the whole system so that they not only feel safe, but that they're really part of the system. Not so that they feel that things are just done to them, or that they're ignored, or that they're not valued and don't matter. They do matter. They matter a lot. We're talking about their homes and communities. We owe it to them to rebuild confidence and trust and help them to feel safe.

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