

The importance of educating residents on the impact of their actions.

Nick Coombe – Protection Vice Chair, National Fire Chiefs Council

I think it was clear after what happened at Grenfell that residents felt they were mistreated and betrayed for a number of reasons. Our role is to try and regain that confidence. Some of you will be thinking, that's fine, but some people don't want to be engaged with. And we have to accept that as well, that not every resident wants to know everything. Some residents only stay for a few weeks at your building, depending on their circumstances. So, we need to be practical and pragmatic.

ENGAGEMENT AND LISTENING

For me there are three key areas. It's about clear lines of responsibility around what residents have to do and what Duty Holders have to do. Secondly resident engagement, which is about influencing on both sides, and thirdly residents' information, which is about responsible residents.

Any safety regime starts at the top of an organisation. Secondly, residents need to know their responsibilities. There's been a lot spoken about Duty Holder responsibilities, but residents need to know what their responsibilities are as well. In my experience in the Fire Service you have residents who do everything they can, you have some who do things in ignorance because they don't understand that what they do in their flat impacts on others, and then you've got a group of people who just want to do what they want to do. They're the difficult people to reach and they're the harder people to reach. If we can help the second category who don't know what they're doing is wrong that would be a really big win for the whole sector.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT?

Primarily this group need to know who is responsible for what, and how. We have a Housing Ombudsman, Registers of Social Landlords, and numerous Complaints Procedures. Fire Services have a procedure so that any complaint received is dealt with according to proper procedures, timelines and by positions of people in authority. As Grenfell highlighted residents were worried that if they made a complaint the landlord might take issue with them. So, we need to change the culture so that people can feel safe wherever they are.

We need to agree what to tell residents going forward. I've seen some very convoluted explanations about who to approach depending on the issue. Ideally, there should be a single point of contact. That could be the Duty Holder or a Property Manager or Managing Agent.

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When we talk about engagement with residents it needs to be at the very beginning. At the design stage. I hope that when the Joint Competent Authority looks at this it will insist that residents are consulted at the design stage because these buildings – many of which will last for a hundred years – will need to be flexible enough to accommodate the differing needs of families as they grow older. We have to future proof our buildings according to our residents' needs. Especially in the social sector, they're not always going to be young families with children. Children will grow up and leave but parents stay.

FIRES HAPPEN AROUND PEOPLE

That's why engagement is so vital. There are lots of examples of good practice – residents' meetings, block days where information is handed out, newsletters, leaflets. But it has to be a sustained effort. The senior management team have to buy into this long term. Governance is key here. This is not a quick fix.

Whenever you're doing major works on a building, you have to plan, consult and monitor. Rather than just share the before and after plans you also need to consider the situation whilst the works are going on. Will certain exits be shut off? Are things being moved around? Residents will need to know this stuff.

As soon as you share with people how any major works are going to be phased, week by week it naturally helps them know what is going on.

Moving on to information, what does 'safe' look like? Think of it from a resident's point of view. Bombarding them with information taken from the Fire Risk Assessment indicating there are numerous faults with the building – but that it is predominantly safe – show that to a lay person and they will only focus on the comments that make them jump to a conclusion they're living in a death trap. So, you have to explain what safe looks like. Sharing a Fire Risk Assessment on a portal is not properly disclosing to a resident everything they need to know.

Partnerships, too, are important. You cannot do this on your own. Fire Rescue Services want to help, Environmental Health Officers want to help, the Health and Safety Executive wants to help, and they all need to be engaged with you at the various stages of your information gathering. Also, learn from others, lots of people are doing really good work, share best practice. I'm hoping the JCA will share examples of what safe looks like when they work through their programme.

This Charter for a Responsible Resident is really important. I've seen residents use the water suppression pipe thinking it's an extra rail. I've seen a wardrobe put in front of a sprinkler without the resident realising it wouldn't possibly work with something in its way. So, the information shared with a resident has to be specific to them and their building.

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ENGAGEMENT AND VOICE ARE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS

You need to provide the resident an opportunity to give their opinion back. We all need to listen to what they have to say rather than just provide them with information.

Finally, we all know this isn't going to be cheap. Investment in people, in resources and thinking long-term are all going to now need a sustained effort. Pre-Grenfell the world wasn't all right and post 14 June 2017, a terrible fire changed our minds forever. The situation had been deteriorating for years and years. To fix it will take a long time. If you think this can be done in two- or three-years' time, you're in the wrong place.

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