

## **FIRE UN-SAFE: Cold and dangerous homes**

*The information and views below are based on what Fuel Poverty Action have been told while working to get insulation and affordable, well-functioning district heating systems in low and high rise mixed or social housing estates managed by housing associations or local authorities. We focus here on two estates: Orchard Village in Havering, and Pembroke Park in Hillingdon.*

### **Insulation**

With around 8,000 people dying of cold every year in the UK, appropriate insulation is desperately needed. Insulation is often missing or poor in both old and new buildings.

It is now known that many Housing Associations, local authorities and private developers have saved money by installing insulation and cladding which had not been tested and found fire safe, and which –whatever regulatory loopholes may be available in the UK– would not have passed building standards regulations in many other countries. Now, as cladding and insulation are removed to prevent further disasters like Grenfell, many more people will face freezing conditions and heating bills that they simply cannot afford. We believe that **until insulation is restored, the landlords concerned must reduce tenants' rent to allow them to heat their homes.**

The cost of retrofitting safe and effective insulation, must not be used as an excuse to demolish communities in favour of new developments, which often exclude the people now living there. **No regeneration should happen without the community's consent!**

### **Building standards and fire protection**

While Housing Association profits have soared, new builds are being constructed to appalling standards in terms of both fire safety and warmth, taking advantage of bad regulations and lack of enforcement (please see our [letter to Minister Claire Perry](#)). And no amount of engagement and pressure from residents seems to have the power to hold HAs to account.

The new build **Clarion Housing Group estate, Orchard Village** in Havering is a clear example of these failings. Residents report fire safety issues including: missing compartmentalisation and fire breaks, inadequate or missing fire doors, faulty smoke vents, alarms disconnected from mains, firemen's keys out of reach. New insulation is being retrofitted, yet they are putting on the same ACM (aluminium composite material) cladding, although it was already proven unsafe in post-Grenfell safety tests.

**A2Dominion's Pembroke Park estate** in Hillingdon, built by Taylor Wimpey, has a similar history of shoddy construction, failure to repair, problems with the district heating, faulty fire protection and alarms, which –even after Grenfell– have been remedied only slowly if at all:

*“Because the fire alarms and smoke alarms are not checked as per regulations, those that are on battery and others linked to the mains are starting to malfunction... The second issue related to a loud beeping sound from a unit in a shared owner block. A2 said it was a failing battery which was special and had to be ordered, as it was not kept in stock. Whoever came out was most incompetent and after 3 visits they decided it was not the battery but a malfunction... Many blocks are missing their fire log books, the logs are mostly not up to date, many fire cupboards are left unlocked and often open. One block does not even have emergency lighting” (Chair of Residents' Association).*

On Pembroke Park, the absence of insulation was witnessed by thermal imaging, years ago. Residents were told by the technical director of A2Dominion, that they were “heating the street”. Yet only one home has been insulated after the threat of legal action to protect a child with an acute respiratory illness; the rest of the estate was left to freeze.

Residents in homes built without proper oversight or accountability live with ill-fitting doors and windows, and chaos in sealed off spaces where you should find consistent insulation and fire breaks.

**Lots of failings that leave tenants cold also leave us vulnerable to fire!**

## Lack of response and compensation

The unaccountability experienced with HAs extends also to much Local Authority housing. Lambeth Housing Action and tenants on many estates there have struggled to get any movement on identified fire risks –except in one case where a TV team was due to make a visit. Elsewhere, promised action is reported to have “fizzled out”. In many LA and HA estates, residents have been left in utter confusion – what is safe, what is not, **why are fire crews still stationed at the foot of my building?**, how will residents be accommodated/compensated for being moved out of their homes, and from the huge disruption to their lives and futures resulting from previous and present money-saving policies for which they are in no way responsible?

## District heating (DH)

In relation to district heating and fire safety, we are particularly concerned about the **holes around pipes** routed through floors, walls etc., which are routinely not filled as required, and can act as a conduit for fire. It seems very likely that this was an issue in the internal spread of the fire at Grenfell Tower, where DH had been retrofitted. The lack of insulation around DH pipes has also been reported in Orchard Village where the pipes were fitted during construction of the estate. Both Pembroke Park and Orchard Village have faulty DH systems and residents suffer from outages, and high prices; the absence of fire protection is in line with an overall picture of unaccountability.

## Water

The whole of Orchard Village estate recently lost water for 23 hours –cold as well as hot– when a pump in the District Heating centre failed after a power glitch. They have been told that the fire services on this estate have independent access to water mains. Even if that is the case, if the water for homes is routed through district heating pumps there would be a huge problem in case of a fire, as malfunctioning pumps could affect the water supply for sprinklers and water supply to homes themselves. How many estates could be affected this way?

## Accountability

**Complex development plans and the chains of private contracts** issued by councils and housing associations are hugely prone to failure. Promises get fudged or are not kept about rehousing, right to return, facilities, and fire safety. **Lives are lost due to vested interests** of commissioning bodies, the perverse incentives of private inspectors to pass projects, neglect of quality in the rush to meet target costs and time deadlines, using contractors who have failed on other projects and still owe remedies, manipulation by developers changing their profitability projections and threatening to pull out unless standards or social housing quotas are lowered. We have seen examples of all of these recently in Elephant and Castle and other London developments.

**There can be no substitute for involving residents’ representatives.** But for residents it takes swathes of time to do the basics –gathering opinions from meetings, polls etc.– let alone following all the complex management processes and struggling to get heard. The fact that all this work is being done unpaid is a serious problem, as is the fact that people consulting residents are routinely careless about the time and convenience of residents’ hard-pressed representatives. **Consultations need enough time to study and respond.** In July, just days before the decision to privatise £2bn of council houses, public buildings and land, Haringey issued hundreds of pages for “consultation” on legal and technical plans. Instead, residents need the resources to evaluate proposals and to develop alternative ideas with **trusted independent advisers.** Without time and care to work with the reality of residents’ lives, availability and changing circumstances, consultation is token.

## Our questions

While some Housing Associations appear to have become nothing more than profitable developers whose view of social housing tenants is “not my problem”, we know there are HA staff at all levels for whom residents’ safety and well being is still a priority.

Listening to residents about the reality of life on our estates is absolutely crucial. **But for this listening to be more than a token exercise, it is equally important for HAs to tell residents what they themselves are currently doing and planning in relation to these issues, and listen to, respect and act on residents’ feedback.** FPA has not been able, before this think-tank, to consult the many TRAs and other organisations which have long been seeking answers from HAs. However, we would pose some initial questions to HAs that we hope this event can address:

- What are the plans for residents whose cladding has been removed and who will not be able to afford to heat their homes this winter?
- What are HAs’ policies in relation to replacing the cladding; will they still, as at Havering, use combustible materials?
- Are post-Grenfell inspections that are looking at fire safety probing the possible routes for fire around pipes and cables?
  - Are they checking for areas where insulation is missing or badly installed?
  - Are results being made public?
- Is anyone monitoring the responsiveness or otherwise of different HAs to residents’ complaints?
  - Is there an approved time-scale for responses to residents’ complaints on fire issues, insulation, and other health and safety issues, and a mechanism for recording and making public when and how these complaints are resolved?
- How will the people in HAs who have absorbed the lessons of Grenfell Tower prevent others in the sector from continuing along embedded and incentivised paths of unaccountability, cost-cutting, prioritising development, and procurement practices that favour contractors who put residents’ safety and financial security last?
- What capital resources will now be switched from building or acquiring new properties, as previously planned, and projected, to the urgent work of ensuring the health and safety of existing residents who have been endangered as a result of HAs’ policies to date?
- Will HAs continue to be guided by regulatory standards which have proved to be lethal in terms of fire and fuel poverty?
  - Or are they now adopting the more stringent rules applied in other countries (or better)?
  - On energy efficiency, are they reverting to the zero carbon homes regulations which were scrapped by the government in 2015, or, at least, accepting the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards for the private rented sector, from which they are currently exempt?

## The Lessons from Grenfell Think Tank 30–31 October 2017

A genuine exchange on the issues above is urgent, and we hope that time can be found at this event: some sessions scheduled appear on the face of it to be less urgent or appropriate to the purpose (eg HA tower block lettings and vetting policies) or even condescending (eg “why do residents need to get involved” – when so many highly engaged TRAs and individuals have worn themselves ragged pounding at the door to be heard). The staging of this Think Tank suggests some collective responsibility on the part of HAs which could help to strengthen the many people in the sector who are anxious to see genuine accountability and a new set of priorities post-Grenfell.