

Mirror image of Grenfell Tower - Spruce Court, Salford fears disaster

At a recent meeting in London between residents of Spruce Court, Salford, and former residents of Grenfell Tower, the Grenfell survivors said that hearing about Spruce Court sent chills up their spine, there were so many similarities. A response from the Deputy Mayor's office to questions from Fuel Poverty Action has failed to allay Spruce Court residents' fears.

The identical neighbouring building, Thorn, has the same problems, and other Salford buildings are also in danger.

Refurbishment, with ACM cladding

Grenfell Tower, a 23 storey tower block, was refurbished 2015-16 by Rydon, including replacement of windows, new district heating system, and installation of combustible ACM cladding chosen by Rydon under pressure from the Council to save on costs.

Spruce Court, a 22 storey tower block, was refurbished 2013-16 by Keepmoat in a PFI scheme, including replacement of windows, new NIBE heating system, and installation of combustible ACM cladding. Cladding has only been removed from the bottom three floors, with a two year schedule for finishing the work on this and surrounding blocks.

Windows

Grenfell Tower

A late change to the window position, moving it out from the solid concrete structure, created 'filled gaps' around the sides where fire could break through.

Spruce Court

Windows not fitted properly, not flush, not closing right, let in draughts and traffic noise. Regularly fall off their hinges, and one fell off completely. In June Pendleton Together sent a letter round telling Spruce Court residents to keep all their windows closed until further notice: impossible in the hot summer. Residents can't stay in their homes, can't cook, and can't survive in the heat if unwell.

Electrical surges

Grenfell Tower

Dozens of residents of Grenfell Tower suffered electricity power surges so strong that their appliances malfunctioned, overheated and emitted smoke a few years before the fire. Documents seen by the [BBC](#) revealed how 25 residents claimed compensation from the council following the surges in 2013. Some say electricity problems persisted into the months before June's fire.

[Grenfell Action Group blog, 2013](#): "The Grenfell Action Group believe that the KCTMO narrowly averted a major fire disaster at Grenfell Tower in 2013 when residents experienced

a period of terrifying power surges that were subsequently found to have been caused by faulty wiring. We believe that our attempts to highlight the seriousness of this event were covered up by the KCTMO with the help of the RBKC Scrutiny Committee who refused to investigate the legitimate concerns of tenants and leaseholders.”

Spruce Court

Repeated problems since refurbishment. In one case, a surge turned the hob on on a cooker, and then all the electrics in the flat cut out. Without checking the electrics, Pendleton Together electrician blamed the cooker. The tenant had to pay to get the cooker tested – it was just out of warranty. Nothing wrong with it. Other people had the same problem. Several times the whole block has had no power. No lifts, no explanation. Tenants have to walk down to bottom of building only to be told “there’s a problem with the electrics”. After Grenfell the HA said they will come round and check, but the outages continue.

At other times electrics have been affected by water from burst pipes: another frequent problem, flooding people’s walls, carpets and possessions. They are told it’s an old building that can’t cope with the power showers introduced with the refurbishment.

Basic fire protection:

Grenfell Tower

Multiple failures including:

Firefighting equipment at the tower had not been checked for up to four years; on-site fire extinguishers had expired, and some had the word "condemned" written on them because they were so old. Grenfell Action Group documented its attempts to contact KCTMO management; they also alerted the council Cabinet Member for Housing and Property but said they never received a reply from him or his deputy.

Fire alarms Residents did not hear an alarm on the night of the fire. [*The Times* reported:](#) “Fire alarms did not sound in Grenfell Tower on the night of the deadly blaze because they would have undermined the building’s “stay put” policy. *The Times* understands that the central-alarm system in the block was never intended to emit an alert to residents. Instead, the signal was relayed to a private fire monitoring company employed to watch multiple alarm systems from large buildings.

Doors Fire doors at Grenfell failed basic safety tests, resisting fire for only half the time intended; many front doors had no closers.

Access for fire engines Lack of access for firefighters was a major factor in preventing the fire from being dealt with early and effectively.

Evacuation policy The disastrous Stay Put policy in Grenfell Tower is well known. Grenfell also had no provision for evacuating residents who had particular problems getting out, because of young children, age or disability. The inquest at Grenfell saw testimonies from incident commanders who, due to not having the resources to evacuate everybody, were

forced to make the decision to rescue as many families with children as they could and leave the disabled people to die in their flats.

Other issues include: Fire lift failed, smoke removal system non-compliant, no wet rising main, no sprinklers.

Spruce Court

Multiple failures including:

Firefighting equipment inadequate. Residents know of no on-site fire extinguishers in Spruce Court. There is evidence that dry risers - the pipes necessary for bringing water up inside buildings - are not being regularly serviced as required and have been left unlocked, so they could be tampered with. The council say they are tested and certified every six months, but tickets on the risers said the last check was 2014. In some cases, their doors have been left open, rubbish put in them. Within a day or two after a tweet to the Salford mayor, workers came to service them. They said they do it every 6 months; when asked why they'd been left open the workers said a lock was not working; another one has no lock. A resident who asked to see copy of service record was told to ask the housing officer, who refused: they could not disclose this information to a "third party".

Fire alarms are in stairwells and can't be heard in the flats if windows are open (it's by a noisy A-road), or the television is on, or if you are asleep or hard of hearing. Repeatedly since Grenfell fire alarms have gone off and people are left in the building. Alarms are in stairwell. Tenants are told it's ok because they have smoke alarms in their own flats. In a letter to FPA the council say, "The fire marshals are equipped with claxons and these would be used in the event of an evacuation to alert residents. The fire marshals are the people who will raise the alarm in the event of an emergency. They will sound the claxons on corridors outside people's homes." Residents say it is not realistic to rely on marshals to run up to all the 22 floors and sound the claxon in case of fire. Marshals in any case are not equipped and are unlikely to be trained to work in buildings that are actually on fire. Multiple complaints and even raising this issue publicly in the media have not changed this. One year after the Grenfell fire, the council say they are "looking at installing sounders in individual flats".

In April 2018 residents were told that a **heat detector** would be placed in each flat linked to an external monitoring system. This has not yet happened.

Doors Emergency doors open inwards, not outwards as they should. Many fire doors on the stairwell are not closing properly and have a gap of about 2 cm, which would let smoke through. Some work has now been done on door closers. The main doors out of the building, inner lobby doors, and in Thorn an emergency fire door, have repeatedly failed. Residents are concerned about whether the electric opening system would work reliably in a fire to allow them to get out. Security guards are now not on duty 24 hrs, or replaced when they are on leave. The doors are supposed to open automatically in a fire or power outage but no one knows whether they would do so or not.

Access for fire engines depends on gates that are unreliable and frequently malfunction. In one recent instance, fortunately not serious, a fire engine was forced to wait an hour before gaining access as the gate could not be opened.

Evacuation policy

The council says a new evacuation policy, replacing “Stay Put”, includes provisions for evacuating vulnerable and disabled residents who receive a personal evacuation plan. Yet an ex Fire Safety Officer in Greater Manchester notes that under their new “Stay Safe” procedure, able bodied residents that are awake are advised to make their way out of the building if their flat is affected by fire or smoke. Meanwhile people who can’t self-evacuate, eg single parents with two or three children, elderly people who have trouble handling stairs and wheelchair users, are still told to Stay Put and hope somebody comes for them. He notes that, instead, each block should have a full escape strategy that gets every person out alive.

Other issues include: Fire marshals are supposed to be patrolling each floor hourly but are rarely seen – they mostly stay at the bottom and walk the stairwell, although the council say they are supervised and monitored; **24 hr security guard** cover has been reduced to 12 hours; there are no sprinklers - although these have now been promised; **lifts break down**, every couple of weeks (forcing residents to climb up to 22 flights with their shopping); no wet rising main (perhaps not required when block was built but required by current building regulations for blocks of this size); residents question: has the Council investigated smoke removal system, fire lifts, etc?

Unaccountability / Not listening to residents

Grenfell Tower

KCTMO – the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation that was supposed to be running the building in consultation with tenants proved totally unaccountable, and residents were forced to set up their own Grenfell Action Group. Housing managers were frightened of residents coming together and failed to recognise the existence and validity of residents’ voice, creating reasons why it could not be recognised. Housing officers failed to be of use to the community. Residents faced various forms of discrimination.

Repeated warnings, over years, from Grenfell Action Group and other residents, were treated with contempt by the TMO and Kensington & Chelsea Council, leading Grenfell Action Group to [conclude](#): “It is our conviction that a serious fire in a tower block or similar high density residential property is the most likely reason that those who wield power at the KCTMO will be found out and brought to justice! . . . We have blogged many times on the subject of fire safety at Grenfell Tower and we believe that these investigations will become part of damning evidence of the poor safety record of the KCTMO should a fire affect any other of their properties and cause the loss of life that we are predicting.”

Threats: In July 2013, after Grenfell Action Group blog repeatedly raised fire dangers, the council threatened the group's blogger with legal action, accusing them of "defamatory behaviour" and "harassment". Individuals raising issues were branded as trouble makers, talked about in derogatory language, and accused of being the only ones who had a problem. Two thirds of residents experienced being lied to, threatened, pressured or harassed during the building project. Threatening letters were sent to all tenants, and specific threats were made to spokesmen and women, some of whom [died](#) in the fire.

Spruce Court

Spruce Court is managed by Pendleton Together Housing Association on behalf of Salford Council. The residents association which should have oversight was dissolved by the Housing Association after the Chair got a dog, in breach of his tenancy agreement. The Housing Association said there were never enough residents present at meetings to elect another Chair so all meetings are unofficial and the group has no status. One reason why people stopped coming is because the HA closed the community room for refurbishment, and even when the room was ready it was not reopened for a long time. The housing officer would not give tenants the key or allow use of the room; after public pressure the property manager has said that the new Tenants Action Group can use the room at her discretion after filling in a long and difficult form each time, but only once without payment.

Residents are resorting to freedom of information requests for access to their block's fire safety and electrical reports. Refusing information on the grounds that residents are "third parties" (as above, re dry risers) contrasts sharply with the Hackitt Review recommendations, which include, "Clearer rights and obligations for residents to maintain the fire safety of individual dwellings, working in partnership with the dutyholder. This will include a combination of transparency of information and an expectation that residents support the dutyholder to manage the risk across the whole building".

Repeated warnings have been ignored. Concerned residents say, "People start off complaining, but get nowhere, and they get fed up, feel like they are hitting a brick wall. Then when individuals complain, they are told 'it's just you, you're always complaining'." Complaints about lack of action on cladding -- only removed from the bottom three floors -- and about fire alarms, fire marshalls, withdrawal of security, and many other issues have led nowhere. Repeated requests from residents for a meeting with the Housing Association have been refused. **The local MP**, Rebecca Long Bailey, asked for such a meeting, which she would attend; that too was refused, with the HA saying it would instead put letters through doors inviting residents to attend their daytime drop-in sessions.

Like Grenfell, Spruce Court residents had imposed on them without consultation a new **heating system** (in Grenfell's case a district heating system, in Spruce Court a NIBE system). This was supposed to be cheaper and greener but has led to [huge bills](#) and residents going cold.

Threats: Pendleton Together has created a culture of fear, which during the refurbishment also included backing intimidation by contractors Keepmoat. They took one elderly Scottish man to court for swearing at Keepmoat about their behaviour in his flat when he was not well. The court threw out the case and said it was wasting their time. Several other residents have been accused of being aggressive, in one case for going to Keepmoat's office to ask for action on the windows, which 15 residents had complained about. This tenant cannot now see the HA without a witness as they mis-record what happens. And after challenging an apparently racist decision about who can use the community room, she was told to only contact Pendleton Together through their solicitors.

Comparison prepared by Fuel Poverty Action, July 2018, information provided by Spruce Court residents. This is a work in progress, with further information still emerging and being gathered.