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1. After Grenfell Tower, can we make our tower blocks safe?;We know from past tragedies that fire safety costs money. But that shouldn't matter when lives are at stake

After Grenfell Tower, can we make our tower blocks safe?; We know from past tragedies that fire safety costs money. But that shouldn't matter when lives are at stake

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Body

The images from the Grenfell Tower disaster are harrowing, and immediately raise key questions for those responsible for the design and maintenance of the building. It will be some time before we know exactly how the fire started and the sequence of events that led to tragedy on such a scale. We do know that the rapid spread of flames, turning the building into a torch and filling the London skyline with smoke, was completely atypical of tower block fires, most of which are contained by designs which limit such a spread. Dany Cotton, London's fire commissioner, stated that in her 29 years of service she'd never seen anything close to a fire of this severity.

Related: [London fire: six dead, 20 in critical care after tower block blaze - latest updates](#)

The immediate emergency operation will focus, rightly, on the terrible human cost. But quickly attention will divert to factors that may have led to the disaster and conditions in the block that may have contributed to the fire intensifying beyond control.

Blazes in tower blocks are rare, but each, especially those that lead to fatalities, should add to the learning used to maintain safety in buildings of similar design.

In 2009, when Lakanal House in Camberwell, south London, caught fire, three women and three children died in what was at the time the worst ever tower block fire in the UK. Southwark council was fined £570,000 for breaching fire regulations, after the fire brigade arrived baffled to see how the flames ripped through the building.

Yet even then there were concerns about the lessons learned. Siân Berry, a Green London assembly member, today said the fact that central fire alarms and drills are still not required for residential buildings is deeply worrying. A report commissioned by Berry and London assembly colleagues after the Southwark fire raised huge concerns that many fire safety checks were inadequate and carried out by people without sufficient training, and that tenants were often not given sufficient information on fire safety protocol.

Protecting life should be paramount for the government, local authorities and landlords. In March this year, the Fire Risk Management Journal claimed that a review into fire safety regulations, prompted by the Lakanal House court case, was not being pursued with any great urgency, with the Department for Communities and Local Government only willing to say it would proceed "in due course".

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This matters. Currently, 4,000 tower blocks have the same building regulations applied to them as Lakeland House. Sometimes, it appears, the risks are heightened by the very attempt to make the blocks more liveable. Architect Sam Webb, who has long campaigned for greater fire and blast safety in tower blocks, told the Fire Risk Management Journal of his fear that there is a trade-off between fire safety and the materials used to construct more energy efficient buildings. "The materials are not fire-resistant and in some cases they're flammable."

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We depend on a collection of officials and experts to keep us safe. We cannot know at this stage how they performed with relation to maintenance and safety at Grenfell House. But we do know that lives cannot be protected without money and there is bound to be renewed discussion about the extent to which financial pressures have affected those who protect the public up and down the country.

Local authority budgets have been cut, fire brigade budgets have been cut, and social housing budgets have been cut. Fire safety and proper upkeep of housing, especially high density towers blocks, costs money. Without sufficient revenue, it becomes impossible to ensure corners aren't cut and upkeep isn't delayed and outsourced without proper oversight.

The London fire brigade, whose officers were deployed to Lakeland House and now to Grenfell, has been vocal about how stretched it has been following cuts and station closures. Fire services have been affected across the country. Many say they can't take more cuts without people dying. The figures seem to bear that out: last year saw a 21% increase in fire fatalities.

Related: What happened at Grenfell Tower? A visual guide

These are problems ordinary people have no power to solve, but already there are powerful accounts of how they reacted as the fire took lives and homes. Many eyewitnesses said they couldn't hear alarms, but were instead woken by neighbours hammering on their doors to wake them rather than focusing on their own escape. Some, it is said, were Muslim residents who were awake in the early hours having broken their fast during Ramadan. Dozens of people opened their homes to survivors, and community centres, mosques and churches opened early in the morning to offer tea, blankets and company.

Those who escaped will need immediate help and support. When disaster strikes, that is rarely the problem. But in the longer term they, and communities throughout Britain, will want assurances that the shortcomings that can lead to loss of life are addressed. That's where we keep falling short.

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