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GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY – CONSULTATION ON TERMS OF REFERENCE

SUBMISSION FROM ST HELENS RESIDENTS/ST QUINTIN AND WOODLANDS NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM

1. We are a residents association (and also a designated neighbourhood forum) of 420 residents in the area half a mile north of the Grenfell Tower, in North Kensington. The two bodies share the same membership (see at www.stgw.org and at www.sthelensresidents.org.uk).
2. We held one of our open meetings at St Helens Church hall on July 12th 2017, to discuss the aftermath of the fire and what we as local residents can do to help. As part of our discussion, we considered how the Inquiry's terms of reference could best be framed and what ground the Inquiry might cover. We offer our suggestions below.

Simple terms of reference

3. It was strongly felt at our public meeting that the terms of reference of the Inquiry should be kept short and simple, in order that the Inquiry can go where the evidence takes it. We noted that in the cases of the Scarman Inquiry on the Brixton Riots (1981) and the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1997) the terms of reference were very brief. In both cases these public inquiries went on to examine a wide range of important social issues, and the final reports in each case had a major impact on public policy making.
4. We recognise the risk that an open-ended public inquiry can take years rather than months (although the Scarman Report was completed in 5 months). An Inquiry that stretches over years would not be helpful in restoring public trust in North Kensington and beyond. We welcome the proposal that a first stage of the Grenfell Inquiry should report swiftly on the causes of the fire and on the urgent changes needed to Building Regulations at national level. We note that the Government has announced an independent review of Building Regulation separate from the Grenfell Inquiry and assume evidence from the latter will inform the former).

First stage of the Inquiry

5. We join others who have called for a review of the equipment available to London Fire Brigade. We also ask that evidence is taken on fighting tower fires from the air (and for rescuing potential victims from the air) in the light of international examples available.

Many local residents affected by the fire continue to believe that more lives might have been saved than proved the case at Grenfell.

6. London is unique within the UK in having a planning system whereby the Mayor of London at present takes decisions on granting planning permission on all developments over 30 metres high, outside the City of London. While it would have an impact on the development industry and on London's economy, we ask the Inquiry to call for evidence on the realism of an embargo on planning approvals for residential towers above the height at which the LFB can fight fires externally, or until such time as Building Regulations on external cladding and on compartmentalising the structure and means of escape have been reviewed and updated. This would help to restore public confidence in the planning system, and in the application of Building Regulations via building control enforcement, which is currently at a low ebb in this part of London.
7. Planning approvals have very recently been granted by the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation for two residential towers of 19 and 20 floors in height in Scrubs Lane W10, a mile from the Grenfell tower. A third such planning approval appears imminent. All three proposed buildings have a single staircase as their means of escape. The OPDC does not exercise Building Control functions and delegates these to LB Hammersmith & Fulham. The risks inherent in divided responsibilities between bodies required to exercise oversight will again occur, as happened at Grenfell.

Second stage of the Inquiry

Living in tall buildings

8. The current dysfunctions in the UK housing market are extensive and we recognise that many of these are beyond the scope of the Grenfell Inquiry. But there are some more specific areas which we feel could be usefully examined.
9. Even with tightened Building Regulations, we believe that the Grenfell fire will have a lasting impact on public acceptance of living in very tall buildings. For some, it is a choice to live 20 or more storeys above the ground. The high rise apartments involved will be well designed, well managed, and equipped with all the measures needed to prevent and control outbreaks of fire. But for the majority of Londoners a combination of planning policies and commercial drivers within the development industry are giving people a reduced choice of types of housing other than high rise accommodation. This applies whether the housing forms part of the rapidly growing 'build to rent' sector or social/affordable housing provided by housing associations.
10. RB Kensington & Chelsea, as our own borough, maintains planning policies that generally resist tall residential towers. We welcome the Council's early commitment to rethink its programme of estate renewal in the light of Grenfell. We ask the Inquiry to take evidence on the history of tall buildings in London (as an example of UK cities) and

to review why the number of tall residential towers diminished sharply after Ronan Point (1968) and remained low for several decades. We also ask the Inquiry to examine the trends of the last two decades on tall buildings in London, already well surveyed and documented by New London Architecture and others.

11. London's spate of tall buildings in recent years is an example of major change that many Londoners feel they were never consulted on, nor asked what outcome they wanted? This type of fracture between citizens and public authorities generates disillusionment and distrust, which turns to anger and resentment when loss of life on the scale of Grenfell takes place.

Increasing densities and building heights in London

12. All over London, 'estate renewal' programmes continue to proceed on the basis that greatly increased densities and resultant building heights are an inevitable price to pay for generating the investment needed to refurbish or rebuild housing stock. With the London Plan under review there is brief window of opportunity for rethinking how London should grow..

Reduction in stable residential communities

13. As we understand, many residents of Grenfell were long term and there have been numerous reports of 'good neighbourliness' amongst survivors of the fire, and amongst those who obeyed instructions to 'stay put' only to lose their lives. It must also be recognised that the Council's apparent inability to confirm who was normally resident in the building (as opposed to visiting for the evening) became an issue in the days after the fire.
14. We are aware that examination of the nature and extent of sub-letting is an issue which needs to be approached with sensitivity. It is one that applies to all sectors of the central London housing market, and no section of the community should be stigmatised in discussing the forces that lead to 'unofficial' sub-letting. In Kensington, there are many property owners at all income levels who routinely breach legislative restrictions (or the terms of their lease or mortgage agreement) by using forms of sub-letting, including AirBNB and agencies such as One Fine Stay.
15. The Inquiry will no doubt be examining the extent to which an element of floating or transient population living within Grenfell, reflecting the huge pressures on accommodation in central London, was a contributory factor to the number of deaths. Commonsense suggests that lack of familiarity with a building by some of those living within it cannot have helped. Previous reluctance by some building occupants to allow entry to their homes by various forms of 'officialdom' may also have been a factor in poor management of fire prevention measures.

The complex accountabilities between the Council and the K&C TMO

16. Our resident's association/neighbourhood forum is far less qualified than many other local organisations to comment on failures of building management and maintenance by the KCTMO, or poor communication between landlord and tenants at Grenfell Tower. But from what we have read and heard, we cannot help feel that the complex relationship between council and TMO (the latter designed to be an 'arms-length' organisation) must have been a significant factor in creating the scenario that led to the disaster. From the commissioning and contracting processes involved in the refurbishment of the building, to the response after the fire, it would seem that the Inquiry will need to devote much effort to examining this relationship, and drawing out lessons for local authorities across the UK.
17. In the case of Grenfell, there were residents groups and local councillors active in trying to obtain answers from the Council and the TMO on the details of refurbishment work on the building. The KCTMO website explains that although a commercial company, it is required by its contractual arrangements with the Council to provide information as required for RBKC to respond to FoI and EIR requests. We suggest that the Inquiry looks into whether this happened, to the satisfaction of those submitting any such requests.

Emergency response and civil contingency planning at RBKC

18. We are aware of the duties and expectations placed on local authorities by the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act. In a London Borough context, London-wide 'resilience' arrangements are also well established. For the reassurance of all Borough residents, we would want the Inquiry to investigate and explain the acknowledged inadequacy of the Council's response on the morning of the fire and the immediate days thereafter.
19. It hard to understand why, on the evening of the first day of the Grenfell tragedy, the Council seemed not to appreciate that it was dealing with far more than the challenge of finding hotel accommodation for a night or two (as all local authorities are accustomed to doing when a residential building becomes unusable). In this case the Council must have known from the start that it was not in a position to deal with requirements replacing the range of identity documents needed to exist at all in today's environment, to access bank accounts and welfare benefits and to carry out life's most basic activities.
20. It was reported in the days immediately after the fire that the Council advised its own officers not to identify themselves as RBKC staff for fear of violence and reprisals from the public. The same has been said of KCTMO. If such stories are true, they show a breakdown of trust and communication between local authority and the public that had reached very extreme levels. Confirmation or refutation of these accounts would be welcomed locally, as an indication of the scale of change in culture needed at the Town Hall.
21. The Council has built up good relationships with many voluntary community organisations over the years. Along with local churches and faith groups many such organisations had to capacity to offer, and many were actively involved in the days after

the fire. There seemed a lack of co-ordination of such efforts from the emergency room set up at the Town Hall. This may have been because those RBKC staff in the emergency response team were not familiar with the contact details and range of organisations in North Kensington, or simple lack of suitable senior staff to do the co-ordinating. Either way, volunteer resources available immediately on the ground had to do their own self-organising with little direction from RBKC.

22. The apparent unwillingness of the council to accept offers of help from other local authorities, or to trigger London-wide and national resilience arrangements for several days, has regrettably caused a widespread rift between North Kensington residents and the Council. It has reinforced an impression of a local authority that fails to understand or care for its residents -- one that assumed Grenfell occupants to have other accommodation to go to and other means of accessing funds, when left with nothing of their home or possessions.

We will follow the progress of the Inquiry and will contribute evidence on any subject which looks as though it may be helpful the work of the Inquiry.

Henry Peterson, Chair St Helens Residents Association/St Quintin and Woodlands
Neighbourhood Forum
August 2017