

Grenfell Tower

What Lessons Can We Learn?

By *David Zussman, Community Housing Aotearoa*

David Zussman *reflects on his recent trip to his home town of Manchester and attending the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) Conference.*

I arrived in Manchester early on Friday, 17 June. It was great to be home and to be with my family. The fire at *Grenfell Tower* had only just been put out and was still smouldering. This awful tragedy played out during my visit and provided a powerful backdrop to day three of the *CIH Conference*.

The very last session of the conference addressed the UK community housing sectors' response to this fire – which was

a very avoidable event. From a panel of representatives, *Sam Webb*, an architect and one of the UK's leading experts on post-war social housing, spoke with a level of power, empathy, distress, and knowledge that stood out for me from just about everything else at the conference.

“We are still wrapping post-war high-rise buildings in highly flammable materials and leaving them without sprinkler systems



“The tragic fire is a symbol of all that is wrong in Britain today. Growing inequality and poverty have been thrown into sharp relief as some of the poorest in our society have died and suffered because of possible negligence and lack of investment following years of government cuts. I’m sure that the Public Enquiry will discuss many reasons for the disaster but there is no doubt that the long term neglect and demonising of social housing and its tenants is one of them.

Tom Murtha, UK social housing professional



installed, then being surprised when they burn down,” Sam Webb commented¹.

It was made very clear to conference participants that sprinklers work and save lives – end of story. And it was pointed out that the cost of a retrofit for a Sheffield tower block of 43 units at a unit cost was £1,150 per unit. Not a great amount when it saves lives.

As an architect and fire safety expert providing advice at the Lacanal fire inquest in 2008 where six people died, *Sam Webb* could name all the people who died, knew exactly where and how they died. The recommendations of the subsequent

inquest were not implemented – although they probably will be now. *Webb* surveyed hundreds of residential tower blocks across the country in the early 1990s and presented a damning report² to the *Home Office*, which revealed that more than half of the buildings didn’t meet basic fire safety standards. He said: “We discovered a widespread breach of safety, but we were simply told nothing could be done because it would ‘make too many people homeless’.”

On the *Grenfell Tower* fire Sam commented: “I suspect it would be one of the biggest fire disasters in British history. This is a fire that need never have happened.”

1. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/14/disaster-waiting-to-happen-fire-expert-slams-uk-tower-blocks
2. www.architectsjournal.co.uk/home/over-half-of-council-towers-pose-a-fire-risk/5205197.article

The CEO of one of the biggest UK housing associations commented that it could have been any of them, and at an earlier session a presenter had commented that providing a home was a life changing event, but that it was also a big responsibility.

What does this tragedy mean for the New Zealand community housing sector?

This made me think about how we should respond to ensure fire safety here in New Zealand – we may not own or manage tower blocks at this stage, but none of us can afford to neglect our responsibility for tenant safety.

Though unlikely, it would be catastrophic if a similar event were to happen here and it is important that we consider the following points in our regular reviews of fire safety monitoring:

- ✓ Are inspections and fire drills up to date?
- ✓ Are we compromising on fire safety? Have we reviewed and considered any outstanding maintenance and safety recommendations and made them a priority?

- ✓ Do our tenants and staff feel safe? Do they have exit plans and are they aware of the safety systems that are in operation?
- ✓ Are daily inspections being undertaken in emergency or transitional housing facilities?
- ✓ Are smoke alarms, extinguishers, fire blankets and other fire safety requirements checked regularly?
- ✓ Does the building design and structure comply with building codes?

There is immense pressure on the UK community housing sector to build to scale and respond to the housing crisis that they are experiencing after years of under-supply – sound familiar? Safety, quality and volume were highlighted, in that order, as the guiding priorities, but it appears that safety was not given the priority it was due. Let's not make the same mistake.

This is also a good time for us to consider what we need to be cognisant of here in New Zealand and what we need to be doing. *Dr Geoff Thomas*, Senior Lecturer in Structures and Fire Safety at *Victoria*

University of Wellington's School of Architecture, says that a similar situation is unlikely to happen here: "With automatic sprinklers and without a 'defend in place' evacuation strategy, a similar disaster to Grenfell Tower is unlikely to occur in New Zealand."

He says it is more important to address the issues we do face in ensuring buildings are built and maintained to comply with building codes and older buildings are upgraded so they stay safe from fire.

The Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment is currently seeking feedback³ on the proposed design guide for *Fire Safety: Residential Community Housing* with the consultation period will running until 11 September this year. A categorisation method has been developed in the proposed design guide that takes into account the differing needs of occupants and each category has a gradual increase in the level of fire safety.



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Faced with a housing crisis, the United Kingdom now has its 15th Housing Minister since 2000 and *Brexit* is set to dominate the bureaucratic resources of government. In the recent UK election housing tenure was seen as an influential guide to voting and not surprisingly, renters voted 50/30 in favour of Labour while home owners voted 50/30 for Conservative. Of more significance is the additional 8% of renters who voted in this election.

Shift from social to affordable housing

There has been a big shift towards the provision of affordable housing, considered as rental at 80% of market rent, and away from social housing. This is driven by lower grant subsidies for building new houses and a 1% a year rent reduction for Housing Associations driven by the increasing cost of *Housing Benefit*⁴.

New social housing for rental is at the lowest level on record⁵. For

3. www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/building-construction/consultations/consultation-fire-safety-residential-community-housing-proposals
4. www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/soaring-rents-and-low-wages-fuel-25bn-housing-benefit-bill-a6831771.html
5. www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/new-social-rented-homes-at-lowest-level-than-any-other-year-on-record-51020

2016, 944 social rentals were funded by the *HCA (Homes and Community Agency)* and the *GLA (Greater London Authority)* – a 98% drop over the last seven years. Overall, the total number of affordable housing completions increased by 25% to 27,792 as homes available as affordable rental replace homes for social rental.

A visible increase in homelessness

Combined with a whole raft of welfare reforms and austerity measures there has been a massive increase in homelessness, doubling since 2010, and very visible on the streets of Manchester.

Mergers and retaining social mission

There has been a trend of Housing Associations merging together with one of the largest mergers being between *Affinity Sutton* and *Circle Housing*. This created the *Clarion Housing Group*⁶ managing 115,000 houses and with a development plan to build 50,000 new homes over the next 10 years: “Clarion

Housing Group will be the largest housing association in the country and one of the largest house-builders in Britain. It will more than double the supply of new homes that the two former organisations could build – without relying on any government subsidy. The *Group* will prioritise affordable housing with around two-thirds of its programme for affordable rent and low cost home ownership, helping to tackle the housing crisis head on.”

The Housing Association sector has been challenged about losing sight of its social mission and core values as it moved to affordable housing and left its social housing tenants to become “demonised” by the Conservative government, according to *Tim Murtha’s* blog⁷ and in the *YouTube* trailer for the independent film *Dispossession – The Great Social Housing Swindle*⁸.

Tenant Scrutiny Panels

Tenant involvement has always been an integral part of social housing in the UK and tenant scrutiny⁹ is taking this to another

6. www.clarionhg.com/about

7. tommurtha.wordpress.com

8. www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AB7WR97p7s

level. This has been driven by the move towards co-regulation requiring social landlords to monitor themselves and to be held to account by tenants. It is a way to give tenants and customers greater influence and establishes landlord accountability. This is an opportunity to develop active partnership between tenants, other customers, and landlords to deliver excellent services.

Digital platforms and customer service

Customer service and digital platforms remain at the forefront of service delivery. Even the smallest Housing Associations (2,000 units) have their own app allowing tenants to check their rent statements, pay



rent, report and track a repair, and provide feedback.

The introduction of *Universal Credit* (one monthly payment of all benefits to tenants and direct rent payments only in exceptional circumstances) means that money management is becoming a core front line service.

Mutualisation – co-ownership by tenants and employees

This new model of ownership for community housing¹⁰ appears to be at the leading edge of tenant empowerment and an emerging trend in the sector.

*Phoenix Community Housing*¹¹ (Lewisham, London) provides an example of the benefits of a large scale voluntary transfer and of an organisation that encourages residents to become shareholders – both the Chair and Vice Chair of the Board are residents.

*Bromford*¹² is a social enterprise organisation that has replaced tenancy managers with neighbourhood coaches.

9. www.cih.org/resources/PDF/scotscrutiny/Scrutiny%20Guide%20Complete%20FINAL.pdf
10. [www.ils-forschung.de/files_projekt/pdfs/Case Study Rochdale.pdf](http://www.ils-forschung.de/files_projekt/pdfs/Case%20Study%20Rochdale.pdf)
11. www.phoenixch.org.uk
12. www.bromford.co.uk