



Anne Power

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## The lessons from the Grenfell Inquiry that we already knew

*Anne Power reflects on the publication of the Grenfell Inquiry, and highlights that one of the critical lessons learned, namely that multi-storey estates need hands-on, ground level management, with locally-based staff, was already being argued for before the tragedy ever happened.*

The final report of the Grenfell Inquiry, published on September 2 is a monumental achievement. It documents, in over 1700 pages, the disastrous mistakes, dishonesty, and carelessness of many key actors that led to the ghastly fire that consumed the 23-storey tower block in West London on the June 14 2017, a tragedy that ended 72 lives.



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I was involved in the Grenfell fire tragedy from its outbreak. I was running a **residential workshop** for 40 regeneration specialists from all over the country, at Trafford Hall, home of the National Communities Resource Centre. I was woken up early on June 14 by a helper telling me that a tower

block was on fire in West London. By the time we met for our first session that morning, all the participants were caught up in the increasingly horrifying pictures and reports from the scene of the fire in North Kensington. I felt we had to carry on with the workshop as there was nothing we could do to help immediately from Chester. One of the workshop's main topics was how multi-storey flats on social housing estates should be run. The overwhelming consensus among participants was that all multi-storey blocks of flats, of which there are at least 30,000 in England alone, need hands-on, on-site managers, caretakers, wardens, and concierges. They can't be left to run themselves.

Over the days following the fire, the full scale of the disaster became clear. There was widespread panic among residents of the Lancaster West Estate where Grenfell Tower is located. The managers, Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) were driven off the estate by angry residents. In fact, KCTMO was never a legitimate "tenant management organisation"; it was an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) of the Council, **masquerading as** 'led by tenants'.

The Local Government Association (LGA) brought in the "Gold Command", an emergency force of Chief Executives from London boroughs, and senior officials from the LGA, hastily convened to run the disaster-hit estate. Local churches and the local mosque opened up all their spaces – normally places of worship – for those made homeless by the fire to take refuge. Literally mountains of clothes, blankets, food, and toys were donated by well-wishers, piled high in community spaces and overflowing onto the estate outside. The seeming chaos was gradually brought under control by nightly meetings of residents of the estate, sharing their grief and fury at how let down they had been, and searching for ways forward.



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LSE had been contacted by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the landlord, to see if anyone could help. Given my experience of working with housing estate communities, I was asked by the LSE's HR division if I might be able to support the residents of Lancaster West Estate. I agreed. A meeting was held at LSE with residents' representatives, the head of the Gold Command,

and two drafted-in expert counsellors, one from an organisation supporting public health, the other from a trauma specialist, and myself. Our aim was to devise a plan for the estate that would calm the overwrought atmosphere, work with the residents, organise and manage the crucial elements of running a large estate such as repairs and cleaning. It was vital to pull together the multiple services involved – the NHS, public health, fire safety, schools, police, emergency repairs, and many council departments, as well as government – to provide access to accommodation for those who lost their homes or were unable to access their homes until the burnt-out Tower was secured.

Based on our earlier [research](#) into neighbourhood management, covering all these functions, we produced a clear idea of how neighbourhood management could work in the situation facing Lancaster West, with its 795 units. We convinced the Gold Command, with backing from the residents, that neighbourhood management could be their way best forward. They put our proposal to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and it was accepted. The plan was for there to be a Neighbourhood Manager, appointed and funded by the borough, with a budget to hire Housing Officers, Caretakers, a repairs team, and Community Support Workers – in all about 15 staff. This localised, ring-fenced, estate-based neighbourhood management service proved to be cheaper than the highly centralised and ineffective, borough-wide ‘Tenant Management Organisation’.

The outcome of that decisive meeting at LSE was the formation of the [Lancaster West Neighbourhood Team](#), based on the estate, which has now functioned for nearly seven years. Over this time, order has gradually been restored to the estate; the worst damage and disrepair is being remediated; the Neighbourhood Team is everywhere to be seen on the estate. Many of the staff are drawn from the estate itself. The goal is to make Lancaster West a showcase for how to restore, renovate, and run a complex, multi-storey estate – a model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The current neighbourhood model at Lancaster West directly harks back to the workshop that took place on that fateful day of the fire in June 2017.



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Sir Martin Moor-Bick's landmark final report of the four-year Grenfell Inquiry into the fire, sets out a clear and detailed record of all aspects of the tragic fire and what led to it: What happened? Who was responsible? What must change? The report makes 58 recommendations. It is striking that the work of the [Lancaster West Neighbourhood Team](#) broadly reflects many of its recommendations: understanding who its residents are, their cultural and religious requirements, and what vulnerabilities they may have; establishing and maintaining strong partnerships with local voluntary, community, and faith organisations; embedding local people into the Neighbourhood Team; and building trust as a key part of its work. They strongly reinforce the idea of having responsible, local staff, on the ground on estates, to manage multistorey blocks. It is important to look forward as the Neighbourhood Team does, as well as learn the lessons from looking back, as the landmark Grenfell Inquiry report does.

The crucial question now is whether the government will enact all the recommendations of the report, in order to guarantee that multistorey rented housing, owned and run by councils and housing associations, will be managed on a neighbourhood basis. This would be a well overdue and positive outcome of the horrific tragedy of Grenfell.

A critical lesson from the Grenfell tragedy and its aftermath is that multi-storey estates of rented homes needs hands-on, ground level management, with locally-based staff responsible for making sure that systems work in complex buildings, particularly as residents' homes are stacked on top of each other, and their survival is at stake. Tragically, this was already known to be the case before the events of June 14.

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### About the author



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