

Homes and Housing Delivery Policy Committee

20 September 2024

Public Forum – Statements



Public forum statements have been received as listed below (full details are set out on the subsequent pages):

1. Nigel Varley
2. Shaban Ali

Please note: The views and information contained within these public statements are those of the individuals concerned and not of the Council.



Statement 1 – Nigel Varley

In the wake of the report on the Grenfell Tower disaster, Bristol City Council needs to consider its relevance and whether we have not had a similar disaster is more a matter of luck than judgement.

Words used to describe the causes of the disaster are incompetence, neglect, dishonesty and indifference. To what extent do they apply in Bristol?

Since the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, questions had been asked by Bristol Council about the safety of the cladding on Bristol's tower blocks. We were assured that the cladding was safe because "it was not the same type and design" as that on Grenfell Tower. As late as July 2022 the following statement was in a letter I received from the BCC Asset Management Team.

"We would like to take this opportunity to reassure you that the cladding system for Gilton House is very different from the type used on Grenfell Tower. We have not used the aluminium composite material (ACM) and it is not the same design. We are confident that our cladding systems perform well in real fire situations, and past experience has tested this on a number of occasions."

BCC Asset Management Team 13/07/22

Not being the same type as that on Grenfell Tower is no guarantee that it is safe. 38 blocks in Bristol have EPS cladding. One look at EPS is enough to see that it is not safe and plenty of expert evidence supports that. The argument is that it is safe if encased in concrete but there has to be regular maintenance to ensure that it is not cracking or flaking.

To refute the charge of incompetence and neglect, BCC must show that it carried out regular checks on EPS-clad blocks. To refute the charge of indifference it must explain what detailed investigations were made when questions were raised by tenants. Were the reassurances based on evidence or wishful thinking? Or was it based on an attitude towards council house tenants that we could easily be fobbed off?

On the charge of dishonesty, there needs to be an investigation as to why, when the dangers of EPS cladding were known, was it fitted to 38 Bristol blocks of flats? Did council officers know of the risks of EPS cladding and still go ahead in ordering it? If not, what efforts did they make to check? Did they know that the assurances they gave to tenants were not true?

Two fires at the Twinnell and Eccleston blocks in the autumn of 2022, resulting in one death, showed that the cladding was not safe. Then that the Council decided to replace it in 38 blocks over a 10-year period. Extra interim safety measures, including a very expensive 'waking watch', were put in.

This raises further questions. At what rate is cladding removal taking place? How many have been done so far? How safe are the blocks which still need to be done? Could fire marshals cope with a fire which spread like the recent one in Dagenham and could the Fire Service evacuate up to a hundred or more people, some with restricted mobility, from blocks many of which have only one staircase? Why is there confusion about "stay put" or "get out now" evacuation policies? Are the Fire Service ladders and cherry-pickers big enough to reach the highest block of flats?

Inflammable cladding creates the risk of fire spreading externally at blocks. There are serious questions about the dangers of it spreading internally. Do flat doors fit and close properly to be resistant to flame and smoke for 30 minutes? If not, then the "stay put" advice is a death trap. Are there refuges and

emergency exits? Is the new mobility scooter policy achievable? What progress is being made with installing sprinklers?

Bristol City Council will say that it has policies on all of these. How long will it take to implement them and how will risks be mitigated in the meantime? Why has it taken a disaster to deal with fire safety risks? That they were not dealt with years ago raises the charges of negligence and incompetence.

There is a further matter which endorses the charge of dishonesty and indifference. Blocks of flats have, by law, Fire Risk Assessments every year. Bristol City Council does not make its tenants aware of their existence or make them easily accessible. For a time, the Council withheld access to them altogether on the spurious and dishonest grounds of data protection. FRAs identify risks and give a deadline to remedy them, usually six months. In at least one case, and probably many others, the recommendations have not been implemented after two years. When the Fire Service was requested to enforce an FRA, it did so only for breaches of building laws. A risk is risk. Avon Fire and Rescue Service is the body responsible in law for enforcing fire safety on the local authority so why is it not more proactive?

I believe that the charges of dishonesty, indifference, neglect and incompetence apply to Bristol City Council and it is by luck rather than judgement that there has not been a disaster on the scale of Grenfell Tower here. In its defence, the Council will claim poverty and that is the reason why Bristol and every other public housing provider in the country has neglected its housing stock and looked for the cheapest option. The chickens of years of austerity and under-funding have come home to roost. My problem with Bristol City Council is that its officers and councillors have been unwilling to be up-front about problems and join with tenants to campaign for proper funding to make our homes safe. Instead, they have tried to cover up. This shows a dishonesty and a disdain and disrespect for its tenants which, in the end, puts our lives at risk.

Statement 2 – Shaban Ali

During the structural repairs at Barton House, I requested that not only my door but also my neighbors' doors be replaced. I emphasized to Fiona Lester that it's the smoke, not just the fire, that endangers lives. Although my door was changed, my neighbors' doors remain as they are, with large gaps that risk our safety. This shows the council's willingness to gamble with our lives by forcing us to return to Barton House under unsafe conditions.

Outstanding Concerns:

- Windows:

When will the windows be replaced? They have gaps, allowing smoke and wind to enter the flats, further compromising our safety.

- Cost of Heating:

The gaps in the windows are also costing residents—many on low incomes and with 50% of children living in poverty—huge amounts of money to heat their homes.