

## The Hackitt fire safety report and challenges posed by tenants

In December Judith Hackitt published her [interim report on building regulations and fire safety](#). It provides an evaluation of regulation and where responsibilities lie, suggesting that there is much room for improvement.

**Article date: Thursday, January 25, 2018 - 16:00**

The report points out that safety does not depend simply on getting the design, materials and construction methods right, but on its management during the whole lifecycle of the building. The finger of blame has previously been pointed at construction and refurbishment failings. Criticism has focused on cladding systems on high-rise flats and whether the provision of sprinklers should be mandatory. However, we must remember that residents have a duty of care to their neighbours too.

Housing associations are in a constant battle with some residents who block open fire doors and use hallways and stairs to store belongings that obstruct escape routes and fuel fires. Others refuse to smoke only in designated areas and clog up smoke detectors with socks to defeat alarms. Unofficial DIY projects can breach property compartmentalisation. People with mental health, drug or alcohol issues sometimes have difficulty understanding or following safety advice. How do you educate residents in fire safety? There's no easy answer.

Problems are not caused only by residents. Big housing associations have thousands of properties, requiring large maintenance teams. They contract many tradespeople, which brings the challenge of keeping track of whether the right materials are used and checking that fire compartmentalisation isn't compromised.

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One of the most confusing aspects of fire safety for residents is evacuation procedures, particularly the "stay put" method. Based on the premise that fire doors provide 30 to 60 minutes of protection, many mobility-impaired residents are given personal emergency evacuation plans that require them to stay in their homes and wait for the fire service to rescue them. It is a procedure cited as contributing to some of the Grenfell Tower deaths. Some residents who develop mobility problems that make their flats unsuitable can be reluctant to move yet cannot be forced to, even though they are potentially placing themselves and fire officers at risk.

A "stay put" policy also brings management problems. Some fire services are reticent to engage with this procedure. Fit and previously mobile residents can develop problems that require a sophisticated monitoring process. Maps of the premises marking "stay put" residents can be left on site and kept up to date, but how do you manage short-term absences? Clearer advice and a standard approach for evacuation methods from fire authorities is needed.

It is hoped that the Hackitt review and the separate inquiry led by Sir Martin Moore-Bick into the circumstances surrounding the Grenfell fire will address these significant issues. We need greater clarity on when to apply a "stay put" policy or when another evacuation system is safer. We must seek better ways to engage residents and educate them on fire safety. The problem is that fires remain rare and such arrangements are not needed until they are vital; so how do you keep them fresh in people's minds?

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