

Local Government Association (LGA) response to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry consultation on terms of reference of the Inquiry

27 July 2017

About the Local Government Association (LGA)

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We work with councils to support, promote and improve local government.

We are a politically-led, cross party organisation which works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

Summary

The LGA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Inquiry's terms of reference, and will be looking to support the Inquiry as it starts its investigations. It is vital that the Inquiry is able to conduct its work both thoroughly and speedily.

Publishing an interim report will be helpful in establishing immediate priorities for work by the government, local authorities, other landlords, the fire and rescue service and the building industry. As work is already underway across a number of areas, including the need to address any fire safety issues identified in other tower blocks, we believe the interim report should identify gaps in existing responses to the Grenfell Tower fire but which need to be addressed in order to ensure such a tragedy will not happen again.

An immediate priority in our view is an urgent review of the building regulations and the approved documents supporting them. This review should start at once, but we believe the Inquiry could usefully point in its interim report to key areas of complexity and potential confusion in the regulations which need to be addressed.

Local government has a wide remit including: in the immediate aftermath of emergencies as a category 2 responder; in providing assistance to people and communities that are displaced; in providing temporary accommodation and permanent resettlement where appropriate; and more generally in providing a strategic lead for housing in their area.

It will be important as findings and recommendations emerge from the Public Inquiry that they are presented in the context of an understanding that the actions of a single authority cannot be seen to be representative of the sector.

Response to questions

Q1. What do you think the Inquiry should cover?

The rapid spread of the fire to the whole of the Tower and the resulting loss of life raise obvious questions around fire safety in tower blocks. The inquiry must consider what general lessons there are for fire safety and fire prevention in England arising from the tragic loss of life at Grenfell Tower. In particular the LGA believes the enquiry should consider whether the existing legal framework for fire safety is robust enough to address all the fire safety issues that may arise in tower blocks where the presence of leaseholders may have implications for the introduction of fire prevention measures and enforcement of fire safety principles in the block as a whole.

Additionally the Inquiry should consider what impact successive governments' policies on social housing and its funding have had on fire safety and fire prevention measures, and whether any changes would improve fire safety in tower blocks.

The ability to convert office space into residential premises under the permitted development process also has implications going forward for the enforcement of fire safety standards by local authorities or fire and rescue services when neither may be aware that there has been a change in use of a building. The interaction between the current planning regime and fire safety in tower blocks should also be an issue considered by the Inquiry.

One aspect of the fire Grenfell Tower fire was its spread over the external walls of the block. This has implications for building regulations which have specific requirements to try and stop this from happening. In our view the Inquiry should consider how easy it is to use, understand and comply with the building regulations and the approved documents supporting them, especially the section in Approved Document B (Fire Safety) Volume 2 relating to the installation of cladding and insulation on external walls of buildings. The inquiry should also consider whether changes in the building control regime to create a competitive market have impacted on the enforcement of building regulations.

In the process put in place by government to identify tower blocks which may have unsafe systems of cladding and insulation, local authorities have adopted a strategic coordination role in relation to housing in their area, working with registered social landlords and private landlords. The LGA believes it would be helpful as part of the wider work of the Inquiry if it considered how as housebuilders, planners, place-shapers, regulators and as responsible guardians to the vulnerable and homeless local authorities can contribute to ensuring there is good quality and safe housing to rent and own in their areas.

As recommendations emerge from the Public Inquiry it will be necessary to consider the financial implications and how these should be met.

Q2. Is there any type of evidence that you think is essential for the Inquiry to obtain?

In developing the interim report and the recommendations for the final report, the Inquiry needs to draw on evidence from local authorities (for example building control and housing departments) and fire and rescue services about:

- the building regulations and fire safety frameworks and procurement processes;
- how these work in practice;
- what issues result from them which impact on improving fire safety in tower blocks; and
- any other general or broader points that need to be considered.

Q3. What should the Inquiry deal with in its interim report? What should be left for the main report, so the interim report can be published quickly?

The Inquiry's interim report should focus on identifying the reasons the fire occurred, why it spread so quickly through the tower block and as a result what immediate actions need to be taken by government, landlords and the fire and rescue service to ensure that residents in other blocks are not at risk.

Based on the initial assessment that the cladding system at Grenfell Tower had some role in the spread of the fire, it would be helpful as part of the interim report if the Inquiry could point to any areas of complexity and potential confusion in the building regulations which the

Inquiry believes need to be addressed. It would also assist in the Inquiry's interim report set out whether any parts of the regulations or the approved documents supporting them were in need of urgent review and amendment.

The Public Inquiry should consider in its interim report the relationship to be struck with other investigations and in particular establish how it might avoid inconsistency with the outcome of the inquests into the deaths at Grenfell Tower, which will report sometime after the Public Inquiry finishes its work.

Q4. Would you like to be kept informed of the Inquiry's work? How would you like to be contacted?

The LGA would like to contribute to the Inquiry so is keen to be kept informed of the Inquiry's work going forward. The LGA can be contacted through Mark Norris, 020 7764 3241, mark.norris@local.gov.uk

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