

The latest views from Alistair McIntosh, Chief Executive, Housing Quality Network

Housing's Piper Alpha moment

It's time to start again. An old friend came to one of our events this week. He runs big construction projects all over the world. Of course, the fire was the only thing we were all talking about. He came up to me at the end and said – this is housing's Piper Alpha moment. And he is right.

Piper Alpha was an oil rig. It blew up and 167 workers lost their lives in the 700 degrees Celsius fire. Sixty-one men survived, some of them by jumping 175 feet from the rig into the sea. Thirty bodies are still missing. This was going on for 30 years ago but it could have been yesterday. You don't forget that. It was a huge event in Scotland. The parallels with Grenfell are plain to see. Can we learn any lessons? Yes, is the answer.



These words about Piper Alpha strike a chord. “The tragedy...led to a profound cultural shift within the industry. Safety, neglected for too long in favour of economic and operational imperatives, was propelled to the top of the offshore agenda. For a whole new generation of personnel...this embedded culture of accountability became the norm rather than the exception.”¹

That sounds like the change we need to make. Yes, value for money matters. But keeping people safe matters more. Let's spin the HCA so it is the right way around. Its first job should be to safeguard residents. The next job is about checking the money. And in that order. That's not the set up now. Either the law needs to change or the HCA needs to flex its muscles. No one in their right mind will insist that they stick to their current role. A lot of things that used to be important aren't important anymore. The drive to cut spending on repairs doesn't look so smart now.

There is another way of doing things. Ten years ago this very month the Cave Review of regulation came out. Its title says it all - Every Tenant Matters. Here's what the Minister wrote in it. “In the twenty-first century we need a regulatory system that enables social housing to respond more effectively to people's changing needs. That gives tenants more opportunity to have their say, and demand action on the issues that matter to them.” We still do.

¹ Quote is from Sea change: offshore safety and the legacy of Piper Alpha, Julian Turner

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|  The Housing Quality Network Fast practical guidance on everything to do with housing. |  The Neighbourhood Network For everyone working in neighbourhood, tenancy and estate management. |  The Excellence in Asset Management Network Asset management, repairs and maintenance, and environmental issues. |
|  The Excellence in Health and Safety Network Promoting and supporting excellence in health and safety in the housing sector. |  The Housing Finance Excellence Network Supports excellence in financial and business management arrangements. |  The Leasehold Excellence Network Helps drive up service quality, performance and leaseholder satisfaction. |
|  The Rent and Income Excellence Network Help housing providers maximise income collection & minimise arrears. |  The Residents' Network The best place to keep up to date with co-regulation. |  The Strategic Excellence Network A resource for everyone with an interest in policy and strategy. |

But will we make the change? The signs are not good. Have we moved fast enough to learn the lessons of the Lakanal fire? I'm not so sure. Did you read the coroner's report? There's a lot of good stuff in there. What are the action points? You should be:

- Making sure residents know what to do when a fire breaks out
- Making sure that the fire brigade has a plan in place for risky buildings
- Taking the opportunity to check fire safety when you are doing major works
- Thinking about retro fitting sprinklers
- Not putting flammable materials on buildings.

Now that's not easy. How do make sure the ever-changing Airbnb people know what to do in a fire? Will the smokers and toast-burners want sprinklers? Can you get the leaseholders to pay for the works? Will your contractors use the correct materials? And so on. But you must show that you have pulled out all the stops. It can't happen again.

In the global construction firm my friend works at they have a golden rule about this. They do a full report on any fire at one of their schemes anywhere in the world. It goes out right across the company. What do managers at other projects have to do? Quite simply it's their job to make sure lightning doesn't strike twice. We need to prepare, share and act on reports like this right across housing. Action this day.