

Grenfell Tower and the Ward of Notting Dale

Written by Amanda Beckles
11th September 2018

Notting Dale in the Victorian Times: The beginning of the end

In the 1850s the Notting Dale ward, where the blackened shell of Grenfell Tower stands, became notorious for poor quality and overcrowded housing. In 1849 and 1853 the area was hit by a cholera epidemic; in 1870 it was plagued with Scarlet Fever; and between 1889-1890 influenza ravaged the area. Even then, progress towards better living standards for the working class were slow and they received little assistance from the local authority. Then, as was the case on the 14th June 2017, a lot of the practical and moral support came from local organisations and local churches. On the 14th June 2017, the government's response to the tragedy wasn't much better either. In fact, it would be fair to say that the Grenfell Tower disaster is to Prime Minister Theresa May what Hurricane Katrina was to President George W Bush.

The Local Community: Unseen and Unheard

On the day of the tragedy, there were two major occurrences that justify residents' claims that the government didn't care about working class people. Firstly, there was the meeting of the government backed organisation, the [Red Tape Initiative](#), who met that morning to discuss the disposal of building regulations to secure more profits for the construction industry. One of the topics for discussion were the rules relating to the fire resistance of cladding. Even today the organisation states on its website, "The Red Tape Initiative will identify the most important, least controversial, opportunities for cutting red tape in a post-Brexit world." Secondly, there was the government's decision not to call a COBRA meeting, for the largest fire in London since World War II.

A few days before the anniversary, the Prime Minister reflected that her decision not to meet the survivors in her first visit to the area after the fire was regrettable. Avoiding the community in the midst of such a catastrophic disaster - just a few miles away from Downing Street - suggests that something else was also on her mind: Brexit. The Brexit negotiations were due to start just five days after the fire. In just under six months after the disaster, all four members of the government's Social Mobility Board stepped down, stating that the current government were too focused on Brexit to give any attention to ensuring that there were equal opportunities for the disadvantaged to reach their potential and to eradicate child poverty.

A recent Needs Assessment report by the council show that Notting Dale is still one of the most densely populated areas in England. The state of disrepair of many residents' homes in Grenfell Tower is now widely known through the prophetic article written in the [Grenfell Action Group's](#) blog that stated, "It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord."

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In 2008 an adjudicator was employed to investigate the complaints residents had made about the TMO, and concluded that repairs were substandard and residents' complaints were not listened to. Nevertheless, in 2009 the adjudicator's report was dismissed by the council. In the same year Robert Black became the new CEO and said that he would improve repairs and rebuild trust with residents." Eight years later Grenfell Tower was razed to the ground in the largest fire in London since World War II and the biggest public inquiry in UK history is underway. As a result of the fire, 72 residents died, and 204 households, involving 292 adults and 81 children, were displaced. In the summer of 2018 the local council reported that 95 households were in emergency or temporary accommodation, Lancaster West residents were faced with intermittent gas and water for months, ex-TMO residents, who live outside of the estate, were left with a backlog 3,500 outstanding day to day repairs and an estimated 10,000 residents are suffering with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We can only hope that the needs of this devastated community do not slip the minds of the government again and that a long-term financial provision for the community is made - post Brexit.

The Disfunction of Local Democracy Exposed

In the immediate aftermath, the world witnessed the council's reluctance to face residents. Affected residents and their supporters organised a march to the town hall on the 16th June 2017 but the peaceful protest quickly turned into anger, when the council officials refused to speak to the residents and tried to escape from the back of the building. A few weeks later the police organised public meetings, which meant that for the first time the council faced local residents. These meetings followed the same pattern as they did on the 16th June, the residents patiently listened to the Council officials but when they failed to answer questions residents became frustrated and angry. In October, the Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee Meeting came to North Kensington and again, residents only became angry after the council answered their questions in a manner that was evasive or simply untrue. Abdourahman Sayed from the Al-Manaar Mosque, which played a central role on the day of the fire and the months that followed and Joe Delaney from the Grenfell Action Group were co-opted onto the Committee. They were effective at asking challenging questions and though they were insistent with their questions, they seldom got answers.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny published a report, "Change at the Council" in March this year. It outlined 12 guiding principles aimed to change the culture in the council, make them less remote and closer to the community they served. The report recommended a new governance structure that would be more inclusive of residents' voices. During purdah (the pre-election period) and the four months that followed, the council got to work on these recommendations. One of the new structures that was introduced was the local Residents' Forums, which was to feed into the Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee. Notting Dale was the first of these Forums to be held and was chaired by Councillor Atkins. As a Notting Dale resident, I attended; the following day I went to the new look Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee meeting to see what changes had been made.

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Surprisingly, the meeting was not held in North Kensington as it was previously but at the Town Hall and neither Joe Delaney nor the CEO from the Al-Manaar were on the panel: in fact, there were no representatives from the community at all. The questions from Notting Dale residents to the scrutiny committee were hardly mentioned. Residents spoke at the scrutiny committee but, almost needless to say, residents' frustrations mounted as their questions remained unanswered. After the meeting Councillor Atkins apologised to me for not asking all the questions raised at the Notting Dale Forum and then Councillor Thompson, the chair of the Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee, suggested that a report from the Forum should be submitted to the committee to avoid it happening again. However, is it realistic for old local democratic structures, no matter how much they are tweaked, to be effective in representing the serious and urgent concerns of so many affected residents?

The council and councillors are operating in a system designed to do things to people not with them and this will be hard to change without a more radical rethink. It is structure based on paternalism, deference, hierarchy and bureaucracy which cannot accommodate a complex and diverse community, whose needs are more acute now than ever. Firstly, local council and councillors will have to change their relationship with local residents in order to regain respect from the local community and remain relevant. They will need to have sound moral judgement and refrain from the old habit of only listening to residents with the loudest voices or to those who flatter their egos. Furthermore, people, are becoming less interested in being represented by politicians or others who claim to represent them. They want to speak for themselves and, judging by the questions that the community asked at the Scrutiny Meeting, they were much better at it than most of the elected members that evening. Residents need to be informed and feel empowered and have their questions answered. They expect and have a right to have their voices heard. Critically, their views and experiences should feed directly into the formulation of the policies that have an impact on their lives.

The digital revolution and social media has meant that this is more possible now than ever before. However, digital exclusion remains an issue and cannot be seen as the only solution. There is still a need to reach small and under-represented communities and doing it online is not always the most effective way.

The Grenfell Tower Community Monitoring Project has found that a flexible approach which creates a trusting and safe environment for residents is essential. In our training sessions, residents are given the time to express themselves, as well as the space to learn and heal, either in one to one meetings or small focus groups; groups which are led not necessarily by organisers or campaigners, but also the affected residents themselves. Our team has been empowering affected residents from under-represented communities through a comprehensive training programme to provide them with the tools and techniques that will enable those from small and under-represented groups to speak for themselves and their

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loved ones, subsequent to the aftermath of the fire.

Currently, councils measure their success by developing their own performance indicators and, as a former local authority policy and strategy officer, I have always felt that this is like the local authority marking its own homework. It is no wonder that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea felt confident claiming that they are a top performing local authority. The end goal of the GTCM Project is to support and empower residents to develop community owned performance indicators, that they can monitor to ensure that the council is genuinely doing a good job.

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