

Grenfell Tower Inquiry
Royal Courts of Justice
Strand
London WC2A 2LL.

By email: contact@grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk

Dear Sir Martin Moore-Bick ,

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY – TERMS OF REFERENCE

Thank you for the opportunity to make submissions to the consultation on the terms of reference for the public Inquiry. This is an open letter that I am submitting on behalf of the Fire and Rescue Statistics User Group ("FRSUG").

In the interests of openness and transparency I would declare that I am an employee of the London Fire Brigade, but I write this letter on behalf of FRSUG which is an independent group made up of representatives from across the fire sector including staff from the fire and rescue services (FRS), government departments, trade and professional bodies, academia and commerce.

This submission is based on the aims and objectives of the group which are to:

- Provide a consultation and engagement forum for fire and rescue statistics and promote the free exchange of views and information.
- Promote the use of fire and rescue statistics to inform policy and practice.
- Identify and monitor existing sources of data and improve users' access to fire and rescue statistics.
- Identify areas of collaboration and develop where feasible data sharing protocols between members of the Group as part of an overall annual work plan.
- Keep fire and rescue statistics users informed of any new developments in fire and rescue statistics.

The areas which it may be appropriate for the inquiry to cover, and we ask you to consider adopting within the terms of reference, are set out below in the form of related questions.

Are fire services sufficiently resourced to carry out fire research?

FRS have, as part of public expenditure funding reductions to what was once a world leading research function. Government's fire research division complemented by a Fire Service College and Buildings Research Establishment (BRE), together with the FRS own research and development functions for evaluating new fire kit, equipment and new fire-fighting techniques has been severely curtailed with the research function now part of the work of a limited number of staff within the Home Office, who also undertake other functions, and both the College and BRE outsourced and now non-governmental commercial entities.

It may be appropriate for the inquiry to examine the how, where and what of fire research now being undertaken and whether or not access to more research information could have predicted the problems attributed to the Grenfell

Tower fire, such as the cladding of the building, how the fire spread and/or how the behaviours of people escaping from a building (particularly in single staircase conditions) could have been predicted. The first specialist informed witness to how a building, its construction and materials react to fire are the FRS who do record some data for future use but there is little connection between these observations and the now very limited public research carried out into methods of construction and how building materials and structures perform in real fire conditions. This includes research into toxicity and flammability and methods of construction. The research that is available is rarely published and there is more to be done to facilitate the sharing of international research and data and consequently there is limited direct connection between research, standards and performance in practice.

The Inquiry may also want to consider if there has been enough evaluation of alternative firefighting equipment and methods, for example how very high reach appliances perform. At the moment, FRS do not have access to any 'national evaluations' of such approaches and it is for each service to undertake their own research. Similarly, the research into human behaviour in fire situations is fragmented and underutilized.

There were clearly highly physical demands placed on the firefighters at the Grenfell Tower fire as with their personal protective equipment (PPE). Firefighter endurance and the related impacts on health and wellbeing need to be more fully understood and monitored through the collection of relevant statistics.

Fire Investigation (which is typically carried out by firefighter specialists) is one of the main methods by which fire causes are understood and prevention methods are devised. This area of work has reduced across the UK in proportion with FRS funding reductions. Whilst the service has very successfully reduced the number of fires through its fire safety work, it does not go hand in hand that there should be a similar reduction in the number of fires forensically investigated. There has been an increase in the number of ways in which fires can start as lifestyles and behaviours change. E-cigarettes, mobile phone chargers and electronic beauty products are just some of the emerging 'new' fire causes that should be fully investigated and understood. It is not for the FRSUG to comment on how FRS are structured or funded, but the Inquiry may wish to consider whether or not the service has adequate access to fire research – in all its forms – to discover, prevent and resolve incidents in an ever evolving environment.

Is there sufficient transparency in fire data for independent research?

The UK's FRS have because of earlier foresight one of the richest, complete and longest running series of data of almost any public service. This data however is locked away within the local services and the Home Office which collects and compiles data for the whole of England. There has been some progress by individual services to make some of the data 'open' data and publically available, but the data that is available probably represents less than ten percent of all the information collected. More recently the Home Office have published some limited open data sets, but concerns around data privacy mean that it is difficult to join the data and use it alongside other open data.

There is considerable intellectual value to be gained from joining fire data with other social, health, demographic, economic and spatial data (much of which is already open data) to fully understand and target social wellbeing projects. This wider view of the data can, and should, be used to drive social policy and understand risk and vulnerability within our society and the built environment. This work is being done on a limited basis by individual services, but open access to all the data would provide the opportunities for more academic and commercial research.

As a practical example, the emerging issues of fires related to faulty appliances subject to recall and the flammability of fridge-freezers has come about from the work of individual services looking at their own data. Arguably, these issues would have emerged sooner if all of England's data could have been analysed. There may well be other emerging fire trends that haven't yet been discovered as the national data is fragmented across individual services.

The absence of a common open access data platform for fire data, with appropriate privacy safeguards, limits the ability to share and exploit the extensive information already collected every day by the service.

The Inquiry may wish to consider whether or not more open access for the public, industry and independent researchers to fire data would drive and improve fire safety standards across the sector.

Do fire services have the data they need to understand risk and prioritise their services?

The Grenfell Tower fire highlighted that the FRS do not have access to data, at the most basic level, to identify individual buildings and their characteristic. The work by DCLG' Expert Panel immediately after the fire showed that the services struggled to identify "high rise buildings", partly because there is no common definition of what a high rise building is, but also because they don't have the underlying data to do this.

Government data has become more open, but FRS would benefit for even wider access to government controlled datasets. For example, the Valuation Office and Land Registry both have information that would help to identify and classify buildings and identify those responsible for the fire precautions within them, but this data is not freely available to the service.

There is also insufficient sharing of information about vulnerable people, where they live and what risks they face. There is considerable information within the health service, local councils and government departments (to name just a few) about vulnerable people which could be put to lifesaving use by the FRS if they had access to it. This need does need to be balanced with the rights and freedoms of the individuals themselves, but more needs to be done to join and share people related information across the public sector.

There is also data with the commercial sector of benefit to the FRS. One main area is access to information about the economic costs of fire. Some work in this area has been undertaken in the past, but it never reflected the range of fire severity or the fullest recovery costs (amongst other weaknesses). The insurance industry share some of this information on a limited basis, but access to a robust 'cost of fire' model would improve have fire prevention and suppression methods – for example water sprinkler and misting systems – are evaluated and adopted.

Terms of reference

We ask that the Inquiry considers fire statistics and research within its terms of reference. In the interim report this might include how currently available data and research is being used to inform building safety concerns and the immediate advice and precautions that are being taken. In the longer term the Inquiry could consider how the systemic learning between fire services, practitioners, statisticians, researchers, scientists, decision makers and government might be improved.

No matter what the scope of the Inquiry, we would ask that the process adopts an exemplar position on the matter of transparency and openness and that the Inquiry openly publish all of the information considered. This should include, but not be limited to, all of the information and reports that the Inquiry are likely to receive about the cause of the fire, the building construction and materials, why the fire spread in the way that it did, the firefighting tactics and resources deployed and lessons learnt.

If you would like any other information about the Fire and Rescue Statistics User Group, its work or the current statistics and research available then we would be happy to help. We would welcome being kept informed of the Inquiry's progress.

Your sincerely,

Andrew Mobbs

Chair of the Fire and Rescue Statistics User Group

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