

Lakanal House

Overview of Coroner's Inquest / April 2013

Overview of Coroner's inquest and report

The end of March 2013 saw the conclusion of the Lakanal House inquest into the London tower block fire that killed six people in July 2009. The findings have been awaited by the fire safety community, not least because it involves the "stay put" policy that is associated with blocks of flats. Evidence was given that those who died could probably still have evacuated the building for up to 45 minutes after initially calling emergency services to say that they were trapped by smoke. In this case, although it was "staying put" that meant the six individuals tragically lost their lives the Coroner also referred to a "catalogue of failings".

"Stay put" policy – compartmentation requirements

The "stay put" policy is founded on an assumption of adequate imperforate compartmentation. In blocks of flats, this means that each flat should be segregated from neighbouring parts of the building by adequate fire resisting construction which would stop the spread of fire and smoke beyond the flat on fire. Any perforations in these materials will negate their fire resistance, allowing smoke and hot gases to spread beyond the flat. In existing buildings, ensuring that building works are carried out without compromising these measures can prove challenging. Moreover, periodically checking all such measures can prove difficult without carrying out intrusive, invasive inspections.

Ill-fated assumptions and missed opportunities

Evidence was heard at the inquest which indicated that fire brigades generally assume that compartmentation is intact. However, evidence also indicated that, particularly with older housing stock, compartmentation can be breached by maintenance, refurbishment work or modifications. In this regard, the jury criticised Southwark Council after finding that "numerous opportunities" were missed to carry out fire safety checks inside the building when other intrusive building works were being carried out. The Coroner also commented that "had a fire risk assessment been carried out at Lakanal House, it is possible that these features may have been highlighted for further investigation".

Recommendations

As is so often the case, various failings contributed to this tragedy and the Coroner has now written letters to four relevant organisations making recommendations. The Coroner has acknowledged that several of the organisations implicated have been working hard to address some of the failings already. However, formal responses are required by the end of May. These comments will give some insight into how some of the failings will be addressed.

Fire Sector Federation

The Coroner wrote to the Fire Sector Federation – which represents a range of fire sector stakeholders – asking for it to help shape policy relating to the scope of fire risk assessments, particularly within high rise residential buildings. The Coroner also asked the FSF to offer guidance as to how these assessments should be carried out and what the necessary training for fire risk assessors should be.

London Fire Brigade

In her letter to London Fire Brigade, the Coroner acknowledged that much had already been done to improve the advice given by Brigade Control Officers to emergency callers in deteriorating conditions, and address their inability to react to dynamic situations. The inquiry also heard evidence of poor communications between those at the incident and those at Control. The Coroner stressed that information gained from familiarisation visits should then be available to others within the LFB – a similar issue to that highlighted by the Atherstone-on-Stour warehouse fire. The assumption was made by Brigade Control Officers that trapped persons would be rescued by firefighters. Tragically, this case highlighted how the assumption is flawed; firefighters were unable to reach those that died.

Department of Communities & Local Government

Writing to the Department of Communities & Local Government, the Coroner recommended that providers of high rise residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises should be encouraged to retro fit sprinklers. She also asked that government consider how they might require high rise residential building owners to provide relevant information on or near the premises, such as premises information boxes or plates. Finally, the Coroner called for several guidance documents either be produced or updated for clarity.

- Publication of consolidated national guidance regarding the “stay put” principle and its interaction with the “get out and stay out” policy
- Review of the Generic Risk Assessment on “High Rise Firefighting”
- Review of Approved Document B of the Building Regulations to ensure it is clear and easy to follow for design and new building, but also for maintenance and refurbishment works
- Issue clarification regarding definition of “common parts” within buildings containing multiple domestic premises and whether fire risk assessments should include inspections within flats or maisonettes which have a “stay put” policy

Southwark Council

The Coroner also wrote to the Mayor and Burgesses of Southwark, recommending that the Council reviews its policies concerning fire risk assessments of its high rise buildings, that it trains staff and liaises with emergency services about access to property. Her letter advocates the provision of information and awareness training to occupants regarding their alternative escape routes, and calls for evacuation procedures to be displayed in common areas of flats or maisonettes, and for the provision of building layout information for emergency services’ use. Competency assessments for those involved in procuring and supervising building works in existing high rise residential buildings were also highlighted (with special note given to the significance of the compartmentation principle and the need to notify Building Control).

Questions to ask

In the wake of the inquest’s findings, Metro Safety urges you to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you have a fire safety policy which identifies an appropriate risk management approach for residential buildings with multiple domestic premises (such as blocks of flats)?
2. Are you aware that residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises in England and Wales require a fire risk assessment under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005?
3. Do you have a suitable and sufficient fire risk assessment of all such premises, which has been carried out by a competent assessor?
4. Have you provided residents with information and awareness training regarding all of their means of escape?
5. Has your fire risk assessment considered the provision of premises information boxes or plates to ensure emergency services are aware of the building’s layout?
6. Has your fire risk assessment considered signage within the communal parts? Does it include alternative means of escape and are floors and flats clearly labelled?
7. Has your fire risk assessment considered building compartmentation, particularly where a “stay put” policy is in place?
8. Has your fire risk assessment raised issues about compartmentation that require further (possibly intrusive) investigation?

If you would find it helpful to speak to one of our Senior Fire Safety Advisors please call Metro Safety on 020 7960 3939.