

The challenges of managing tower blocks

Tower blocks are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain due to a number of different factors, says Eamon McGoldrick, Managing Director of the National Federation of ALMOs (NFA).

As the Grenfell Tower Inquiry gets underway, the focus returns to high-rise living. At the same time, a number of London councils with tower blocks are carrying out checks because of concerns about cracking or their ability to withstand gas explosions. All these safety concerns can be added to the growing list of challenges faced by landlords which own tower blocks built in the 1960s and 1970s.

When they were constructed, they were a wonderful alternative to the thousands of poor quality and overcrowded slum properties that existed in many areas of cities. They provided a large number of good quality homes on a small footprint and had good space standards. Tower blocks were also constructed of concrete walls and metal windows, which were very fire resistant. Robust construction, combined with the fire services' 'stay put' policy, meant that tower blocks presented those living in them with very little risk of fire. Initially, tower blocks were a dream for asset managers. Their repeat flat layouts and uniform communal areas helped to keep responsive and planned works costs low. Voids reservicing in particular proved cost effective, with minimal turnaround times.

However, over time, these benefits have been outweighed by new risks, latent defects and changes in expectations of those living in such homes. "As energy costs increased over time, landlords started cladding towers in insulation materials to improve thermal efficiency. These works may have introduced new fire risks." Concrete and metal materials have poor thermal efficiency and in many cases contributed to dampness and condensation problems. "Keep your windows open and the heating on" was the advice given to tenants suffering such problems. As energy costs increased over time, landlords started cladding towers in insulation materials to improve thermal efficiency. These works may have introduced new fire risks. Over the years, disruptive works were carried out in tower blocks. These included installation of individual gas boilers to replace district heating schemes, renewals of gas, water and electric rising mains, and drilling through concrete slabs to install cable and broadband connections. Without correct fire-stopping, these works have put compartmentation at risk and increased the danger of fire and smoke spreading. Landlords have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on fire safety work in recent years and this will undoubtedly increase following Grenfell.

But these are not the only challenges faced by those who own older tower blocks. Modern living habits have put a strain on water and electricity supplies. For example, most towers have water booster pumping systems to ensure adequate pressure on the highest floors. These systems are expensive to install and maintain. There are also the risks of legionella in water tanks – this requires robust management systems. “[Disruptive] works have put compartmentation at risk and increased the danger of fire and smoke spreading.” Lifts are essential to high-rise living, but they are expensive to maintain and replace when their lifecycle expires. There are also challenges with day-to-day management. To tackle anti-social behaviour, many towers now have CCTV systems in every corridor and lift. Concierge services are even more effective, but have high capital and revenue costs. Some blocks in London have attracted pirate radio installations used to facilitate drug dealing. Again, high security measures to prevent this activity come at significant cost.

Of course, when these towers were built, there was no Right to Buy and the arrival of leaseholders may have changed the tenure mix, but it has certainly made day-to-day management more difficult. Generally, major works to flats in towers are more frequent and expensive than in traditional houses. Recovery of recharges to leaseholders is invariably challenging. Some landlords have had great difficulty in getting leaseholders to allow access for fire safety works such as installation of sprinklers and new front doors. Resistance to such works makes it hard for landlords to achieve 100% installations and in theory puts fellow residents at risk. In some cases, freeholders have waived leaseholder recharges to get works done, but these costs fall on other rent and tax payers. All of this means that, over time, tower blocks have gone from a real housing solution to accommodation that is now high maintenance.

If the Grenfell Inquiry delivers another raft of requirements on landlords that own towers, it would be perfectly understandable. However, it could be a tipping point for some blocks because landlords will say they are not worth the further investment and will look to demolish them.

Inside Housing has launched a campaign to improve fire safety following the Grenfell Tower fire ‘*Never Again*’. The campaign is calling for immediate action to implement the learning from the Lakanal House fire, and a commitment to act – without delay – on learning from the Grenfell Tower tragedy as it becomes available.

Comment by Eamon McGoldrick Managing Director NFA.

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