

New journalist of the year – Nathaniel Barker

Feeling the strain: assaults on frontline staff

The problem of assaults on housing officers, who make up a core part of *Inside Housing's* readership, goes hugely underappreciated.

In this piece Nathaniel committed to set that straight: combining data journalism with hard-hitting human interest to bring to life the reality of a job on the frontline.

Research for the piece, a huge sector-wide survey and almost 300 Freedom of Information Act responses, was undertaken solely by Nathaniel. Once this was complete, data analysis skills were required to process the figures and produce a stark news line.

Beyond that, Nathaniel showed his skill as a sensitive interviewer to encourage one person to open up about the impact of his own experience, giving the piece a distinctly human angle.

The result is a tight, engaging and crucial read which tells the story of the harsh reality of working life for thousands of *Inside Housing* readers.

Stay put or get out: what to tell tenants

Soon after the devastating Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June, the question of the 'stay put' advice given to residents received national attention – much of it ill-informed.

It is the role of a specialist magazine in these circumstances to provide sober, clear-eyed and uncompromising analysis – something Nathaniel delivered with aplomb in this analysis piece.

Nathaniel sourced the core documents on the subject, as well as reaching out to new contacts to gain an informed and balanced view. He was unafraid to ask difficult questions of the various experts, and showed his ability to write on a complex and sensitive topic, avoiding leaping to conclusions or ignoring the very fresh human cost around the issue.

In addition, his research resulted in a strong news line regarding the divergence between Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service's advice and that of the London Fire Brigade.

Sprinklers: now a necessity?

Set against a backdrop of fears over fire safety and very real concerns about social landlords' ability to pay for remedial works in the wake of the Grenfell Tower blaze, the issue of sprinklers was both complex and vital.

Nathaniel tackled the piece with a focused approach. He carried out snap research and interviews to hit on the questions at the heart of the issue: whether sprinklers work, how much they cost and whether the cost is worthwhile.

This research produced an important news story about the wildly varying estimated costs of installing sprinkler systems in tower blocks.

The feature itself is a perfect example of trade journalism – fact-based, informed by experts and pushing forward prevailing debate within the housing sector.

It formed a valuable part of *Inside Housing's* work following the fire: keeping the sector dealing immediately with the issues absolutely up to speed with the key debates.

"I'll cut your throat
if you interfere with
my property again"

Inside Housing's annual survey reveals that
verbal and physical assaults against frontline
housing staff are on the up. But how is the strain
affecting the mental health of housing officers?
Nathaniel Barker assesses the impact

FRONTLINE

THE STRAIN

ILLUSTRATION: COREY BRICKLEY

"Verbal Abuse
is just part and
parcel of the job"

I felt like I was running for my life," remembers Daniel (not his real name), casting his mind back to an attack from which he is still recovering.

One evening last year, the London-based night support worker had been visiting a tenant on a supported housing estate for people with mental health issues and histories of drug addiction. As he knocked at the tenant's front door, waiting to be invited inside in order to assist him with his medication, Daniel was set upon from behind.

"I was hit in the neck," he says. "I fell, and when I stood up I had to run. There was no issue between me and the guy [a neighbour of the tenant he was visiting] that I was aware of. He was always around and sometimes I would help him with his medication."

So forceful was the attack that Daniel later admitted himself to hospital because of a "serious pain" where he had been struck.

Sadly, Daniel is not alone. Since 2009, *Inside Housing* has been track-

ing incidences of verbal and physical abuse experienced by frontline housing workers.

Through Freedom of Information requests to every local authority in the UK and to the 180 largest housing associations, a disturbing picture has emerged. A total of 321 organisations responded - 294 councils and 27 housing associations.

The data, which is of course not exhaustive, showed there were 3,566 assaults carried out against staff in 2016/17. That is about one every 35 working minutes. Of these incidents, 3,327 (93%) were verbal in nature and 239 were physical.

Examining figures for the 178 landlords which responded to our survey both this year and last shows a rise in the number of cases. Recorded assaults are up 14%, from 1,719 to 1,960. This change is chiefly due to a rise in verbal assaults - which leapt 18%. Recorded incidents of physical assaults for these providers decreased from 171 to 134, a drop of 22%.

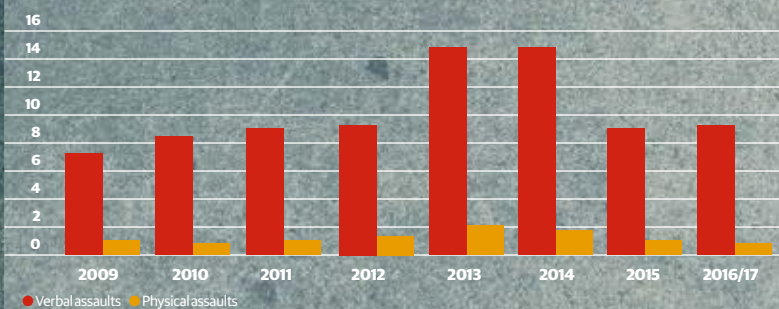
Inside Housing also carried out an

anonymous survey of frontline housing workers in order to go beyond the raw data and gauge experience on the frontline of housing services. The 293 respondents were quizzed - among other things - on their experiences of assaults, whether they feel more or less safe than previously, whether they feel the government's welfare reforms have had an effect and whether they think their employers are doing enough to keep them safe. And, for the first time, we asked if being assaulted on the job is having an impact on housing workers' mental health.

The incidents reported were varied and troubling, with 189 (65%) saying they were verbally assaulted in 2016/17. For some, this was an occasional occurrence, though several indicated they suffer abuse on a daily basis. Respondents recall racial abuse, being spat at, having furniture thrown at them, receiving death threats and being told they would be responsible for the assaulter's suicide. ▶

"I Have Seen colleagues
cry Over Abuse"

Assaults per organisation 2009-2016/17



Source: Inside Housing

These kinds of incidents can have severe lasting psychological effects. Daniel is a seasoned housing worker, with nine years' experience, but says he still experiences flashbacks to the attack. "It left me really scared of my job; I always feel that someone is waiting to hit me," he says.

One housing officer we spoke to was so frightened of the tenant who abused her that she asked for absolutely no details of the incident to be reported, in case he was able to recognise her from the account. She still works on the estate where he lives and sees him around frequently, though the two no longer interact directly.

Shockingly, one in six (17%) front-line housing workers who responded to our anonymous survey has suffered lasting health impacts as a result of being assaulted by a tenant. Of these, 91% say the effects are mental health-oriented, with respondents mentioning symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I do not believe anyone would have an idea of the situations we face all day unless you worked in the job," says one housing management officer who works in Northern Ireland.

"There have been times after being verbally assaulted where I have thought to myself the job isn't worth it, even though the majority of the time I enjoy working with the public."

Another respondent, a housing manager in the East Midlands, says being kept hostage and physically assaulted by a tenant led to a breakdown - and that mental health issues have left him approximately £40,000 in debt.

John Gray, London housing association branch secretary at Unison, calls this trend "horrendous". "It's not surprising that when housing

officers have years and years of continued low-level abuse, that is going to have an effect on their mental health," he says. "Wouldn't it on anybody?"

Growing concerns

A possible explanation for the overall rise in assaults could be changes to recording methods. Indeed, this was given as a reason by two housing associations we contacted that have experienced particularly significant rises in assault numbers.

Yet there appears to be more to the increase. Just four respondents to our survey (1.4%) say they feel safer doing their job in housing than a year ago. More than a third (34%) feel less safe, while 65% say they feel no difference. This represents a change from last year's survey, when a lower proportion (28%) said they felt less safe and more said they felt the opposite (3%).

The reasons behind these increasing impressions of vulnerability are wide-ranging and complex. For some, the introduction of Universal Credit and the benefit cap have had an effect, with 46% of respondents saying welfare reform has heightened the risk of them being assaulted, and a further 33% suggesting it may have been influential.

"People are so frustrated with the system and see us as part of it. We are having to give bad news more often, which increases our risks," says one housing officer from Wales, in a fairly typical response.

Others cite the added responsibilities shouldered by housing providers for tenants because of cutbacks on other services.

"As local government and third sector services shrink or disappear housing staff are left trying to manage the problems of customers," says one respondent. Two more mention ►



"I cannot shake the job
at the End of the Day and
at Weekends. I am regularly Tearful"

more contact with tenants suffering from mental health issues, and another believes reduced police resources mean housing officers are more likely to have to confront criminal activity and anti-social behaviour.

"Because other public services are stretched thinner and thinner, things will be passed to housing staff that might not normally be part of their role; things that they may not be equipped to deal with," says Melanie Rees, head of policy at the Chartered Institute of Housing. "It is about making sure that they are adequately trained and skilled to deal with those things."

Is enough being done?

Following his attack, Daniel was disappointed with his employer's response. The tenant was evicted, but Daniel was left to deal with the police himself after reporting the incident. He eventually chose not to press charges having received no assurance from his housing association that he would be assisted with the legal process.

This is an extreme scenario, but he is not the only housing worker left feeling abandoned by his boss. According to our survey, 22% of those who reported assaults are unhappy with how their employer handled the situation. Some respondents say incidents are not followed up, while others mention a lack of support for workers who receive abuse. Several say they have no idea what happened after they made complaints.

"They just roll their eyes as if it's

the norm and we should put up with it," says one homelessness and housing solutions officer in the North West of England, who had a drinks can thrown at her while pregnant.

Failure to investigate

That sentiment is echoed among many other frontline housing staff. Of those who did not report all assaults against them, an eyebrow-raising 19% say it would be a waste of time because nothing is ever done, while 54% say these incidents are just part of the job.

"We come across this all the time," says Saskia Garner, personal safety policy officer at the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, who penned a report on worker safety in the housing sector last year. "We would always say that actually it is not acceptable to feel unsafe every day in your job and that you just have to manage. And from an employer's point of view, it does not make sense to ignore these issues because it affects how effective your staff are and makes them more likely to move on."

Mr Gray agrees, and says this feeling needs to be challenged. "It's not part of the job. It happens, but if employers did their job properly it wouldn't happen nearly as much. A lot of conflict is avoidable or can at least be managed if employers review their policies on this properly and have a robust response."

And Ms Rees adds: "This is never OK. The idea that it is just part of the job is something we really need to change, for employers and staff as well."

Just over half (52%) of respondents say their employers are doing enough to protect them against further incidents. That leaves 20% who say they are not, and another 20% who say the response is only sufficient some of the time. With that in mind, perhaps the vigilant approach outlined by Mr Gray would be a good start to cutting down on assaults.

Paul Sultana, head of health and safety at WM Housing, certainly thinks so. He says that disregarding a minor verbal assault can be a "green light" for tenants to abuse other staff, possibly with more serious consequences.

In an attempt to reduce assaults, the organisation has begun to make sure it follows up on every reported incident, as well as introducing remote systems to make it easier for staff to log complaints. "We need to be firm and open and nip it in the bud," adds Mr Sultana.

These sound like blindingly simple solutions to such a complex problem. But Mr Sultana admits his team "haven't always had these processes in the past", and our anonymous survey certainly suggests that's true for other providers. While some of the factors behind assaults - cuts to services, welfare reforms - are out of the sector's hands, an attitude change towards these incidents might be needed.

Surely few would disagree that frontline housing staff do vital work supporting some of the most vulnerable people in society. But the question remains: who is looking out for them? ■

STAY PUT OR GET OUT:

The 'stay put' advice given to residents in tower block fires has fallen into the national spotlight in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster.



Cladding is removed from Whitebeam Court, in Pendleton, Greater Manchester, in the wake of the fatal fire at Grenfell

Nathaniel Barker asks if it is time for a review of that approach



WHAT TO TELL TENANTS

Would you stay in a burning building? That was the advice given to residents at Grenfell Tower - of whom 80 are now dead or missing and presumed dead. Several eyewitnesses told *Inside Housing* that police officers called up to residents waving from windows telling them to stay where they were as flames began to take hold.

So soon after the tragedy, it is of course inappropriate to speculate on whether this advice added to the casualties. Yet, inevitably, the dreadful events that night have placed 'stay put' response policies under the spotlight once again, eight years on from the Lakanal House fire.

In a letter to council and housing association chief executives last

week, Melanie Dawes, permanent secretary at the Department for Communities and Local Government, told bosses: "Engage with residents to ensure they fully understand the emergency fire procedures in the building, particularly the meaning of 'stay put'."

And the London Fire Brigade (LFB) reissued its stay put advice last Friday. "You are usually safer staying put in your own flat or maisonette unless heat or smoke is affecting you," it said, in line with the majority of the UK's fire services.

According to a 2012 report commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) and authored by CS Todd & Associates titled *Fire Safety in Purpose-Built Blocks of Flats*, the stay put strategy is based on the understanding that fires in blocks of

flats are usually contained within one dwelling. It argues that stay put is "undoubtedly successful in an overwhelming number of fires in blocks of flats" - and points to official statistics which found that in 2009/10, of more than 8,000 fires in high-rise blocks, just 22 required more than five people to be evacuated with the help of fire fighters.

Established approach

Stay put policies became widely applied in the UK after the British Standards Institution recommended its use in a 1962 version of its code of practice, but not all services use this approach.

Geoff Harris, director of prevention and protection at Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, said its "advice remains that if you have a fire

or become aware of a fire in your home which includes blocks of flats, you should get out, stay out and call us out". A spokesperson for the service confirmed that this represents a divergence from the LFB line.

"If you live in a block of flats where your landlord has advised you to 'stay put' in the event of a fire, this is their advice which they should have based on an individual fire risk assessment for that building," they said.

Jake Pauls, a consultant and leading expert on safety and evacuation procedures in tall buildings - who himself lives in a high rise block - said there is still no firm consensus over the relative benefits of "stay put" versus "get out and stay out" - known technically as simultaneous evacuation, where groups of flats are evacuated together.

"The authorities are not giving a clear message to the people living in the wide range of buildings that are high-rise," he said. "There really should be better guidelines for people like us about this central question."

He said if a fire broke out in his own building, he would choose to stay if there was no smoke outside his window or in the corridor, although he stressed it is a much more upmarket block than Grenfell Tower.

"This is site-specific. If you are in a building that has problems to begin with then those people should not be told to stay in place."

Default position

In Greater Manchester, housing bosses were briefed by Andy Burnham and by the city's fire service chief Peter O'Reilly last week to

clarify the brigade's advice. Matthew Gardiner, chief executive at Trafford Housing Trust, said: "They are saying the default position is get out."

"But they recognised that a number of landlords have got properties with good compartmentation. If you have got that then there is no reason to evacuate all the residents."

He said Trafford Housing Trust was confident its tower blocks can support a stay put policy, but it has set up a custom finish group to review its management of high-rise fires.

One of the measures the group is eyeing is a concierge on site at high-rise blocks at all times, after this was recommended by Mr O'Reilly. Reassurance steps such as these might seem simple, but they could play a life-saving role in a crisis situation.

Families living in a block also

managed by Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, the Grenfell Tower landlord, told *The Guardian* newspaper they believe the stay put policy puts lives at risk.

"The authorities are not giving a clear message to tenants."

And the thousands across Britain who have been told their homes are clad in combustible material may be forgiven for feeling similarly - rightly or wrongly. Reissuing the stay put advice, Dan Daly, assistant commissioner for fire safety at the LFB, said he can "fully understand why people who live in high-rises have questions about their safety".

Jan Taranczuk, a housing safety consultant and chair of the Chartered Institute of Housing's London board, said despite trusting the LFB's advice: "It may be time to clarify what we mean by 'affected by smoke or fire'."

If you live in a 20-storey building, and look out of the window to see smoke several storeys lower, are you then being affected?

A template notice for residents living in stay put buildings in the LGA report echoes the "usually safe" wording used by the Local Government Association and other services. But it also adds: "If you are in any doubt, get out." Post-Grenfell, there may be a danger that even in buildings with good fire containment, knowing you are "usually safe" staying in your home might not be enough to eliminate the doubt. ■



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Sprinklers: now a necessity?



Sprinklers have become one focus of attention since the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Should social landlords now be installing them as a matter of course? *Nathaniel Barker* takes a closer look

The horrific Grenfell Tower fire, in which at least 80 people lost their lives, has sparked an intense, national debate on fire safety in social housing. Within this debate, an accepted wisdom in some quarters has been that sprinklers could have prevented the disaster.

Indeed, many councils far and wide are now scrambling to install sprinkler systems in their high-rise buildings. In so doing, some are committing vast proportions of their perpetually stretched capital budgets, with little certainty over whether the government will eventually help foot the bill.

In the dash to make these buildings safer, it's vital that we get our priorities straight. Because, as with any unpredicted additional cost of housing provision, it is the tenants who will ultimately feel the pinch. With that in mind, *Inside Housing* has taken a closer look at sprinklers - to find out if this retrofit is the right fit.

The answer?

Ian Gough, senior technical advisor at the British Automatic Fire Sprinkler Association (BAFSA), is, as you may expect, firmly in the 'yes' camp.

"Sprinklers invariably prevent fires escaping from the room of origin," he says.

Assuming the prevailing understanding that the Grenfell Tower blaze was started by a faulty fridge-freezer, he believes a properly

installed system would have suppressed the fire before it crossed the threshold.

Not everyone quite agrees, however. "Really, sprinklers are unsurpassed in their ability to perform when required," says Jim Glocking, technical director at the Fire Protection Association, which represents fire safety engineers, officers and insurers. "But in respect of Grenfell, where we had uncontrolled fire spread up the side of the building, that is the sort of recipe that could defeat a sprinkler system."

There are limits to the power of sprinklers. "Sprinklers are good - they are very good - but they're not a magic bullet," says Edwin Galea, director of the fire safety engineering group at the University of Greenwich's mathematical sciences department. "A sprinkler system doesn't compensate for having a dangerous facade on a building. It helps, but it doesn't compensate." Given the choice between living in a building with a Grenfell-style cladding system and sprinklers, or a building without either, Mr Galea says he would take the latter.

What's more, he adds, if a fire starts outside the building - possibly caught from a burning car, or a pile of rubbish - and spreads rapidly up its exterior, a sprinkler system is of little use.

That perhaps puts the sprinkler debate in some sort of perspective compared to all the other aspects of fire safety which have been cast under the spotlight in recent weeks. "Effectively, you should not be using sprinklers to make up for design deficiencies elsewhere," says Mr Glocking. ▶

"A sprinkler system doesn't compensate for having a dangerous facade."

Research appears to corroborate that view. A 2005 study by the Building Research Establishment (BRE) concluded that: “For the majority of scenarios experimentally studied, the addition of residential sprinkler protection proved effective in potentially reducing casualties in the room of fire origin and connected spaces.”

However, it added that sprinklers were “not found to be a complete panacea”.

Burning funds

Experts appear broadly pro-sprinkler, then, but what are the associated costs? That, it seems, is a difficult question to answer. “I can’t give you any idea of how much it’s going to cost,” says Mr Galea. “There are wildly varying costs depending on individual buildings.”

The councils which have so far ventured to provide cost estimates for retrofitting sprinklers in their high rises have floated starkly disparate figures. Stockport Council, for example, surmises that the work in its 22 blocks could cost £5m, or £227,272 per block. Sheffield City Council has estimates in a similar region, at £6m for 24 buildings - £250,000 per block.

However, head down to the South Coast and the picture is very different. Southampton City Council is looking at a £12m cost for 19 residential towers, and Portsmouth City Council £12.2m for 13. That’s £631,578 and £938,462 per building respectively.

The differences aren’t just regional, though - there are clearly numerous factors involved here. Scale could play a role, for instance. Birmingham City Council believes retrofitting sprinklers in its 213 high rises could cost £31m - a huge amount of money, but a relatively modest £145,540 per block.

A spokesperson for BAFSA said that in addition to more obvious factors such as the size of the block and whether corridors and lobbies are also protected, unit layout, the availability of water supply and mark-ups added by preferred main contractors can all push up the bill.

Incidentally, BAFSA and the Fire Sector Federation have both estimated that retrofitting sprinklers in Grenfell Tower would have cost £200,000.

“That doesn’t seem like a great deal of money,” says Mr Glockling. Perhaps not, particularly when one considers the now-infamous renovation



of the tower in 2016 cost £10m. But for cash-strapped councils straining under the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap, any new level of investment is a lot of money, and there are ongoing maintenance costs associated with sprinkler systems.

A cost-benefit report carried out by the BRE on behalf of the Chief Fire Officers Association in 2012 found sprinklers are a cost-effective measure in “most blocks of purpose-built flats and larger blocks of converted flats... where costs are shared”.

Yet that was five years ago, a very different time in market terms. Moreover, *Inside Housing* revealed that in 2015, fewer than 1% of council tower blocks had sprinklers fitted within their homes. However, more had systems covering communal areas, after coroners recommended that social landlords consider retrofitting sprinklers in high-rise blocks following inquests into the fatal fires at Lakanal House in Southwark in 2009 and Southampton’s Shirley Towers in 2010.

John Bibby, chief executive of the Association of Retained Council Housing, anticipates an issue there.

“If everybody now starts rushing to put sprinklers in their buildings, the question is whether the sprinkler industry is capable of coping with that, and are the costs going to go up to deal with that?” he says.

The capacity of sprinkler-fitting firms has rarely been tested at the scale we might be about to see in this

“It is the landlord’s responsibility to ensure that people are safe. Cost should not get in the way.”

country, and the costs remain a relative unknown.

However, there is another strand to the sprinkler cost discussion. “Other fire protection measures are really only geared up for protecting life,” says Mr Gough. “But sprinklers protect both life and property. Can you afford to lose your housing stock? Can you afford the legal costs of not having these measures in place?”

Mr Glockling echoes that point, and adds: “At the moment our building regulations are about life safety and life safety only, and even then they have a very limited remit. I believe that if people understood this - the very low bar that building regulations actually set - then at the time of procurement they might be persuaded to take extra measures like adding sprinklers.”

With the loss of social housing - yet another conversation in the Grenfell debate - a huge risk in itself, needing sprinklers merely to make a building technically safe might not be enough.

“Even with some tower blocks which are not overclad, some of those councils are saying for reassurance’s sake we’re going to retrofit sprinklers

anyway,” says Mr Bibby. “And the reassurance factor is not to be underestimated. We may get a problem whereby some tall buildings become difficult to let. That may well be a problem to some local authorities, and they may have to step further than they actually need to fill their stock.”

In the past, sprinklers have often been as unpopular with tenants as they have with treasurers. But that was pre-Grenfell. Now, that could easily change.

The Westminster wallet

Inside Housing’s campaign Never Again calls on the government to fund the retrofitting of sprinkler systems in all tower blocks across the UK (except where there are specific structural reasons not to do so), in recognition of the fact that without this there would inevitably be a piecemeal response with tenants footing the bill.

So far, communities secretary Sajid Javid has insisted that “any work that is necessary” should be carried out, and where councils “cannot afford it they should approach us”. We sought a little more clarity on this point, to be told: “It is the landlord’s responsibility to ensure that people are safe, and cost considerations should not get in the way of this. Where work is necessary to ensure the fire safety of social housing, we will ensure that lack of financial resources will not prevent it going ahead.”

And despite Mr Javid’s assertion last Thursday that no local authorities have yet asked for assistance from the government to pay for extra fire safety measures, five claim to have done so, with no response at the time of writing.

“I don’t want my residents feeling unsafe, I don’t want them going to sleep wondering what could happen,” says Muhammed Butt, leader of Brent Council, which has earmarked an initial £10m for fire safety upgrades in its blocks, including sprinklers, and is one of the authorities to have contacted the Department for Communities and Local Government. “But that £10m should be coming from the secretary of state.”

Whether the government will put its hand in its pocket to fund sprinklers remains to be seen. What is clear, though, is that doing so may represent one step towards ensuring a disaster like Grenfell never happens again. ■