

News reporter of the year – Sophie Barnes

Fire safety issues uncovered in blocks

In the aftermath of Grenfell, with fire safety in tower blocks the number one national priority, Sophie single-handedly produced one of the most rigorous analyses of high-rise fire safety ever conducted.

Using the Freedom of Information Act, she received 436 fire risk assessments. Meticulously reading through each of these and documenting the common issues allowed her to report the terrifying scale of fire safety issues: 268 blocks had problems with fire doors, 71 had no emergency lighting, 54 had no ventilation in escape routes. Her story cut through the national narrative which only focused on cladding and serves as a warning to landlords and tenants alike.

BBC Breakfast, Sky News, the Press Association and several local BBC News stations picked up the investigation, which was public interest journalism at its finest – the kind that can only be delivered by a meticulously dedicated reporter with specialist knowledge.

Tory 'social rent' plan means affordable rent

When the Conservatives pledged – weeks before the general election – a new generation of socially rented housing should they win, the sector reeled in shock. This was, after all, the party which had ended funding for social rented housing in 2010.

In this story, Sophie was able to unveil this pledge as spin. She secured an interview with then housing minister Gavin Barwell, despite him defending a slim majority in Croydon, by travelling to his constituency and tracking him down on the campaign trail. Under questioning he admitted the pledge actually referred to 'affordable rented' homes – a hugely important distinction.

After Sophie broke the news, it was followed up by The Independent and others – going viral on Twitter with more than 20,000 shares. The story demonstrates the political importance of specialist reporters in understanding a brief well enough to see straight through the spin.

Government delay in reviewing fire safety regulations 'putting tower blocks at risk'

Three months before a fire tore through Grenfell Tower, killing at least 80 people, Sophie's prescient reporting warned that a delay in reviewing building regulations was putting tower blocks at risk, according to experts.

Successive government ministers had delayed reviewing the building regulations despite calls from various coroners and fire safety experts to take another look at the regulations because they were unclear.

It was only after the Grenfell Tower fire that ministers announced a review into building regulations, four years after it was first promised.

INSIDE HOUSING

Sprinkler debate

Are sprinklers the answer to stopping the spread of tower block fires?

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Tower block anxiety

What a Solihull landlord is doing to allay tenant fears over fire safety in high rises

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Fire safety issues uncovered in blocks



Fire safety Fire risk assessments reveal worrying problems in many tower blocks in England

Sophie Barnes

Fire safety flaws including defective fire doors and holes which could allow smoke and flames to spread were discovered in hundreds of English tower blocks, an exclusive investigation has revealed.

In the first major analysis of fire risk assessments (FRAs) since the

Grenfell fire, *Inside Housing* examined 436 of approximately 4,000 tower blocks in England to reveal the most common fire safety issues in social housing. It shows 268 (61%) had problems with fire doors that were not to the correct standard, damaged or did not close properly.

A further 71 blocks had no emergency lighting, or limited or faulty

lighting in stairwells or other communal areas, and 109 blocks were found to have holes or gaps in service rooms such as electrical cupboards and drying rooms which could allow fire and smoke to more easily pass through.

There were also exposed pipes or cables hanging down from ceilings in 44 blocks and 54 with no ventilation

or faulty ventilation in staircases to clear smoke from a fire.

The overwhelming majority of the assessments were 'Type 1' checks, which only look at a building's communal areas and do not assess the inside of flats or external features such as cladding.

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→ Fixing furnishing for new tenants, see p22

INSIDIE HOUSING

Unbuckling the belt

Is it time to loosen restrictions limiting building on the green belt?

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Housing comes first

How the devolved governments have approached the Housing First method

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Tory 'social rent' plan means affordable rent

Election Insight Gavin Barwell reveals "new generation of social rent" will be affordable rent levels

Sophie Barnes

A "new generation of homes for social rent" promised by the Conservatives will instead be affordable rented homes, the housing minister has admitted.

The Conservatives recently announced they would strike deals with councils and associations to help them build a "new generation of homes for social rent" citing the loss of 300,000 social rented homes compared to 20 years ago. However, in an interview with *Inside Housing* Gavin Barwell (right) admitted the new council homes would be at affordable rents, which can be up to 80% of market rate.

He said: "I think the idea is that they are

what you'd call affordable rents in housing terminology, but they are social housing."

Mr Barwell also cast doubt on whether a high-value asset levy for councils will still be used to fund the Right to Buy for housing associations - a key manifesto pledge from 2015 which was left out of the document published last month.

He said: "As and when we move to national roll-out [of the Right to Buy extension] that's a decision we'll take with the chancellor."

However, he said the Conservatives remain committed to giving housing association tenants the right to buy their home.

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PRESS ASSOCIATION

→ We meet three election hopefuls, see page 24



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Fire safety

Delay in review putting tower blocks at risk

APPG on fire safety says regulations do not consider Lakanal inquest

Sophie Barnes

Tower blocks across the UK could be at risk of fire safety failures because of a government delay in reviewing building regulations, experts have warned.

The All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety and Rescue Group has been calling for a review of building regulations for years.

Fire safety failings were uncovered following a devastating tower block fire at Lakanal House in south London in 2009, which killed six people. These failings included a lack of fire risk assessments, and panels on the outside walls not providing the necessary fire resistance.

The council recently pleaded guilty to four criminal charges relating to fire safety lapses and paid a £570,000 fine.



Fire safety failings were uncovered after a fire at Lakanal House, south London

Housing minister Gavin Barwell said in the Commons last October that the government will review Part B of the regulations, which relate to fire safety, "following the Lakanal House fire".

Ronnie King, honorary administrative secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), said the

building regulations "haven't taken account of the Lakanal House fire inquest, or updated recent accredited research".

He added: "We still have 4,000 older tower blocks in the UK which have the same regulations applied to them."

Mr King is concerned about

the "failure of three successive government ministers" to review building regulations related to fire safety.

Mr King said a review of the regulations "would take account of all the errors that occurred in Lakanal House, and is a sure way of ensuring that everything is being done to prevent such a recurrence."

Fire safety expert Sam Webb said "really serious questions" should be asked in parliament about fire safety.

He added that there is a "conflict" between fire safety and the materials that are used to make buildings more energy efficient.

He said: "The materials used are not fire-resistant and in some cases they're flammable."

A spokesperson for the Department for Communities and Local Government declined to give a date for the building regulations review and added it will take place "in due course".

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Stock transfer

Hammersmith plan scrapped

Plans to transfer 17,000 homes in Hammersmith and Fulham into a new community-led housing association have been abandoned.

The London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham's mooted stock transfer of council housing has been wound down, because central government refused to write off the cost of debt held against the assets.

The transfer, which came under one of the Labour administration's key manifesto pledges, would have led to the creation of a new "community gateway" company, giving residents power over their estates and preventing estates comprising 17,000

"The council has extensively explored all other options to finance a stock transfer." *London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham report*

homes from demolition.

A Residents' Commission on Council Housing was set up in late 2015 following the well-documented election of a Labour-led council in 2014, replacing the long-standing Conservative incumbents. Chaired by former

housing minister Keith Hill, it has spent nearly £1m on costs including legal fees and "specialist project staff".

At the time of the last council election, Labour was deemed to have won, in part, due to its manifesto pledges on housing.

The report announcing the closure says: "The council has with its advisors and the shadow board extensively explored all other options to finance a stock transfer, and has concluded it is not possible to produce a financially viable business case which also satisfies residents' objectives."

Councils

Bristol puts forward £175m plan

Bristol City Council has proposed plans to set up a housing company as part of a new £175m five-year delivery programme.

A £57m grants package for affordable house builders up to 2021/2022, which was included in the proposals, was approved by its cabinet this week. The council is under extra pressure to reach a 2,000-a-year housebuilding goal set by city mayor Marvin Rees after it was forced to cut its own target because of funding pressures imposed by the government's rent cut.