

## Scoop of the year

### *Revealed: fire spread linked to panels*

The missed warnings in the build-up to the Grenfell Tower disaster have become a well-established part of the narrative about the tragedy. What is less well known is that the final, clearest and most specific warning was delivered to the housing sector exclusively on the front page of *Inside Housing* exactly three months before the blaze.

In August 2016, a fire at Shepherd's Court, west London, started by a tumble dryer, ripped through five floors of a council-owned tower block. The fire received media attention, but soon disappeared from the national agenda. However *Inside Housing* kept digging.

With the council refusing to explain why the flames had spread, news editor Pete Apps sent Freedom of Information Act requests to the London Fire Brigade and the council seeking more information. In April, these finally paid off. The fire brigade released a report – which had been kept secret since November – showing insulation panels fitted to the outside of the building in a refurbishment carried the blaze quickly up the tower. The brigade had warned London boroughs – but not those outside of London – about the risks.

This was reported in a striking front page on *Inside Housing's* 13 April edition – with experts warning the impact could be “catastrophic” if repeated.

Sadly, the national media did not follow the story up until after Grenfell, when it finally made [the front page of the Evening Standard](#) and [the BBC](#), with Pete appearing on the BBC's Newsnight programme to discuss it.

This scoop is the clearest demonstration of *Inside Housing's* role in signalling the risks to high rises before Grenfell, [as documented by The Guardian here](#). It was a scoop that demonstrates the magazine's expertise and diligence in chasing difficult stories. It remains heart-breaking that the warnings went unheeded until it was too late.

# INSIDE HOUSING

## Legal guardians

What does the future hold for property guardian companies and their stewards?

*Feature, page 16*



## Waiting for the axe

A look at which areas will be worst hit by the housing benefit cut to young people

*Feature, page 22*



# Revealed: fire spread linked to panels

■ **INVESTIGATION REVEALS CONCERNS OVER PANELS IN BLAZE WHICH SPREAD ACROSS FIVE FLOORS**

■ **FIRE SERVICE ISSUES WARNING TO ALL COUNCILS TO CHECK HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS**

**Fire safety** Documents reveal safety flaws in insulation panels

**Pete Apps**

Councils have been warned over the use of insulation panels on high-rise buildings, after tests revealed they “likely” caused a devastating fire to rip through a tower block last year.

Flames tore across five floors of the Shepherd’s Court building in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham last August in scenes reminiscent of the Lakanal House tragedy, after a faulty tumble dryer caught

fire on the seventh floor.

Documents released to *Inside Housing* under the Freedom of Information Act this week revealed that an investigation showed panels attached to the outside of the building came apart when burnt, exposing flammable insulation material and plywood to the blaze.

It concluded this “is likely to have assisted the fire in spreading up the outside of the building”, with the London Fire Brigade warning Hammersmith

and Fulham and all other London boroughs over use of the panels. No details about the cause of the fire’s spread had previously been released.

In 2009, six people – including three children – died when a fire spread through Lakanal House in south London. A coroner’s investigation later revealed panels attached to the building contributed to the spread of the blaze.

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LONDON FIRE BRIGADE

→ **Meet the sector’s future leaders. See page 10**

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## And 4 pages of jobs

### Offsite

# East London modular plan

## Partnership to create homes and commercial property for Docklands

**Luke Barratt**

A housing consortium is planning to build 3,000 homes in east London with a new modular factory.

The Silvertown Partnership (TSP), a £3.5bn scheme run by developer First Base, aims to create homes and commercial property in east London. It has partnered with engineering giant Aecom, which will provide the technology required for modular homes in the Docklands.

Aecom is seeking planning permission to construct a modular factory which, it is hoped, will deliver 500 homes a year. The first homes are expected to be provided next year.

Phil Wade, a director at TSP, said: "We are excited to be partnering with Aecom to deliver 3,000 homes for Londoners via cutting-edge construction methods. As the government stated in its recent Housing White Paper, innovation is essential to meet housing demand in the UK, and this is a bold step that will help us deliver these much-needed new homes in

significantly less time. We look forward to working with Newham and the Greater London Authority to advance these plans."

Of the 3,000 homes being provided from the factory, 35% will be affordable. Aecom will be responsible for designing and assembling the homes on site.

Modular construction has begun to take hold in the UK, with a number of new entrants to the market in the past 18 months. Last year, *Inside Housing* revealed insurance giant Legal and General was planning a factory near Leeds with the capacity for 3,000 homes per year.

In December, Your Housing Group signed a £2.75bn deal with a Chinese consortium to develop a number of factories across the country. Swan Housing Association is planning an offsite factory, which should deliver its first homes this summer.

The government has been seeking to increase modular construction in housebuilding in England, hoping it will speed up development. It plans to favour offsite construction in its Accelerated Construction programme, with large portfolios of land given to developers to provide volume for offsite factories.

### Fire

# Insulation panels helped fire spread

→ Continued from front

Arnold Tarling, chartered surveyor at Hindwoods and fire safety expert, said this kind of fire can be "catastrophic" in high rises, which are supposed to contain the spread of flames for at least 30 minutes, with residents often advised to stay put as a result.

In response to the findings, Hammersmith and Fulham originally said it "had no prior knowledge" of any fire risk relating to the panels. It has now commissioned CS Todd and Associates to examine the issues raised by the LFB. The panels, which were made of polystyrene mounted on plywood covered by a 1mm steel sheet, were installed during window replacement work 10 years ago. This was originally done by now defunct contractor Connaught and completed by Balfour Beatty, which is not thought to have installed any panels.

An LFB spokesperson said: "We have written to Hammersmith and Fulham Council and all other London boroughs to inform them of the results and have advised that they review the use of these panels in their buildings."

A Hammersmith and Fulham spokesperson said it had "commissioned leading practitioners in fire safety and fire engineering, to examine in detail the issues raised by LFB".

## From the web

[www.insidehousing.co.uk](http://www.insidehousing.co.uk)

### ● Five most read

1. Staff dissatisfaction grows despite pay increases
2. Giant supermarket chains plot residential development
3. Your Housing Group plots major stock rationalisation
4. LHA: a reverse supermarket sweep
5. The politics of the benefit cap

### ● Five most commented

1. Your Housing Group plots major stock rationalisation
2. Government rejects committee recommendation over Right to Buy funding
3. More freedom but more

### accountability

4. 'Keep reputational risk in mind' warns regulator as changes kick in
5. Inheritance tax change will have huge impact on the market

### ● Blog

Digital services promote self-confidence and esteem among tenants, says *Catriona Simons* of The Guinness Partnership, [insidehousing.co.uk/7019469.article](http://insidehousing.co.uk/7019469.article)



### ● Blog

Deregulation will change the way associations operate, but there is no suggestion they will move away from social purpose, says *John Bryant* of the National Housing Federation [insidehousing.co.uk/7019565.article](http://insidehousing.co.uk/7019565.article)

