

Tenants' fears 'routinely ignored'

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Survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire are calling for a change in culture amid a rise in complaints against landlords

Social housing tenants' complaints about safety and maintenance are routinely ignored despite the Grenfell Tower tragedy, residents have claimed.

The survivors of the tower block fire are calling for a change in the culture of how social housing residents are treated by landlords.

The Housing Ombudsman Service ruled on a record number of formal investigations last year. The service, which settles disputes between tenants and social housing and local authority landlords, had its rulings double in the past two years to reach 1,649 in 2016-17, up from 819 in 2014-15.

In 2016-17 the ombudsman received 15,112 complaints from tenants who could not get a satisfactory resolution with their landlords directly, with 81 per cent of these complaints closed without a formal investigation. In the latest annual report it said that there had been a "continued increase in demand for investigation".

Social housing tenants from across London spoke out this week about landlords ignoring their complaints, at a meeting of the London Assembly housing committee. Sian Berry, the chairwoman, said the meeting had been convened because the Grenfell fire had "focused all our minds on how we do the management of our homes". She added: "It's not just a matter of health and safety but life and death."

Grenfell United, a support group for survivors and the bereaved, said in a statement: "For many years our concerns, our voices, our worries, were overlooked. We are a diverse and hardworking community who live in social housing but come from all walks of life: teachers,

social workers, business people. We played by the rules, did everything that was asked of us, raised concerns [about the maintenance and refurbishment of the tower] through all the proper channels and were completely ignored by those with the power to help us."

Social housing tenants painted a picture of social housing and local authority landlords increasingly becoming disconnected from their tenants and acting like private property companies.

The complaints at the meeting included a mother and child in Tower Hamlets who needed 12 treatments for bed bugs in a year after their housing association allegedly took no action. A pensioner in Barnet who had hip replacement surgery was said to have been forced to throw her keys out of the window for six months to let care staff in because the broken security doors in her block of flats were never fixed.

Caroline Mandelson, a social tenant in Barnet, said that three fire safety doors in her block of flats had been broken for seven out of the ten years she had lived there.

Pat Turnbull, regional director of the London Tenants Federation (LTF), called on the Greater London Authority to introduce mandatory tenant involvement to the funding criteria set for social landlords to manage properties. Ms Turnbull said: "We tenants live in our homes and nobody knows them better than we do and it often seems that we're the last people to be listened to when our homes are the question under discussion. The terrible Grenfell fire shows the worst that can happen when tenants are ignored, sidelined and regarded as unimportant.

"We regard it as extremely urgent that the reduction and fragmentation of tenants federations that has been going on for so long should be reversed and that tenants should be listened to."

The LTF is urging Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, to re-establish a housing forum for tenants, elected from across the capital, to feed into housing policy.

Terry McGreenera, a Tower Hamlets Homes resident, said: "I have been attending the Grenfell inquiry commemoration hearings this week and it's sad that we only hear from tenants when they are dead. The purpose of housing providers as it is at the moment is to save money and not to serve us as tenants and that must change."

The housing ombudsman said: "Changes in the sector are likely to have had an impact on the demand for our service and the increased number of determinations since 2014-15. These include factors such as the 1 per cent rent reduction, the impact of welfare reforms and the many changes to landlord operating models and structures. The increase in determinations could also be a result of better signposting to our service by landlords."