Reframing Social Housing in England

Simon P Taylor

Arts, Education and Business, University of Cumbria, England

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how social housing in the England has come under scrutiny from the government over the last year following the tragic fire that took place in 2017 at the Grenfell tower block in Kensington, London that resulted in over 70 deaths and it asks why the government has used this episode to reframe the debate about social housing. It looks at the legal framework regarding fire safety in the country and describes the responsibilities that landlords are required to comply with to provide homes for their customers that have had the appropriate fire safety measures implemented. Social housing is contextualised in regard to the focus of successive governments since 2010, firstly the Conservative dominated Coalition and then successive Conservative governments. The political ideology followed by these administrations was informed by the Neoliberal agenda that had been set during the 1980s which sought to reduce state involvement in social housing, the privatisation of housing, the use of market forces within the provision of housing and the promotion of the home ownership agenda. The introduction of austerity as a policy by the Coalition government in 2010 after their election was a response to the Global Financial Crash (GFC) of 2008 and has been used by the government to carry out large cuts in the provision of welfare services to those in need. The theoretical underpinnings of the process of framing and re-framing policies are described as well as how this is being applied to social housing in England in the twenty first century. It concludes, by asking how a tragedy that has health and safety implications for the fire safety management within social housing, has become a focal point for re-framing the debate about social housing.

*Corresponding Author
E-mail: simon_taylor@rocketmail.com

INTRODUCTION

'In one of the richest, most priviledged corners of the UK – the world, even – would a fire like this have happened in a private owned block of luxury flats? If you believe the answer is no, even if you think it is less likely, then its clear that we need a fundamental rethink of social housing in this country' [1].

This statement was made by Savid Javid, the Minister for communities at a housing conference three months after the Grenfell fire. An investigation by Inside Housing found that between January 2015 and December 2017 87 enforcement notices were served by the London Fire brigade (LFB) on blocks of flats that were privately owned whereas only 62 were served on social landlords in the same period [1]. Was the statement made by Savid Javid a reaction to an event that was not based on the actual

evidence or a platitude aimed at using the tragedy to reframe the debate about what a conservative government conceive to be the real problem – social housing?

FIRE PROTECTION IN ENGLAND: THE LEGAL REQUIREMENT

Landlords have a legal obligation to ensure the safety of people who reside in their properties from the threat of a fire. The Housing Act 2004 and the Smoke and Carbon monoxide Alarm (England) regulations 2015 provide statutory requirements for inside of a domestic premises whereas the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order (2005) applies to the common parts of the premises (hallways, stairwells, common areas). The owner, agent or controller of the premises is deemed to be the *'Responsible Person'* who legally has an absolute duty to ensure that legislation is complied with.

Fire Risk Assessment (FRA)

As *'Responsible Persons'* landlords have to carry out an FRA in their properties to identify fire hazards, persons who are at risk and to make recommendations to remove or reduce the risk. The legislation requires that the FRA achieves a satisfactory outcome through the evaluation of all the risks and the assessment should be suitable and sufficient. This is not defined within the legislation. The aim of the FRA is to reduce the chances of a fire occurring, limit fire spreading, alerting people in the event of a fire and ensuring that the means of escape are suitable. This is done by identifying all fire related hazards in a systematic way within the premises and assessing the impact they could have on the residents and the building. In identifying the risks it also states the control measures that need to be put in place.

FRAs are undertaken in 5 steps.

Step	Stage	Activity
1	Identify fire hazards	Source of ignition, fuel, oxygen
2	Identify people at risk	People in and around the premises / who are at risk
3	Evaluate, remove or reduce, and protect from risk	Evaluate the risk of a fire starting, the risk to people, remove / reduce fire hazards / risk to people, protect people by introducing fire precautions
4	Record, plan, inform, instruct and train	Record any major findings and action, discuss / work with responsible people, prepare an emergency plan, inform and instruct relevant people, provide training
5	Review	Review FRA regularly, make changes where necessary

Table 1 – 5 steps of an FRA

Source: Adapted from [2]

A FRA needs to be reviewed on a regular basis and a new one carried out if there is a change in the use of the building or it is altered. Notices need to be put up in the building providing instructions for residents and visitors in terms of what to do in the event of a fire. Fire assembly points and exit routes need to be sign posted.

Statutory Compliance and Enforcement Notices

To enforce the RRO 92005) the Fire & Rescue Service authority appoints inspectors who have specific powers to enter a building, enforce an order, inspect records and samples from a property (if required) to find out about the fire resistance of the materials being tested. An inspector is required to have evidence of their authority to be able to carry out their duties under the RRO (2005). If any inspector finds a premises non-compliant with the legal requirements they can issue an advice letter, a deficiencies letter, an action plan or notices to the responsible person in charge of the premises. The types of notice that can be issued include;

- Alterations notice which requires a notice to be given of any intended change to a high risk building
- Enforcement notice I issued it there is significant failures to comply with the law. It states the reasons why the notice is being served, which part of the law it does not comply with and the course of action to be taken by the responsible person to remedy the fault. Before issuing this type of notice the inspector needs to consult with any other statutory bodies that have an interest in that property.
- Prohibition notice relates to situations where there is an imminent danger or serious threat to life, such as unsuitability of premises use, overcrowding, blocked escape routes, defective fire system or structural fire resistance problems. The notice will state what should be prohibited, the reasons why and directions about the measures to be taken to remedy the faults.

A failure to comply with the legislation is a criminal offence that can be dealt with in the magistrates and crown courts. It has to be proved that negligence to carry out one of the activities in Table 2 has caused a risk of death or serious injury to people.

Number	Activity
1	Duty to take general fire precautions
2	Fire Risk assessment
3	Principles of prevention
4	Fire safety arrangements
5	Elimination or reduction of risk from dangerous substances
6	Fire fighting and detection

7	Emergency routes and exits
8	Procedures for serious and imminent danger
9	maintenance
10	Safety assistance
11	Provision of information for employees
12	Provision of information to employers / self employed
13	Training
14	Co-operation

Table 2 – Activities under fire legislation

Source: adapted from [2]

Blocks of Flats

A block of flats is recognised as having a high degree of risk attached to it should a fire break out. Landlords are required to carry out a FRA of all common areas in blocks to identify fire hazards, risk and actions to be taken. Landlords should ensure that the activities identified in Table 3 are carried out.

Number	Activity
1	Fit smoke detectors – maintained and tested
2	Ensure outside doors can be opened
3	Have a smoking policy for the building
4	Carry out electrical installation checks
5	Maintenance of fire alarms and emergency lighting
6	Ensure all escape routes are clear
7	All doors to escape routes to be a 30 minute fire door (FD30)

Table 3 – Fire safety activities to be undertaken by a landlord for a block of flats

Source: Adapted from [2]

AFTER THE GRENFELL FIRE

A fire broke out at Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey towerblock of social housing of 129 flats in North Kensington, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, West London. It caused 71 deaths, over 70 injuries and resulted in 223 people escaped. The police and fire services believe the fire started accidentally in a fridge-freezer on the fourth floor. The fire was spread and accelerated by the building's exterior cladding.

At the Chartered Institute of Housing Conference 2017 held in Manchester Andrew Rawnsley, the Chief Political commentator for *The Observer* newspaper stated 'That burnt-out hulk on the skyline of one of the worlds wealthiest cities is a rebuke to the whole country – we haven't paid enough attention to social housing' [8]. This statement was made to draw the attention of people at the conference not only to the tragedy of the Grenfell fire and the fire safety issues that had arisen from it but the metaphor that it represented about the state of the social housing sector in the UK. The aftermath of the fire highlighted the differences between rich and poor in wealthy areas, the ineptitude of the landlord managing the social housing block, the disconnecting of public agencies from the public they serve and the overall decline in the provision of social [9]. The political ideology of the market has driven housing policy in the UK since the 1980s and successive governments have overseen the evolution of a system in which the market is relied upon to provide housing that is affordable. However, for those who do not have the income or financial power to compete in the marketplace for housing there is an increased precariousness about their housing options and ability to secure affordable, secure and good accommodation [9].

Following the Global Financial Crash in 2008/9 a Coalition between the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats was voted into government in the UK in 2010. This administration introduced a policy of austerity which sought to role back the influence of the state, cut the welfare budget and pursue policies that championed the rights of the individual. In terms of housing 'all government effort has been aimed at encouraging home ownership and social housing….. has been actively discouraged' [10].

ERA OF AUSTERITY

Since the 1980s 'neoliberal free market policies have become embedded' [12] [21] in the economic, political and operational aspects of the UK. A key part of the neoliberal ideology includes enabling enterprising and entrepreneurial individuals create wealth which will in turn create employment, economic growth and allow financial benefits to trickle down to the less wealthy within society. The creation of such an environment that encourages risk taking and entrepreneurial activity is one where regulation is restricted, financial rewards are encouraged, the burdens of taxation are reduced and interference from the state is curtailed [11] [12].

Role of housing orgs getting fat

A report by the Resolution Foundation looked at the impact of the problems of accessing affordable housing for different generations. The generations are roughly classed as the baby boomer generation (up to the mid-1960s), generation X (between 19602s and 1980) and the millennial generation (1980- 2000). The report stated that:

'With home ownership often out of reach, and options in the social rented sector highly constrained, it is no surprise that four-in-ten millennials rent privately at the age of 30. While an acceptable and indeed often preferred tenure when footloose and fancy free, the limited security the PRS provides in England and Wales makes it far less fit for purpose as families begin to age. With the number of households with children renting privately tripling in recent years, and up to 16 per cent of millennials set to rent in the PRS from cradle to grave, it is time for warm words to be converted into serious action on tenancy reform'[14].

FRAMING AND RE-FRAMING – THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The word *frame* can be used as a noun (a frame) and as a verb (to frame). As a noun it identifies a structure that holds things in place *and as* a verb it refers to the placing of things into the frame [5]. This word has been used to describe how people use their experiences and their views to interpret the world around them and represent it to others through a *frame*. It can also represent how people can *frame* that picture of the world by adding to it or taking away from it. The human mind deals with complex information and can put filters onto that information which can be selective depending on that person's perceptions and beliefs. The frame that a person will develop will be based on underlying structures of beliefs, values, and experiences.

A body of academic work exists that has developed the concept of a *frame* into a tool of analysis [6]. They have been increasingly used as a way of understanding situations and to present them in another way by *reframing* them. Reframing is a process which seeks to show an issue or a situation in a different way but ensuring that the details are the same [3]. The way that issues, situations and events are perceived can vary between different people depending on a range of factors including how they view the world, their experiences and their emotional state. By looking at the same details of an issue or a situation in a different way can change its meaning completely [3]. Used as a tool by politicians in America reframing is a way of identifying a specific message to realign the debate and focus the dialogue in a certain direction and with a specific audience in mind. Words and language are important to altering the perspective in which an issue is seen and to successfully change the way that it is seen without altering the facts. Examples of reframing can include putting the emphasis on some words and not others, selecting specific topics and re-interpreting what people say [4]. In the 2016 Presidential election Donald Trump used a strategy of constantly repeating key words and stating his position on certain issues [7]. It is argued that 'People tend to frame political arguments in terms of their own values' and so it is more likely to appeal to your political opponents if the argument is reframed in terms of your opponents values [7].

Reframing the Discourse

A vision of the future of social housing has been offered by the professional body for housing in the UK as being either:

- An ambulance service – only providing help for short periods for those with a high level of housing need
- A safety net – providing wider assistance over a longer period to those not able to afford market housing and for those who are homeless
- A wider affordability role – available for a range of income groups, providing quality accommodation that is competitive when compared to the private rented sector and curbing price growth [15]

CONCLUSION

The tragic fire that took place in 2017 within the Grenfell block of flats in Kensington, London has *health and safety implications for the fire safety management within social housing which are being investigated via public enquiry. However, this tragedy is also being used by the government as a focal point for re-framing the debate about social housing. The provision of social housing is not the cause of the fire tragedy so it is not clear why it is being discussed unless the objective is the continued fragmentation and dilution of social housing in England.*

REFERENCES

[1] Inside Housing, (2017a), Disguised Luxury, 15/12/17

[2] Corgi Technical Services, (2017), Qualification Notes, Hampshire: Corgi

[3] Watzlawick P, Weakland J and Fisch R, (1974), *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*, New York: Norton

[4] Phillips B, (1999), Reformulating Dispute Narratives Through Active Listening, *Mediation Quarterly*,17(2), 161-180

[5] Oxford Living Dictionaries, (2018), Dictionary. Available at http//:en.oxforddictionaries.com

[6] Lewicki R, Gray B & Elliott M, (2003), *Making sense of intractable environmental conflicts: Concepts and cases*, Washington, D.C.: Island Press

[7] Rathje S, (2017), The power of framing: It's not what you say, it's how you say it, *Guardian*, 20/7/17

[8] Alafat T, (2017), Renewed Focus, *Inside Housing*, p16

[9] Neate P, (2017), After Grenfell, we need to talk about social housing, *New Statesman*, 8/9/17

[10] Dudman J, (2017), Social housing: haunted by Grenfell, hemmed in by cuts, left in limbo, *Guardian*, 22/9/17

[11] Taylor S P, (2017), Austerity: Inequality in the UK, *International Journal of Housing and Human Settlement Planning*, Vo 3, No 2, pp 16-25

 [12] Taylor S, (2017), *Austerity: Punishing the poor for the mistakes of the rich* (eBook), CA, USA, Rakuten Kobo, ISBN: 9781386648451

[13] Taylor S, (2017), Neoliberalism and the marketization of social housing: A study of four countries, *International Journal of Science: Basic and Applied,* Vol 36, No 7

[14] Judge L & Tomlinson D, (2018), *HOME IMPROVEMENTS: Action to address the housing challenges faced by young people*, Resolution Foundation

[15] Alafat T, (2018), Time for a sea change, *Inside Housing*, 27/4/18