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# Learning from experiences of remediation in the building safety crisis

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# Executive summary

## Background

Building safety problems identified in the aftermath of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire have resulted in the need for large-scale remediation of buildings around the UK. In many cases, this will mean removing external wall systems comprised of cladding and insulation, and retrofitting buildings with alternative materials. In some cases, internal works to communal areas and people's homes are also required, for example to remedy inadequate compartmentation or replace flammable materials. These are long-term programmes of work that are being undertaken in close proximity to households, with a significant impact on their daily lives. Tom Hunt, MP for Ipswich, described one building in which he came across "conditions that I would feel guilty about an animal living in, never mind human beings", with "shrink wrap... leading to virtually no natural light at all in the building. Bars across the windows were added, meaning that getting fresh air was very hard", with serious anxiety and mental health impacts for residents (Westminster Hall Debate, 2022).

This report is based on a survey of 149 leaseholders and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 leaseholders in England who have experience of building safety remediation. The purpose of the research is twofold. First, to report the experiences of leaseholders living in buildings which have been undergoing remediation. Second, to generate learning and key principles in order to improve the experience in the many buildings in which work is yet to commence.

As the research has been specifically undertaken with long leaseholders of flats in England, throughout the report the term 'leaseholders' is used, rather than residents or tenants. However, many of the issues described in the report are likely to overlap significantly with the experiences of private and social rent tenants in mixed-tenure buildings undergoing remediation. As such, many of the key learning points which feature in the last section of the report will be of direct relevance to the remediation of residential buildings, regardless of the tenure structure.

## Planning remediation

90% of leaseholders responding to the survey and living in buildings during remediation agreed that the work had changed how they felt about their home. The fundamental problem with remediation so far is that in many cases discussed here it has proceeded without consideration for the experience of those who are living through the works, and whose homes are impacted. In many cases, leaseholders have not been viewed as having a voice in remediation, and there is little evidence that their interests have been at the heart of decision-making. However, steps can be taken to minimise the negative impact of remediation works on those living through these major works.

Prior to work commencing, 68% of leaseholders responding to the survey did not have a good understanding of the impact that remediation would have. There is a need to improve pre-remediation communication, and to clearly set out lines of responsibility, what work is being done to the building (the scope of work), when it will be done (the schedule of work), and how leaseholders are likely to be affected (the impact of work). During interviews, it was clear that not all leaseholders were offered an open meeting with the different organisations involved in the project before remediation started. Only 41% of leaseholders responding to the survey felt that they understood who was responsible for managing the remediation project.

In planning remediation works and choosing different courses of action, there has not been enough focus on the experience of those who would be living in the buildings. This fits with the overall response to the survey, in which 80% of leaseholders did not feel that their views were listened to when planning remediation works. In interviews, many leaseholders described a process of being told about aspects of the works, rather than being consulted or involved in a discussion. This contributed to the overall impression that the conduct of remediation work was another facet of the building safety crisis in which control and agency over decisions relating to their homes was removed from leaseholders.

## Lived impacts of remediation

Whilst remediation represented another step towards the possibility of being free from building safety problems, living through the work has a negative impact on mental wellbeing. 87% of leaseholders responding to the survey and living in the building during remediation agreed that their mental health had been negatively affected by the work. Some leaseholders were managing conditions such as stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal feelings, and PTSD, which were manifestations of the ongoing stressors associated with building safety problems.

The negative impact of noise was highlighted by virtually all participants and was one of the biggest issues experienced by leaseholders. This was in line with the results from the survey, in which 84% of leaseholders living in buildings during remediation reported that they were not able to enjoy peace and quiet at home during the work. Loss of light was also an issue for numerous leaseholders; this was generally a result of the placement of scaffolding and boards, netting, and sheeting. 56% of leaseholders responding to the survey and living in buildings during remediation reported that they were not able to receive adequate natural light into the home during the works. During interviews, leaseholders with plastic sheeting were the most likely to highlight loss of light as a significant factor. It was often not clear to leaseholders why plastic sheeting rather than netting needed to be used, highlighting the need for more transparent engagement with leaseholders around the use of a material that can significantly impact on the experience of the home. Where possible, plastic sheeting should be avoided in favour of mesh, and in cases where it is necessary it should be used for the shortest period possible.

As well as light, the placement of scaffolding and wrapping materials could also affect air flow into homes. 59% of leaseholders responding to the survey reported that they were not able to adequately ventilate their property when living there during works. A guiding principle of work should be to cause the least disruption necessary, for the shortest period, and to actively consider the impact on liveability for those who are resident in buildings through the works. Leaseholders were concerned about fluctuating temperatures due to coverings and the removal of insulation, with the latter compounded by anxiety around the rising costs of energy.

Most leaseholders reported impacts on their sense of privacy at home during remediation works, with many highlighting the intrusive nature of the work. In the survey, this was one of the biggest areas of dissatisfaction, with 73% of leaseholders living in buildings through remediation reporting that they did not have adequate privacy at home during the works. During interviews, for some female participants in particular, the loss of privacy contributed to a wider sense of unsafety at home. Living in a scaffolded building was highlighted in several cases as a security concern. This was also a significant area of dissatisfaction among survey respondents, with 74% of leaseholders reporting that their building did not feel secure during remediation works. Interviews uncovered several examples of individuals climbing scaffolding and accessing buildings, increased theft, and attempted burglaries. Building works could also change the feel of wider developments, with more people, and more semi-hidden areas which could create spaces for anti-social behaviour. Individuals also frequently lost access to communal green space, which was taken over for the storage of materials.

Many leaseholders reported that contractors working on site lacked awareness that they were working on occupied buildings and failed to adjust their behaviour to the context around them. There were several reports of smoking on site, which was a particular source of anxiety given the wider context of remediation projects. Avoidable noise, contractors staring into people's homes, and rubbish being left outside were also relatively common experiences, adding to the perception that homes were not being respected, and that the day-to-day lived experience was not considered.

## Communication

Leaseholders often described communication with other parties involved in building remediation in terms of a fight, struggle, or battle. Many interviewees described negative experiences, such as being unable to get answers to reasonable questions, being ignored or dismissed as a nuisance, or being labelled as vexatious. It is essential to improve communications with leaseholders during remediation works, which may be aided by improving their involvement in planning work in the first place, and evidencing that the experience of those living in the building is being prioritised throughout the remediation process. 64% of leaseholders responding to the survey reported that they did not find it easy to get in touch with those responsible for managing remediation during the works, and 70% reported that they had not found it easy to receive a response. Although channels of communication will differ across different buildings, it is important that leaseholders know who is responsible for communicating during remediation, what kind of information they will receive, and how often. Issues relating to communication may be built into contracting, to ensure that this is considered as an essential part of the remediation process, alongside the material safety improvements to buildings.

There was demand for more frequent and detailed information about the works that were being carried out. Information about what type of work was being carried out, in which part of the buildings, and when, may enable those living there to more effectively plan around the inevitable disruption. The communication of changing timeframes was a particular source of stress and frustration. 77% of leaseholders responding to the survey reported that the timelines for different aspects of remediation had not been made clear to them. As with other areas, during interviews there was a call for greater transparency over set-backs, as well as more effective project planning. Understandably, leaseholders wanted to know when the work would be completed, because it marked not just the end of disruptive building work, but also the possibility that they could move on with their lives from a crisis that for many individuals has defined the last few years of their life.

Given the importance of leaseholders having a voice in remediation works, it is important to recognise that the mechanisms through which such involvement may happen will differ by building. For leaseholders in buildings approaching remediation, it is therefore important to consider the channels that exist – or may be established – to enable greater influence in the process of building works.

## Five areas of key learning for good practice

There was a strong desire from leaseholders who participated in the research to improve the experience for others. The aim is not to generate prescriptive rules that must be applied in a uniform way for every remediation project, but to promote broader principles or approaches to planning and undertaking remediation with leaseholders in mind. The mistrust and sense of betrayal that has characterised many leaseholders' experiences of the building safety crisis underlines the need for remediation to be guided by: meaningful involvement, choice, transparency of information, understanding, and assurance. When a contractor starts a remediation project, this is not 'day one' for those living in the building, but may represent the culmination of many years of frustrating, stressful, anxious and uncertain experiences.

# Principles of good practice for building safety remediation

## 1. Involvement and liveability in planning remediation

- Those leading remediation works should recognise leaseholders as key stakeholders in the remediation process, promoting a culture which values 'resident voice' and engagement
- In planning remediation, the views, opinions and preferences of leaseholders should help shape the approach to undertaking remediation work
- Promoting a liveable environment should be a core part of decision-making when planning remediation. Those responsible for remediation work should be able to evidence that the impacts on liveability have been considered, which may be used to inform choices relating to:
  - Phasing of work
  - Days / time of work
  - Access to common spaces
  - Maintaining ventilation and light
  - Noise mitigation measures
  - Measures to increase privacy
  - Site-security plans
- Measures that have a negative impact on liveability should be in place for the shortest possible time period, with these measures kept under regular review
- Leaseholders should be able to attend an open meeting / open day with contractors and other key organisations involved in remediation, prior to works commencing

## 2. Consultation and choice

- Leaseholders should be given meaningful choices – where these exist – relating to the conduct of remediation works and the materials used
- Those responsible for remediation should communicate the possible advantages and disadvantages of particular choices to leaseholders
- Where choice is not possible, this should be transparently explained and a rationale provided
- There should be transparency around how decisions about moving people from the building during remediation works are made, including underpinning guidance and processes

### 3. Communication

- A communications plan should be available to leaseholders, setting out responsibilities and expectations around communication between different organisations or parties, and leaseholders, at different stages of remediation; expectations around communication may be included in contracting arrangements
- Leaseholders should have access to regular communications about the nature and progress of remediation works, even during less intensive phases of work
- Leaseholders should have transparent access to 'live' information setting out the work taking place in specific locations on-site at given time intervals, for example week-by-week or month-by-month. This should state the impact the work is likely to have on those living in particular parts of a building
- Timeframes for the completion of different elements of work should be clear and accessible
- Where there are delays, a reasonable effort should be made to make a realistic estimate for the completion of different elements of work, avoiding the use of 'TBC' or 'unknown'

### 4. Daily working practices for those working on-site

- All individuals working on site should be briefed about the wider context of building safety remediation and working on an occupied building
- Individuals should make adjustments to working practices that account for working alongside homes which are occupied
- Individuals should use a dedicated lunch and rest area away from people's homes
- Individuals should make an effort to minimise avoidable noise when working in proximity to people's homes
- Individuals should ensure that conversations and language are appropriate for a context in which you can be overheard by others, including children
- Where possible, individuals should avoid looking into people's homes; if travelling up and down scaffolding or using lifts face outwards to maintain privacy
- Individuals should never smoke on site outside a designated area; this is unsafe and can cause a lot of anxiety for people living with fire safety problems
- All individuals should regularly check for, and clear away, rubbish
- Designated individuals should regularly check communal areas, roads, pavements, and car parks for dropped nails and other hazards
- All individuals should maintain security by closing doors and never leaving fire doors open

### 5. Assurance

- Quality-assurance mechanisms should be built into building remediation projects, with outcomes being communicated to leaseholders at appropriate intervals



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