



Rebuilding Trust in a Post-Grenfell World

In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in the 24-storey Grenfell Tower in Kensington, West London. At least 72 people are known to have died as a result of the fire, more than 70 others were injured, and hundreds lost their homes.

The fire sent shockwaves around the world: how could such a catastrophic fire happen in a residential building in 21st century Britain?

In an effort to answer this question, the prime minister immediately ordered an independent public inquiry¹ to examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire.

The government also announced an Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety², commonly known as the Hackitt Review. Led by Dame Judith Hackitt, the final report³ was published in May 2018 and set out more than 50 recommendations.

A framework for radical change

Dame Judith Hackitt recommended radical changes to the culture and practice of the construction industry which included: creating a new regulatory framework; establishing clear duty holders; ensuring residents' views are heard; improving competence levels; establishing more effective product testing; improving enforcement; changing procurement practices; and establishing a 'golden thread' of information.

Following the publication of the Hackitt Review, the Industry Safety Steering Group (ISSG) was established by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Chaired by Dame Judith Hackitt and with members drawn from a wide range of industries including oil and gas, civil aviation, financial and chemical engineering, the ISSG is tasked with holding the construction industry to account for delivering on culture change and monitoring progress on implementing the Hackitt Review recommendations.

“You can’t see good or bad fire safety, it’s hidden. The important thing is that we need to have a system whereby we are sure that work has been done to a proper standard, that people are competent to do that work.

“It’s the system that needs to change. We need duty holders and people in construction to take responsibility. We need a robust regulatory system whereby those people can be called to task if they don’t do the right thing.”

— Lorna Stimpson

In addition, a Competence Steering Group was set up by the construction and fire safety sectors with a remit to progress the key recommendations for addressing competence. With representatives from organisations across the built environment and fire disciplines, the group published its initial report, ‘Raising The Bar’, in August 2019⁴.

The U.K. government has committed to implementing all the recommendations from the Hackitt Review, and there is cross-party support for fundamental change.

How this will happen in practice though is still subject to a variety of consultations and policy discussions that are likely to continue into 2020.

While the detail is yet to be agreed, everyone is clear: we must ensure that all parts of the property and construction industries, at every level and in every discipline, are better aware of the impact of low probability, high consequence events, and are better able to manage and mitigate them in future. There can never be another Grenfell.

Rebuilding trust and confidence

As a result of the Grenfell tragedy and the findings of the subsequent reviews and inquiries, the construction industry is suffering a severe loss of trust which stretches far and deep.

Tenants have lost trust in their landlords, building owners have lost trust in building contractors, construction companies have lost trust in building products and the testing and certification process has been called into question. More recently, obtaining insurance and therefore mortgages on these types of buildings has been increasingly difficult due to the perceived risks involved with the flammability of certain claddings.

There is clearly a need for urgent change and reform. Against this backdrop, in 2019 UL brought together six industry leaders and opinion formers from across the construction sector and asked them what needed to be done to rebuild trust in the industry.

Taking part were:

- Jane Duncan, a past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and chair of the expert advisory panel on fire safety at the RIBA
- Hannah Mansell, Group Technical Director at Masonite (U.K.), Chair of the Passive Fire Protection Forum and Trustee of the Children’s Burns Trust
- Jonathan O’Neill OBE, Managing Director of the Fire Protection Association
- Niall Rowan, CEO of the Association for Specialist Fire Protection
- Lorna Stimpson, Chief Executive of Local Authority Building Control
- Geoff Wilkinson, Managing Director of Wilkinson Construction Consultants



All agreed that much needs to be done to start to rebuild trust in the building control, fire safety and construction industries and that the job certainly won't be easy.

However, implementing the findings of the Hackitt Review was deemed to be the best way forward.

“The best way to improve trust in the construction industry and in fire safety in general is for the government to implement all of the recommendations that came out of the Hackitt Review,” said Niall Rowan

Greater transparency is also considered key in addressing the issue of trust. Having clearer regulations, better third-party accreditations and ensuring ongoing testing regimes will be essential. Moreover, the issue of improving competence at every level is crucial.

It is also clear, however, that the industry has a tremendous task at hand as outlined by Jane Duncan, **“I’m not entirely sure whether we can or whether we cannot ever completely regain the trust of the public. But as professionals, it’s absolutely our duty to try. If we don’t try to win back that trust, to do what’s needed for that trust, then we’re not professionals.”**

“Rebuilding trust and confidence, they are two different things.

Rebuilding trust is going to be enormously difficult. When I think about trust I’m thinking about the people who are responsible for managing my fire safety in a building, so the building owners, the occupiers, the competent people they may be engaging to manage that building.

“When I think about confidence, I’m thinking about the confidence I’ve got in the building fabric, the materials, the products, the regimes of inspections, the maintenance that building has to make sure they are up to scratch when the time comes.”

— Hannah Mansell

Improving industry competence

Dame Judith Hackitt's review⁵ found that a lack of skills, knowledge and experience, and a lack of any formal process for assuring the skills was a major flaw in the current regulatory system. The existing system was found to be fragmented and with no coherent approach for proving competence, experience or qualifications.

In her final report³, Dame Judith Hackitt outlined four recommendations to improve competence across the industry and the Competence Steering Group was tasked with developing proposals to meet those recommendations.

“To achieve really, really good competence in fire safety, everybody has got to understand they are not fully competent now.”

— Jane Duncan

There are some early initiatives being introduced already.

For example, Local Authority Building Control (LABC) is putting all of its surveyors through competency validation assessments so that it can test their competency at each stage of their career. In particular for higher risk buildings, all surveyors will sit an examination to test they are qualified to work on those buildings.

“Competency isn't about a qualification that you gained 20 years ago, competency is about ongoing understanding, appreciation and validation of your ability on a certain subject,” said Lorna Stimpson

Meanwhile, the RIBA has introduced mandatory CPD to ensure that all chartered members know more about fire safety.

“This landscape of fire safety is going to change dramatically over the next five to 10 years. It's about making sure that training is done on a regular basis so that people are always up to scratch with the latest knowledge,” said Hannah Mansell

In the meantime, each of the 12 working groups within the Competence Steering Group is developing specific requirements on skills, knowledge and experience for engineers, installers, fire engineers, fire risk assessors, fire safety enforcement officers, building standards professionals, building designers, building safety managers, site supervisors, project managers, procurement professionals and product manufacturers and specifiers.

We can also expect to see the establishment of a new oversight body, a building safety register, a shorter reassessment period and basic fire science as part of CPD.

No stone is being left unturned in an attempt to improve the competence of those who design, construct, inspect, maintain and operate higher-risk residential buildings.



“What we must work on in the next few years, is to ensure there is enough confidence in third-party certification, that there are enough systems, that there are enough schemes out there, and they’re covering all angles of the construction process that we can bring in third-party certification of installers and manufacturers of equipment to ensure we have competency engrained throughout the construction industry.”

— Jonathan O’Neill

Third-party certification

Dame Judith Hackitt said that ‘the current process for testing and “certifying” products for use in construction is disjointed, confusing, unhelpful and lacks any sort of transparency.’

“The point of third-party certifying fire safety products is simple. It’s about public safety. Third-party certification adds layers of protection. It’s also about the control systems being in there. So, if something does go wrong it’s identified and quarantined and removed from the supply chain immediately,” said Hannah Mansell

However, test regimes, how certification works and how assessments are done is a complex area. It was agreed that professionals need guidance and training to interpret certification, test reports and assessments.

“There is a real need for training and upskilling in that area. It’s not just a point about being trained once and then thinking that you’re armed with everything you need to know,” said Hannah Mansell

In addition, there needs to be a system in place to check that the products coming off the manufacturers’ production lines still match the original tests and to ensure those standards are maintained. Moreover, third-party certification needs to cover installers as well as products.

Culture change and closer collaboration

The culture of the construction industry was a common thread throughout the findings of the Hackitt Review. Closer collaboration rather than competition, and prioritising safety over profit, will be central to driving the sea change required.

“Culture change in an industry is very, very small words to represent a very, very huge challenge. Culture change in my view means that we’ve got to have something which we’ve never had before, which is true collaboration, working together to make something better,” said Jane Duncan

However, in its update report published in July 2019⁶ the ISSG commented that the progress that the industry is making toward culture change is currently slow. The group plans to make recommendations on how to accelerate progress. Crucially, it says that there is ‘still much more work to do to ensure that the message of culture change reaches the whole of the industry and that the industry needs to have a plan of work going forward to address this in more detail’.

“One of the things we must do is address the culture in the construction industry. Currently there is a culture of cheapest is best as opposed to what is best value. This leads to specifications for products and installations being broken and downgraded or what they call value engineering, which is a pseudonym for cost cutting. And this is unacceptable.”

— Niall Rowan

In addition, the Hackitt Review found that those responsible for the safety of buildings are not discouraged enough from failing to comply with their responsibilities as they are not often held to account by the current regulators.

The government wants to change this, and it plans to take a tougher approach to those that do not comply with their responsibilities under the new regime⁷.

“Quite clearly, we need better enforcement. We need better resources in enforcement. The fire and rescue service need more resources in enforcement, but they don’t need that at the expense of other frontline services, such as fire prevention or operational firefighting.”

— Jonathan O’Neill

Dame Judith Hackitt has welcomed the government’s proposals to implement the recommendations in the Hackitt Review, although she is also on the record for her concerns about how long it is taking.

‘It has been clear to us throughout the year that whilst some parts of the industry are willing to make changes, there has been a strong sense of “wait and see” regarding Government’s commitment to lead the way with robust regulatory change. The publication of the [MHCLG] consultation document⁸ sends out a clear signal of Government’s intent and commitment.’

Empowering residents

Following the Hackitt Review, the government has clearly stated that the views and concerns of residents should never be ignored by those responsible for managing the safety of their buildings. It is proposed that the accountable person in an occupied high-rise building will have specific duties to residents.

These proposals will give residents a stronger voice and allow them to hold those responsible for the safety of their buildings to account⁷. Residents will be empowered by having better access to information about their building and have more of a say over decisions made about the fire and structural safety of their building.

However, our interviewees agreed that there is still a huge way to go to start to rebuild trust and to give residents the voice they deserve.

“It’s not just about making sure that people who live in the buildings or who frequent the buildings have got access to the fire safety information and knowledge in that building. It’s also about the building owners and managers engaging with those residents so they can understand what their specific needs are, what their knowledge levels are,” said Hannah Mansell.



“We need to look at the way in which the residents themselves are involved ... It involves transparency of information, ensuring residents get a copy of the fire risk assessment and that they are fully aware of who is inspecting their building, why they’re inspecting it and what the standards that are being applied are.”

“If recommendations have been made, it’s important those recommendations are communicated to the residents of that building ...”

— Geoff Wilkinson

Dramatic change for a brighter future

The regulatory landscape around construction is set to change dramatically in the coming years. In October 2019, new building safety standards legislation featured in the Queen's Speech, demonstrating that it is one of the issues at the forefront of the Government's agenda.

In the Queen's Speech, the Government pledged to implement new building safety standards and to put in place new and modernised regulatory regimes for building safety and construction products, ensuring residents have a stronger voice in the system.

"I think if we had total confidence and trust in the fire safety in our buildings in the U.K. it would be dramatically different from what we see now. I would expect to be walking into buildings and see total transparency of the fire safety protection measures that are in there, the maintenance records, how often the building has been upgraded and how often it has been fire risk assessed."

— Hannah Mansell

UL's commitment to improving fire safety

While there have been good intentions from some parts of the industry, progress is still frustratingly slow and there is still a long way to go.

There are two main ways that the industry can start to rebuild trust. First, we need to look at the government's consultations and find sensible ways to implement the changes that have been proposed. Second, we must help ensure that people doing the work including specifying, building and maintaining buildings are competent to the right level. At present however, there is no scheme in place, and we are therefore a long way off achieving this aim.

UL is firmly committed to improving fire safety and to supporting the industry as it takes on this challenge. There is a need for more capacity in testing and certification within the U.K. coupled with a higher level of governance to help ensure consistency throughout the industry, and UL is working to raise standards in this area.

Through its support of the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety Rescue Group, the Fire Sector Federation and other professional bodies, UL aims to help ensure that best practice in fire safety is embedded within the construction industry into the future.

"Fire safety is a holistic approach; there is no silver bullet. It's about all of your passive and active measures working together. It's about the occupants of the building knowing exactly what they should do in the fire. It's about the firefighters, the emergency services, being familiar with how they should respond. We can't pin our hat on one thing that's going to make buildings safer in the next five to 10 years."

"I hope to see dramatic change."

— Hannah Mansell



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