

14th September 2018

Dear Professor Alston,

RE: Submission to United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in the UK

I am a volunteer for an small organisation called [Tower Blocks UK](#). We are a hub for sharing information and resources with groups or individuals who live in, or are concerned about tower block housing safety issues in the UK. Please accept this letter with our express consent for public publication as representation on behalf of Tower Blocks UK.

As a submission under section A3, we consider that social housing, and in particular, defective and unsafe flats in tower blocks around the UK, is an urgent issue which needs to be addressed. Since before the Grenfell fire, tower block safety issues were being highlighted, but, in many cases, being ignored by our government. One of the most pressing issues that Tower Blocks UK is addressing is the immediate risk to life posed by Large Panel System tower blocks.

In brief, many Large Panel System tower blocks were constructed in the mid to late 1960's in the UK, in response to the urgent need for housing following WWII. The government of the day entered into agreements with contractors such as Taylor Woodrow Anglian, and others, to very quickly and cheaply, construct tower blocks using pre-cast concrete panels. These types of tower blocks are effectively a 'house of cards', they do not have a supporting frame, instead the concrete panels are stacked on top of each other. Workers were unskilled and were on piecemeal work, and, as a result, examinations during the dismantling of these types of buildings have, in the past, demonstrated that joints weren't constructed properly, crucial bolts were not in place and newspapers were stuffed into void gaps between panels. In 1968, one of these tower block partially collapsed at Ronan Point in Newham, London, killing 4 people and injuring many more. The dismantling of Ronan Point in 1984 highlighted many of the faults and poor workmanship during construction listed above.

The government halted the construction of these tower blocks for a few months after that tragic event in 1968, before issuing two circulars, 62/68 and 71/68, which said that if these blocks were constructed using a new type of joint, then they would be safe, and construction thereafter continued. Many of these blocks have since been demolished, however, there are also many still remaining around the country, inhabited in the main, by social housing tenants.

In June 2017, residents on the Ledbury Estate in Peckham, once again highlighted their concerns over large gaps and cracks in their flats. These gaps are a common feature in Large Panel System blocks as the concrete panels tend to bow outward during warm weather, opening up a gap at ceiling and floor level, thereby breaching the fire compartmentation between tenancies in many of these types of tower blocks. As a result, structural engineers were brought in to investigate the Ledbury Estate, and subsequently discovered that these four

13-storey blocks did not meet the building regulations for structural strength, as laid out in the government circulars I mentioned earlier. The work had never been carried out following Ronan Point.

The government's Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government then sent out [this letter](#) to all authorities who own Large Panel System tower blocks asking them to undertake tests to ensure their buildings met the regulations. Some authorities carried out these tests, such as Hammersmith and Fulham, and it was revealed that some blocks, including two 13-storey towers on the Aintree Estate did not meet the regulations, even after having had the previous strengthening work. Some authorities did not undertake any checks or works as a result of the Government letter, instead choosing to rely on paperwork and documents they from the 70's, 80's and 90's to assure themselves. Further blocks have now been found to be suffering the same issues, including [Biar Place in Rugby](#), [Broadwater Farm estate in Haringey](#) and many others.

We have been lobbying the government to set up a specific Large Panel Systems team, and set a standardised uniform response and set of clear instructions on what exactly building owners should be doing to check the safety of their Large Panel System blocks, but they have not done this. They are simply not willing, it would appear, to consider the safety of many of the countries poorest people - namely social housing tenants living in tower blocks, as a priority, even after the tragedy of the Grenfell fire.

We met with Dame Judith Hackitt who raised the issue of Large Panel System blocks in her recent report: [Building A Safer Future](#) where she says *'In my interim report published in December 2017 I described how the regulatory system covering high-rise and complex buildings was not fit for purpose. In the intervening period, we have seen further evidence confirming the deep flaws in the current system: lack of an audit trail as to whether essential safety work was carried out on the Ledbury Estate, and other large panel systems tower blocks'*

The UK government are still not taking this issue seriously, even though the collapse of one of these buildings resulted in the death of four people living in Ronan Point in 1968, and the subsequent recent discoveries that 50 years later, many of these buildings are still not safe for habitation and are just as vulnerable (if not more so due to time deterioration) than Ronan Point itself.

Not only do many of these blocks not meet the regulations for being able to withstand certain pressures including a gas explosion, high winds or vehicle impact (all of which could lead to the same type of 'progressive collapse' seen at Ronan Point) they also have the inherent fire safety defect, caused by the bowing panels.

To put it bluntly, if there were a serious fire in one of these Large Panel System tower blocks, which was not contained, not only would the fire be likely to spread very quickly from flat to flat, but it could also cause the partial or complete collapse of the building. A fire test was carried out in these types of flats at Ronan Point in 1984, the fire was ordered to be put out after 10 minutes

as it had spread so rapidly, as highlighted in [this article](#). We feel that if this issue is not addressed, then we may be at risk of seeing another catastrophic tower block disaster in the future.

We would very much like the opportunity to meet with you when you are in the UK to discuss these issues in more detail. In the meantime, please do feel free to have a look at our website at towerblocks.uk.com where there is more detail on our work and our concerns over these issues.

Many kind regards,

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