**Peter Apps and Paul Smith**

**In conversation with Andrew Kelly**

**Andrew:**Welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly. Supporting good housing for all is a key part of our work in our programme on future cities and in our work on council housing. We were horrified by the Grenfell Fire on 14th June 2017, when 72 people died, many families were destroyed and hundreds were made homeless. What we have learnt since then has been almost impossible to believe and comprehend.

We've learnt much of this thanks to the research and reporting of Peter Apps, who is with us today. Peter is the deputy editor of [*Inside Housing*](file:///C:\Users\Amy%20Obeirne\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\IWTLQ1AV\~WRD0002.jpg)*,* he has reported on the fire from the very start and has worked closely with the Grenfell community. He's the author of the new book *Show Me the Bodies. How We Let Grenfell Happen*.

Joan Smith, [who has written for us on the importance of council housing for her and her family](https://www.bristolideas.co.uk/read/acton-stevenage-and-basingstoke/), said in the *Literary Review* that 'Peter Apps provides a remarkable book, a damning verdict, but justifiably so. This is simply one of the most horrifying books I've ever read.'

Peter is joined by Paul Smith. Paul is chief executive of Elim Housing. He has worked in housing for over 30 years at a senior level and prior to joining Elim was the Cabinet Member for Housing in Bristol City Council. Thank you, Paul, and Peter, for joining us.

Peter, you call this the most serious crime committed on British soil this century?

**Peter:** I do. How do you measure the severity of a crime? In terms of the number of people who died, you could take all of the terror attacks on London since the 2000s and put them together and you would have more deaths at Grenfell Tower. The financial consequences of it have been vast. The government has spent £9 billion removing cladding and insulation from other buildings already. And the ripple effect throughout the market of people who've been impacted by this is huge. This is hundreds of thousands of people who have either had to delay selling their property or had to pay out money in waking watches, all that kind of thing. And a lot of it comes back to the fallout from this fire. I think it's almost unquantifiable. But even before you get into all of that, you can just straightforwardly say that there were 72 people, 18 children, who aren't here anymore. And I think that alone makes it the most serious crime that's happened in Britain this century.

**Andrew:**One of the most important things about the book is the way you centre the people involved, particularly the victims, the ones who died, the ones who managed to escape. And I thought that was a critical part of the book, but it couldn't have been a very easy book to write and research.

**Peter:**I think that's probably true. The book is, as you suggest, split. You have one chapter on a minute-by-minute journey through the night, and then one chapter on the background of how and why the fire happened. And we follow particular characters through that night. And yes, a lot of that information came from interviews with people I did, or with relatives of people. Some of it came from the public record that's been put together by the enquiry. But I think what was really important is that everyone who looks at Grenfell, and hopefully people who read the book, come away with a sense that these were human beings.

We're assaulted by bad news. And the number '72 dead' doesn't really mean anything to us in this day and age. And you can't feel the humanity of every tragedy you read about, it wouldn't be possible to exist if you did. But I wanted to get across to anyone, if you're going to read about Grenfell and think about Grenfell and understand Grenfell, these were human beings and what happened to them was real human suffering. And so that's why it was always so important to me that if this book was going to be written, it would need to have the human beings, the residents of the towers, at its heart.

**Andrew:**Paul, what were your immediate reactions when you heard about Grenfell and your views about the enormity of the crime that Grenfell is?

**Paul:**I think the first thing is you see the pictures. I remember waking up in the morning and seeing the pictures firstly on Twitter, then on TV. And I was horrified, a bit like 9/11 in a way, of seeing a block of flats going up like that and thinking about what had happened to people in that circumstance. Absolutely horrifying. And then the second thought was, could this happen in any of our blocks? At the time, I was cabinet member for housing in Bristol. 59 high rise blocks and a real concern that if it could happen in this block in Grenfell, could it happen in any of our blocks in Bristol? It was horrifying in terms of itself, but also potentially the implications of it more widely.

**Andrew:**When I was reading your most recent work with the housing association, you centre residents, don't you, Paul. in your work? These are at the very heart of why you're in housing.

**Paul:**Yes. I can't talk too much about it because of a potential legal case, but we've got a small block of flats which has got an issue with the cladding and the firebreaks and the roof and pretty much everything else, which to put right will cost us more than the cost of building the building. And I made it personally an important point that I went and spoke to every one of the residents in those flats. And what you find is the vibrant, very diverse community that you find in the Grenfell Tower exists also in the block that we've got. And for me, it was so critically important that I didn't delegate that, I went and talked to the residents about the risk that we'd identified and also what we were going to do to put it right. People should feel safe and comfortable in their own homes. They shouldn't be hoping that one of their neighbours doesn't accidentally start a fire which could kill them and their children. And Peter's book brings that very much to the fore, rightly, I think.

**Andrew:**Peter, Grenfell was not just a tragedy but also a warning to others. And Paul is acting on that. But we're not very good at this, are we? You talk in the book about a previous fire at Lakanal House in Southwark when cladding caught fire and six people were killed. And there’s been other fires in tower blocks, haven't there, which should have acted as a warning?

**Peter:**There's a long antecedence to the Grenfell Tower fire and we might discuss the title of the book as we go on. Half of the title is 'How We Let Grenfell Happen'. And I think that is how I see it. The information needed to prevent the Grenfell Tower fire in terms of the dangers of combustible cladding and the problems with compartmentation and the potential dangers of the stay put policy if everything went wrong, were all known years before Grenfell Tower caught fire and they just weren't taken seriously enough by either the industry or government.

Yes, there's a long line of fires. Lakanal stands out because it killed six people and lots of these fires, there's only one death or no one dies. But Lakanal was different and three of them were children. And it also stands out because it led to a very and in its time, forgotten by many, but in its time quite a high-profile coroner's inquest, which made suggestions to government, to the social housing sector, to the fire brigade about what needed to be done to prevent a repeat. And, unfortunately, very few of those recommendations were acted upon. It's the ultimate missed warning really.

**Andrew:**We've had the first stage of the enquiry and the second stage will be reporting next year. It's trying to look at the lessons to learn, who to blame. But one of the problems with this is there are myriad people involved who had some responsibility at different levels. You call this a dishonest world, Peter, the many people responsible. What makes up this dishonest world for you?

**Peter:**You mean the individual organisations? It starts from the top with government really. I think the government, through the actions of various ministers and officials down the years, not only did it fail to deal with the warnings, it also failed to be open about the extent to which it was failing to deal with the warnings if that makes sense. It wasn't only that the government was not acting on good information. It was presenting a front that it had. I think then if you look at some of the corporate organisations involved, particularly from the manufacturers of the cladding and the insulation which was used in Grenfell Tower, a long history of fire tests which showed that these materials were dangerous. It was from as early as 2004, the cladding manufacturer Arconic tested its product and discovered that when it was bent into a particular shape, it burned with this incredible ferocity but decided to leave that product on the market, to continue to allow it to be sold and allow it to be fitted to the walls of people's homes, because there would be a consequence for profit margin if it didn't, it would become less competitive, it would be required to change this investment into other, less fire risky products. And so, at many levels, we elected not to do the things that were necessary in order to prevent a serious cladding fire happening.

**Andrew:**We'll come on to some of the individual areas of responsibility in a moment. Paul, you've talked before about you responding to this idea of the bonfire of red tape, which is a term used and a very unfortunate one. And the way that this has reduced health and safety, particularly in areas of housing, but also other areas. What's your view on this now?

**Paul:**Firstly on the previous question to say, if you read Peter's book, and also I'm somebody who's been following his almost daily reports from the enquiry itself over a couple of years, and fantastic that *Inside Housing* made that time available for that coverage because it's so important, if you read it, you can see that there were many, many, many opportunities that this could have been stopped from happening.

There were many times when different actors could have intervened in a way that this cladding would never have been put on this building. And in every case, they failed. So, in one way, you could say it's a system failure, which of course it is, but also it's a personal failure of all of those people. I don't think it's like, can we put them in a rank order? Who's the most culpable? They're all culpable. Anybody who could have stopped this happening is, in my view, is to blame.

I think that there is a system issue. It goes back into the '80s. It's not just the bonfire of red tape of Eric Pickles. It goes back, for instance, to the deregulation, effectively, of building regulations, of allowing private companies to actually take that work on. You can actually see websites where, I think a lot of them have toned it down now, where they're basically saying, 'employ us to do your building regulation and we'll make sure you get through'. And whereas councils still do have building regulation officers, of course there's better money in the private sector. You find that the councils become denuded of the level of expertise that they've got, so you end up with a reduced level of quality of building regulation from councils, and in some respects some dubious building regulation from organisations.

Once you move to effectively a system of self-regulation, then you're almost asking for things to go wrong. And I don't think there can be any doubt that this continual obsession with reducing regulations, health and safety gone mad, and all those sorts of attitudes where what you want to do is being driven by companies' sense of good value, maybe British values or whatever. You see where that leads you, it leads you to Grenfell and these sorts of problems.

Because self-regulation doesn't work. We saw in the finance sector in the 2008/2009 crash. You have to hold regulation of all sectors in the centre. In housing associations, we had the removal of consumer regulation from the sector. and we've seen that in itself has also led to problems with the focus being on financial viability of organisations rather than on customer service.

**Andrew:** I don't think, Peter, you'd disagree with any of that? You write a lot about the attack on red tape and health and safety in the book.

**Peter:**I think that was a pretty thorough summary there from Paul. There has been, and the Grenfell enquiry evidence charts this, there's been this almost fetishisation really of the idea that government should cut back the rules and regulations, get out of the way and let industry take the lead, dating back certainly to the 1980s and that's cut across so many areas as Paul described. Grenfell Tower, when it was built, was built under a different system of building regulations called the London Model Bylaws in, I think, 1974. And those prohibit the use of combustible materials on the facade of a building, and those were derived themselves from regulations which went all the way back to the Great Fire of London. We took the decision to take those limits and restrictions away. And I think that there was a document which came out towards the end of the enquiry, which said we will probably see the consequences of this in around 30 years. So, in some ways, Grenfell came along right on time.

**Andrew:**Just before we move on to some other areas. You also write in the book, Peter, about shoddy workmanship. There were problems with fire detection systems, elevators and so on.

**Peter:**Some of that mattered a great deal in a causative sense and some didn't. So, for example, the area where there's an enormous causative factor is the self-closing devices on flat entrance doors. And that appears to be evidence of both poor workmanship and then poor maintenance, the poor maintenance being very crucial there because there were some very specific warnings about the need to replace those devices.

Throughout the story that sort of carelessness comes up. The fire cavity barriers in the cladding system, for example, you had vertical barriers fitted horizontally, or they're backwards, upside down, back to front, or missing completely. Those things didn't really matter in the fire because the cladding was so combustible that you could fit a cavity barrier pretty perfectly and it's still going to burn around it. But they show if you have that lack of care and you have that sense that these things don't matter, we'll just do what we can get away with, you will end up in a position sooner or later where something that does matter doesn't get done. In a sense, all of it matters, even the stuff that didn't cause the deaths, because it shows an attitude that's consistent. And that attitude is one of callousness and not caring really.

**Andrew:**And just staying with you, Peter, on the enquiry, you had one main government department involved on regulations and safety and fire in housing, the Department for Communities and Local Government. You had two ministers giving evidence there. What do you think we learnt from those pieces of evidence from Eric Pickles and from Stephen Williams, who at the time was a Bristol MP.

**Peter:**I think just to make sure that their names don't get missed off the list, we also had James Wharton, Brandon Lewis gave evidence from the Home Office, and I think he remains in cabinet now. And Gavin Barwell, who went on to be chief of staff to Theresa May, all of them were called to give evidence as well as those two.

Stephen Williams was a relatively junior minister in the department at the time. The Coalition era when Liberal Democrats were handed these - unless they were called Vince Cable or Nick Clegg - relatively minor government roles. But his brief included building regulations. So, it's very relevant to what happened at Grenfell Tower. And he came in the period I mentioned a couple of questions ago. There [was this inquest](https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/about-council/transparency-open-data/lakanal-house-coroner-inquest) into the deaths at Lakanal House which had made recommendations to government. And one of those really pivotal recommendations was that they review the building regulations guidance with particular regard to the issue of external fire spread. The government was supposed to do that because there had been a fire where there had been really serious external fire spread which had killed people. And it never did. That review never began.

By the time of the Grenfell Tower fire, it was not only [not] completed, it was barely even started, and that was four years after the inquest. Stephen Williams was one of the ministers who held that baton. And what was happening at the same time was there was a group within Parliament, an all-party parliamentary group, chaired by the late David Amess MP, who was very aware of what had happened at Lakanal House and why, and wanted government to speed this review up so that a second disaster didn't happen. They sent some very strongly worded letters to all of the people who had that brief, including Stephen. And they received quite a sharp brush off, really. I can't remember the exact quote, but a letter bearing Stephen Williams's signature said something like, 'I've seen nothing which convinces me this issue is urgent enough to disturb the work of my department by bringing it forward' [[the full letter is here](https://assets.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/HOM00001621_Letter%20from%20Stephen%20Williams%20MP%20PUS%20DCLG%20to%20David%20Amess%20MP%20in%20response%20to%20letter%20dated%2004_05%20August%20re%20review%20of%20Building%20Regulations%20%28Approved%20Document%20B%29..pdf)].[[1]](#footnote-1) And that's quite an extraordinary statement to make, given that you already had six deaths, three of them children, what more urgent evidence should you need? He was challenged about that at the enquiry. And I think there were a couple of things that struck me from his evidence. One was he really handed that responsibility off to the officials. I think what he told the enquiry is he didn't even read the letters on which his signature [appeared](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/minister-responsible-for-implementing-lakanal-fire-recommendations-never-read-them-74979).

This was an issue of life safety, it's an issue of building regulations, fire safety. People have actually died. Why not? Some more curiosity. Why was this so low down the priority list that he felt it was OK not even to read the letters? And he said that he never read the [Lakanal House coroner's inquest report at all](file:///C:\Users\Amy%20Obeirne\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\IWTLQ1AV\~WRD0001.jpg), bearing in mind he took office in 2014 which is only a year or so after it was published [William’s appointment as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government was in October 2013; the Lakanal House coroner’s enquiry ended on 28 March 2013]. Again, I found that quite surprising.

And then towards the end, he also came across as a little unprepared it has to be said. There's this government standard that's very, very crucial to this story called Class Nought, Class Zero. I won't get too into the technicalities of that now, but it was very much at the heart of the government evidence. And under cross-examination, Stephen Williams said that the [first time he'd heard of that](https://www.housingtoday.co.uk/news/former-minister-in-charge-of-building-regulations-had-never-heard-of-flawed-fire-rating/5116870.article) was the day he gave evidence. So he clearly wasn't too keen on following every twist and turn. And then in his final statement, I think he got the date for the Grenfell Tower fire wrong.

So all in all, I think it was an eye-opening performance from him that we saw, because he really did seem to feel like he had no responsibility for what was happening in his brief under his watch. And really, he was just there signing letters from officials and taking instruction from more senior ministers. And everyone in this chain was either passing responsibility up or down, everyone from the ground level housing manager to the senior executive at companies were saying 'someone somewhere else in the chain was responsible, and I wasn't'. But to have reached the higher echelons of government, which even though he was a junior minister, that's where he was in central government. He was the guy who's in charge. And to still see him handing responsibility off, I think was quite telling about how the enquiry played out and how a lot of witnesses approached it.

**Andrew:**Paul, what were your reactions to listening to bits of the enquiry that came over the news and reading Peter's work?

**Paul:**Actually, not a huge amount of coverage in the news. I, like lots of other people in the housing sector, were very lucky to be getting Peter's updates. The whole thing was horrifying. As I said before, there were so many times when this could have been stopped from happening, whether that was government in terms of politicians or civil servants, or whether it was businesses. And this goes back a long a long way. It doesn't just relate to the Conservative government. The Labour government previously didn't put right the building regulations system and some of the fires and some of the tests that Peter talks about happened well before the Coalition Government came in.

It's probably the greatest argument for a circular firing squad I've ever read. Everybody trying to blame everybody else, was both disingenuous but also completely unconvincing. And I think Peter takes that apart really well.

Obviously, the issue that hit us in Bristol was firstly to check, once the cladding had been identified - quite early on after the fire the cladding was identified - was have we got any of that cladding in Bristol? Which thankfully we didn’t. Then to look at the history of tower block fires in Bristol. The thing is, you will always get fires in residential property, you can't plan on the basis that it might not happen. It is the classic of somebody falling asleep with a cigarette, through to faulty equipment, which we think was the case at Grenfell with the fridge, through to all sorts of other reasons, and [it’s] really worrying now about people using candles because they are trying to save their energy bills. There's a thousand and one ways that a fire could start, people having indoor barbecues started a fire in Somerset a few years ago in a house. You have to plan on the basis that there will be fires and there will be fires in blocks of flats which will be below other flats, and therefore the buildings have to be able to deal with that. And also the fire services have to be able to deal with that.

I think what we got at Grenfell was a case that there was a complete system failure once the fire started. But it was a real issue for us at Bristol to look and say 'is this something that could be replicated here?' And immediately after we did events at all of our high-rise blocks, not that it's just a high-rise issue, this can happen in a house or in a low-rise block, to make ourselves available to tenants, to talk about their buildings and the fire safety measures in them with the fire service.

In some respects, the most controversial thing was the staying put policy, which we were all expected to stand behind, which now seems to slowly, quietly have been dropped in favour of evacuation plans. And what works needed to be done. There's been quite a lot of shocking reports, but there was an investigation done by housing associations in the South West into houses built since 2005. Looking at the firebreaks and [in] nearly two thirds of properties there was at least one failure with firebreaks being badly fitted or missing and a real concern that it's left to the apprentice on the last day that it can possibly be done to stick in a firebreak with nobody really testing it's in the right place.

The problem with a lot of these measures is that once the building is finished, they're hidden. And the only way you can find out whether or not things are as they should be is to start taking the building apart or taking parts of the building apart to look into it. And I think we've been left with, obviously Grenfell, a terrible tragedy for the people directly involved and their families. And I'm sure that even among the people who survived, there's quite a lot people suffering from mental anguish and PTSD and everything else, there's actually billions of pounds needed to be spent on ensuring that homes across the country are safe.

**Andrew:**The bill is huge. That's clear. Peter, just on the stay put policy, one of the most frightening things about the book was the advice that was being given to residents, which you reported on, about staying put and how gradually you saw the fire reaching them closer and closer, and they kept being told to stay put or to go higher. Do you think that policy has been dropped quietly now?

**Peter:**No, quite the opposite, unfortunately. There's the policy at the government policy document level, and then there's the real-world reality of what people would do if another fire like Grenfell happened. Obviously, the Grenfell Tower enquiry, for any of your viewers or listeners who don't know, the Grenfell Tower enquiry's been split into two phases. The first phase, which concluded about three years ago, looks at the events of the night of the fire in great detail. And it produced a report with recommendations. The fundamental philosophy of which was staying put is fine when it works, but you need to have a plan B for all buildings in case it doesn't. Not just buildings where we know that there's dangerous cladding because, as Paul was referring to, there are buildings out there with faults buried deep inside three-dimensional structure of the building, which you simply won't know about until a fire exposes the fact that a piece of passive fire protection, which is crucial to that building's fire strategy, isn't there.

You need to have a way for people to get out of buildings, a clear way for people to get out buildings, and a clear plan for the fire authorities about what to do when those fires that we don't expect, the ones that get out of control, the ones that go in an unexpected direction happen, because they will happen again, as Paul said. Fires are just part of residential life. If you want people to cook and live and smoke and sleep and all the other things, own electrical appliances, sooner or later some of those things are going to catch fire.

What the government's approach has been is to reject that. Reject it at its most fundamental root and their view is that we should stick with stay put as an all or nothing complete reliance policy unless we know about existing fire safety issues with the building, in which case we should have a simultaneous evacuation policy, which is like being in an office where everyone gets out every time someone burns the toast. And neither of those things are very good, frankly. It doesn't really work on either front as an evacuation strategy. You need to be cleverer than that. And you need to have a plan B, which is everyone escaping themselves and then plan C, which is people being rescued by the fire brigade.

And I think there's a really key area where the government has not wanted to go down that road, and that's with regard to disabled residents. I wrote in the book, and I've written elsewhere and many other people have too, the Grenfell Tower fire disproportionately killed disabled people. There were 37 disabled residents in the tower at the time the blaze started. By the morning, 15 of them were dead, so it killed 41% of the tower's disabled population, which is a higher rate than any other group in the building. And if you add children onto that, getting on for half of the victims were either disabled or children, so they were vulnerable.

What the Grenfell Tower enquiry report said was that you should develop emergency evacuation plans personalised for an individual. So, if they have crutches, if they have autism, if they're deaf, then you should think in advance what is needed to get this person out of this building in an emergency. And that is something the government has refused to implement. There was actually a High Court case concluded last week - and we'll get the findings in the new year - where I think for the second time the government was being brought through the courts in order to try and persuade it to implement that policy. But at the moment it doesn't want to. I think fire authorities are trying to think differently about how they'll approach it. I'm sure Bristol Fire Service have asked themselves those questions. And housing providers have, too, to some degree, about what's the best way of evacuating this building. Certainly, residents won't stay in a building that was burning like Grenfell anymore, but at a government policy level, rather than a quiet dropping of the stay put policy, it's been more of a full-throated retention of the status quo.

**Andrew:**You talked earlier about civil servants and I don't want to go into too much detail about this, but it was a comment from a civil servant that gave you the title of your book, 'Show Me the Bodies'?

**Peter:**That's correct. A civil servant by the name of Brian Martin. There's an architect called Sam Webb who very sadly passed away just a couple of months before the book was published, who'd been a long-term campaigner on fire safety. And going back to the same period I talked about with Stephen Williams on the Lakanal House Coroner's inquest [and] its findings. It asked for this review of regulations, but government is not doing it. And Brian Martin was the civil servant who held responsibility for that area of regulations. He was asked by Sam Webb, according to Sam Webb's witness statement, why he hadn't implemented the Lakanal coroner's recommendations. And [Sam Webb recalled that was](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/official-told-safety-campaigner-to-show-me-the-bodies-when-warned-of-tower-block-fire-disaster-inquiry-hears-74889), 'Where's the evidence? Show me the bodies.'

Brian Martin denied saying that when he was asked about it at the enquiry, but there was another witness who said they'd heard him say it too, and it might be something the enquiry comes to a conclusion on. I don't know. Nonetheless, I think that statement spoke to a philosophy which was the government's philosophy that there simply weren't enough fire deaths occurring in the UK to justify tougher restrictions on industry. And whether we agree with Brian Martin or we agree with Sam Webb about whether or not that quote was said in the time and place it was said, that philosophy was absolutely there and that philosophy was right at the heart of why the government didn't do anything to prevent the Grenfell Tower fire.

What they really were saying there is that they didn't care enough, they didn't care enough about preventing a hypothetical tragedy. They were willing and they accepted the fact that they would wait until a tragedy happened until they acted, essentially. That might not be the exact thoughts that were going through their mind, but that was a consequence of their actions. And I thought something about that quote, the idea that if you don't have to do it, you won't do it. And we'd rather care about something else, this just isn't a priority. That attitude was displayed across so many of the different organisations that found themselves in the spotlight during the enquiry that it felt to me that it captured something about what had happened and why, which is why I pulled it out for the title of the book.

**Andrew:**Just staying on remarkable quotes that you report on in the book. Let us talk about the corporate sector and their responsibility. You quote a manufacturer called Kingspan and someone from there who, when asked about the fire risk of their insulation, said ['I think they are getting me confused with someone who gives a damn'](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/kingspan-manager-said-professionals-raising-fire-concerns-could-go-fck-themselves-grenfell-inquiry-hears-68801). And then also you quote from the same company after a fire test was passed on the third attempt said ['fucking happy days'](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/grenfell-tower-inquiry-diary-week-21-its-there-in-black-and-white-isnt-it-we-see-a-complete-absence-of-any-consideration-of-life-safety-68916). These are remarkable comments. These all came out in the enquiry.

**Peter:**Certainly did. Some of them, yeah, that is a small snippet. I think Kingspan delivered quite a few quotes like that. There was a WhatsApp or text message exchange between two employees who were discussing their own fire testing of their products who noted that the product didn't actually pass if it was tested in full, and the other one said ['shit product'](https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/health-and-safety/grenfell-kingspan-workers-laughed-at-product-safety-lies-09-12-2020/). And then the last one said, ['All we do is lie in here'](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/grenfell-tower-inquiry-diary-week-22-all-we-do-is-lie-in-here-68980), which Kingspan would disagree with this because they say that was examples of disappointing poor conduct among one team and among a small number of employees. They've argued that quite strongly.

It's up to the enquiry now to decide whether that actually said something about the culture of Kingspan. And not just Kingspan, but the other corporates involved in this, maybe not in quite such callous language, but certainly similar sorts of emails. Imagine the kind of culture, the working environment, in which those comments can be made by quite senior people in the company? What does that say about their attitude to safety and their attitude to the end users of their products ultimately? It's pretty scary, really. It's important. Kingspan's reputation is important to them, and I think some of those employees have been disciplined and they've instituted management reviews and they say they're moving in a different direction now. Nonetheless, it's very much of interest to the enquiry to investigate that culture and how it came to exist.

**Andrew:**You can read full details of those comments in Peter's book [in links to original articles here] and also the statements of witnesses to the enquiry at [grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk](https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/).

Paul, can I ask you about the 'we' that's in the Peter subtitle, 'How We Let Grenfell Happen'. We're reading more and more about damp in houses. We've had the terrible tragedy of the two-year-old boy recently who died. And that was a result supposedly of some of the problems caused by that damp. And we've also let housing become a major crisis in this country. How are we responsible to make housing better in the future?

**Paul:**There are many different types of housing crisis. There's not a single housing crisis. The trouble is we keep trying to deal with one and then we ignore the others. So, for instance, the obvious housing crisis is one where you see people sleeping on the streets and the rise in homelessness. We've certainly got a huge rise again in people in temporary accommodation. Certainly, in Bristol, we'll get the homelessness street count stats out again soon and I think that will show a rise as well. So, there's that very obvious part of the housing crisis which is around homelessness.

But there are other issues as well. For instance, a lot of the housing stock that's held by social landlords is post-World War Two, often built incredibly cheaply. I looked at the estate I grew up on, the average cost of building a property was £1,480, which in today's money is £50,000. Now you can imagine all the corners that would have to be cut to build a house for £50,000 now. You have got a huge number of properties which are way, way past their sell-by date that need to be either massively improved and upgraded themselves or demolished, and something else built in their way. And that part of the housing crisis had almost completely disappeared from view.

But what we've seen with the recent cases, [the campaigning of Kwajo](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/19/im-willing-to-take-on-absolutely-everyone-kwajo-tweneboa-on-fighting-for-britains-poorest-tenants) around housing standards, and ITV as well, is that…all the people in social housing like to think that they're lovely people, doing wonderful things for society, but are not addressing the quality of the housing because they feel, I guess, that they've been directed to build to deal with the other housing crisis. And all of the attention is being placed…[on] the regulatory system, not on the quality of homes…and therefore some organisations have definitely took the eye off the ball in terms of their existing homes or have been left in a position where there's funding to build new homes, there's not funding to regenerate existing houses and have not unsurprisingly followed the money.

So we have got a crisis of housing condition in the social housing sector, as well as a crisis of housing provision and housing numbers. And we can't keep swapping which one we think is important. Under the Blair government, there was much more focus on housing condition, but not much on housing provision. We have got a real problem.

And housing associations, we all have to look at our position in this crisis. We're not completely guilt free, as in Grenfell, it's possible for everybody to blame everybody else. But the important thing is actually that you take responsibility for your own actions. So, there are issues. Grenfell refocused the government on tenants’ rights, tenants' voice, housing conditions, although the legislation is only starting to go through Parliament now, [and] seems to have taken an awful long time to get into place. And there will be a new system of regulation, which is the old system of regulation coming back again in many respects.

**Andrew:**And just staying with you, just turning to Bristol, because you are no longer a member of the cabinet, but you were a member of the cabinet when Grenfell happened. Have I got that correct?

**Paul:**Yes.

**Andrew:**And for four years after that, I think. And you're also now responsible for around 800 homes in your work. And we've seen campaigns, we've seen activity to reduce fire risks in some properties in Bristol, you've got the use of waking watch wardens and the programme of sprinkler installation. How much progress do you think has been made in stopping another Grenfell happening or simply making properties a bit safer for people?

**Paul:**In terms of generally across the country, nowhere near enough. There's still lots of cladding that needs to be removed and replaced. What we found at Elim is you take the cladding off, then you find the firebreaks that aren't there, that are supposed to be there. And then that takes you through to the insulation that you've got in the building. Then you think, what do we do about this? And so every time you look, you find something else. And the deeper that you go, the more that you find.

I think Pete said at the beginning of his talk that there are hundreds of thousands of people trapped in properties that they can't sell. They might not feel safe living in them, but there's nowhere else for them to go until this problem is sorted out. In terms of building safety, obviously, there's a lot of focus on building safety and everybody's doing more work than ever before in terms of checking fire safety, working with fire services around their fire risk assessments, and hopefully informing and involving their residents as well.

In Bristol, there've been some fires recently. I think one of them was another danger that I think Pete has identified and written about in *Inside Housing*, which is rechargeable lithium batteries. There have been fires caused by those electric wheelchairs that are rechargeable. [The one in Bristol](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/bristol-flat-fire-cause-electric-bike-b2175714.html), which caused a very tragic death when somebody tried to escape their flat through the window, was a rechargeable scooter.

It seems as soon as you deal with one fire risk, another one crops up. And there's a lot of work to do. Fundamentally, I think we should move to a situation where every property has sprinklers fitted. That will certainly give people much more safety and security. Pete jokes about burning toast and the whole building gets evacuated because the sprinklers have gone off. Obviously, they're much more sophisticated now in terms of the way they work. And burning toast won't set your sprinkler off. But there's still a lot of people who think that will happen and that every time they light a match to have a fag, they're going to be drowned in water. So, there's a bit of an education required there. In Wales now, I believe every new property has to have a sprinkler fitted. In Britain, I think it's only for properties over 49 feet, or so many metres or whatever, but we really need to up that and I'm really pleased that the council reinvigorated the sprinkler programme that I started after the Grenfell fire because we do have to plan for the basis that buildings will catch fire because they will.

**Peter:**I don't think I said the sprinklers would go off when someone burns their toast. I think I said that when there's a simultaneous evacuation policy in place in the building, everyone needs to leave, even during a minor fire. But I am aware that sprinklers are heat activated and very efficient at not activating for minor incidents like that. I'm all for sprinklers, just to get on the record.

**Paul:**I didn't think you wouldn't be. I think it was a throwaway comment you made about office fires. But yeah, people have got to be safe and comfortable in their homes as a bottom line.

**Andrew:**And Paul, just a quick question. There was a recent fire at [Eccleston House](https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/six-people-injured-bristol-flat-7726946) in Bristol, and was that put down to the use of expanded polystyrene cladding, which was flammable?

**Paul:**Yes. From what I understand, that polystyrene cladding, which there's a lot of in Bristol and a lot of across the country, if it's properly rendered and flushed to the building, then it is fire resistant. But if it's broken and cracked and the render becomes cracked, it can then become a fire risk. And in that case in Bristol, the fire did spread through that type of cladding. And that type of cladding will now have to be added to the list.

I think there were a couple in London fairly recently where timber cladding was partly responsible for the spread of the fire. Some cladding was brought in for aesthetics. A lot of it was brought in to improve the thermal efficiency of buildings. But there's a question mark against a huge amount of it. From our perspective now, as a housing association, we would probably only look at rock wall type cladding, which hopefully you can't burn it unless you're trying incredibly hard, because it's effectively made of concrete. I'm sure its carbon footprint is not great. But you have to compromise between these different drivers.

**Andrew:**Just moving on to what we do about this. There was a report in early December 2022 from the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Better Social Housing into social housing provision. And that obviously looked at the state of social housing, and that was quite a difficult report. You've got house builders committed to investing one and a half billion pounds in improving properties, but that money is still a drop in the ocean, isn't it, Peter? It's a huge bill that's got to be paid. What would you like to see Government do ideally and some of the people involved, like the Fire Service?

**Peter:**There are only difficult answers to what to do. The building safety crisis, which has emerged since Grenfell, is the consequences of 30 years of neglect, 30 years of poor building regulations, and lots and lots of buildings have been built in that time, lots of them have been maintained poorly in that time as well.

I think that what the crisis has really missed since the start is a sense of central national leadership. And I think that's, ironically enough, part of what took us here as well. That absence of that. The Government's been quite willing to publish advice notes saying if you have combustible materials on the outside of your building, you should seek further advice. And that's not really good enough, frankly. I think that what that's done is pass the decision down to somebody with a vested interest: either the building owner who doesn't necessarily want to do work to their property, or the insurance provider or the mortgage provider who very much does but won't pay for it. And you end up with very risk averse approaches where they're driven by mortgage providers, very risk happy approaches when they're driven by building owners who would really rather this problem went away, and they didn't have to worry about it anymore.

What you just need is the same thing that we've needed since the day after the Grenfell Tower fire, frankly. And that is clear, unambiguous guidance so that we can determine some buildings are safe, some buildings are in the middle and they need sprinklers and they need fire alarms. But we don't need to rip them down and start again. And some buildings are really dangerous…We're a society which taxes people in order to provide public services which benefit us all. And I can't see how preventing another huge tower block fire doesn't benefit us all. So those ones need to benefit from public funding, if you can't get the people responsible for it to pay, which is obviously where the first port of call should be.

Now, some of that has happened. Obviously, there's been some public funding come in. There's been some increasingly robust efforts to get that money out of the responsible parties. But we still lack that clarity in this crisis of defining the wood from the trees really, and the really dangerous buildings from the moderately dangerous buildings, from the relatively safe buildings. And until we get that willingness from government to take the lead in doing that, I think the crisis is only ever going to be solved at the fringes. It's never really going to feel like we're moving towards a proper solution.

**Andrew:**Paul, you're responsible for 800 houses, you've had your funding cut. What are the solutions for you? Not just in making sure that your existing buildings are safe but making sure you can create the new buildings that people need and feel safe and comfortable in?

**Paul:**There's some really tedious things, like making sure your asset management team and your development team are working together and that fire safety is really top of their agenda. I've certainly said to my team as well that anything that we build - obviously it is not so easy for things that we buy – the things that we build should have sprinklers in as of course.

There's another thing underlying this in that there's this huge skills shortage. The reason we've got some of these problems is because a lot of the work's been really badly done because people haven't necessarily been properly trained or they're not properly supervised. All organisations are surveying all of their properties to see what needs to be done to them or with them. So, a lot of those things are in place.

I think what Pete says is absolutely at the core of it: government needs to hold the ring, doesn't [need] to do it all, but it needs to be there showing that it's responsible. I think there have been some improvements in Government's approach under Michael Gove and I think he has been trying to find the solution to the problem within the terms of the overall government that he's in, [but] there's a limit to what he can achieve. [This recording took place before [Michael Gove’s recent announcement](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/gove-accepts-faulty-government-guidance-contributed-to-grenfell-fire-80038).]

I've got a building where I've got to deal with this issue. It's not quite tall enough to fit some criteria. It's not quite dangerous enough to fit some other criteria. Potentially we could end up in court with the developer of the building and you're talking about probably over £1,000,000 to get into court to get all the evidence that's required. So, what we've got is a really expensive process in terms of getting any solution. We need to look at how those can be streamlined.

But ultimately, it needs money. Pete's absolutely right. Some properties are safe, but people might be worried about them because they haven't had all of the guarantees that they require. Some buildings might need some work. And there's an issue about where that's funded. And then there are the properties, quite frankly, they do need to be put to the bulldozer and we need to replace them. At the moment there's no funding for regeneration of existing properties and funding to replace them. And as with a lot of these things, it will come back to a combination of legislation, regulation, and finance.

**Andrew:**I was reflecting as I was preparing for this event on an event that we did with Robert Peston, and that was about five months after the Grenfell Fire. It was about his book *WTF, What have we done? Why did it happen? How do we take back control?* And his conclusion to that book was that Grenfell changes everything. But did it? A final question to you both.

**Paul:**The [recent] [death of Awaab](https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/awaab-ishak-death-the-coroners-verdict-in-full-79122) …and people are talking about a defining moment…How many defining moments do we need before we grasp the nettle?And of course, these things they disappear from people's minds and consciousness. So it's important that Pete's book has come in now to reinvigorate that debate and to remind people of something that only happened a few years ago.

But we've moved on. We have quite a short attention span and we move on from one thing to the other. And people now are very concerned about the cost of living and heating and the war in Ukraine and all the rest of it. And there's a danger that the public's and government's attention span is very short. Things that should change just don't change. I don't feel that fundamentally we live now in a better funded, better regulated environment generally, not just around housing, but in the country as a whole.

**Peter:**I think we all felt a bit like Robert Peston at the time that it would. But honestly, if you could have said to me five years ago that we'd be here now, so many buildings are unsafe. Still really not resolving this issue around the stay put policy. Still no funding for the retrofitting of sprinklers into social housing. Still building buildings with only one staircase, still with no movement yet on the promised tougher regulation of social housing providers and empowerment of residents, all of that stuff. Where is the change? Anyone I would ask who thinks that they would answer that question differently, what are they talking about? Because I can't see really substantive changes.

I think what I would say just to not end on too sour a note, is that sometimes it is easier to see the change that hasn't happened than the change that has happened. And I think that there probably at grass roots level, there are probably organisations that have taken this stuff seriously. I think that there probably are people who will work in a different way now to how they did before, because some of these lessons have hit home and those smaller things do add up to something bigger once they're all put together.

But if we're talking about has this changed things, are we a different country now than the one we were before Grenfell, which I guess is what Robert Peston meant, then the answer just has to be 'no'. We're the same country and we could see another Grenfell happen. And I think in some ways one of the most depressing things about this whole thing for me really is the whole 'show me the bodies thing' suggests that we wait for a disaster until things change. And actually, that's too optimistic because we wait for a disaster and then still don't change. Sorry to leave you on a real downer, but that's unfortunately the position we're in.

**Andrew:**Thank you, Peter, for the book. And thank you to *Inside Housing* for giving you the time and the space to follow this story from the start. *Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen* is published by Oneworld. It's a brilliant book and should be read widely. We can all learn from this and hope that it will lead to justice for the victims. Thank you, Paul, and Peter, for joining us today.

**Paul:**Thank you, Peter, for the book.

**Peter:**Thank you, guys, for the discussion. It's been really enlightening.

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.*

1. The quote in the letter dated 19 September 2014 is ‘I have neither seen nor heard anything that would suggest that consideration of these specific potential changes is urgent and I am not willing to disrupt the work of this department by asking that these matters be brought forward.’ Williams added: ‘However, I do acknowledge that the matters to which you refer are worthy of full consideration and I have asked my officials to ensure that they are included in the ongoing review.’ A handwritten note added states: ‘Happy to have a chat in the Lobby, as always.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)