

Inner Southern District of Greater London

**The Coroner's Court
1 Tennis Street
London SE1 1YD**

**Her Honour Frances Kirkham CBE
Assistant Deputy Coroner**

28 March 2013

The Mayor and Burgesses of The London Borough of Southwark
160 Tooley Street
London
SE1 2QH

Dear Mayor

Lakanal House fire 3 July 2009

I write concerning the inquests into the tragic deaths of Catherine Hickman, Dayana Francisquini, Thais Francisquini, Felipe Francisquini Cervi, Helen Udoaka and Michelle Udoaka who all died in a fire at Lakanal House, Camberwell, on 3 July 2009. The jury brought in Narrative Verdicts in respect of each of the deceased.

I write to you pursuant to Rule 43 of the Coroners Rules (as amended) which provides:

“(1) Where

- (a) a coroner is holding an inquest into a person's death,
- (b) the evidence gives rise to a concern that circumstances creating a risk of other deaths will occur, or will continue to exist, in the future; and
- (c) in the coroner's opinion, action should be taken to prevent the occurrence or continuation of such circumstances, or to eliminate or reduce the risk of death created by such circumstances,

the coroner may report the circumstances to a person who the coroner believes may have power to take such action.”

I announced at the end of the inquests that I would be sending a report to you as evidence adduced at the inquests gave rise to concern of the type identified in Rule 43. I believe that your authority has power to take action as set out in this report.

It has been drawn to my attention that your authority has taken some steps to address fire safety in relation to high rise residential buildings. I understand (1) that fire risk assessments have been undertaken in relation to all high rise residential buildings within the Borough, and it was your intention that any fire safety work be completed by March 2012; and (2) that fire safety information and advice have been given to residents of such buildings. I therefore make no recommendations in relation to such matters. I do however make the following recommendations.

Information and guidance to occupiers of flats and maisonettes in high rise buildings

Of those former residents of Lakanal House who gave evidence at the inquests, few recognised the extract from your authority's handbook containing advice about fire safety in the home and few knew about the fire safety features of the maisonettes.

It is recommended that, in relation to residents of high rise residential buildings, your authority:

- demonstrate to those who are about to enter into occupation of a flat or maisonette the fire safety features of their dwelling and of the building generally; this should include walking residents through relevant features such as escape balconies and demonstrating how to open fire exit doors and where these lead
- give residents clear guidance as to how to react if there is a fire in the building, namely to explain whether they should attempt to get out of their flat or maisonette and leave the building, or whether they should remain in their flat; that guidance should explain clearly how to react if circumstances change, for example, if smoke or fire enter their flat or maisonette
- consider additional ways in which information might be disseminated to residents, for example, by fixing inside each flat and maisonette a notice about what to do in case of fire.

Signage in high rise residential buildings

It is recommended that your authority review signs in common parts of high rise residential buildings to ensure that these are sufficiently prominent and provide useful information. It is recommended that signage:

- in common areas explain whether residents should normally remain in their flats or maisonettes or whether they should evacuate the building, in which case evacuation procedures should be explained
- provide clear information to residents to enable them to find escape routes
- use pictograms to assist those for whom English is not their first language
- provide information to those in the emergency services which would assist them to understand a building's layout and enable them quickly to find a particular flat or maisonette once inside the building.

It is also recommended that your authority liaise with London Fire Brigade regarding use of premises information plates and boxes.

Policies and procedures concerning fire risk assessment

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 ("FSO") which came into force in October 2006, imposed obligations in relation to fire risk assessments in certain buildings.

It is recommended that your authority review its policies and procedures to ensure that adequate fire risk assessments of high rise residential buildings have been or are now carried out in accordance with the requirements of the FSO, having particular regard to

- prioritising such buildings for early rigorous review
- considering the skills and experience needed to undertake an assessment of higher risk residential buildings

- considering the training required for members of staff considered to be competent to carry out assessments
- identifying when individual flats or maisonettes should be inspected and how these should be selected for inspection
- ensuring that assessors have access to relevant information about the design and construction of high rise residential buildings and refurbishment work carried out to enable an assessor to consider whether compartmentation is sufficient or might have been breached.

Training of staff engaged in maintenance and refurbishment work on existing building

It is recommended that your authority consider the training needs of personnel who will be involved in procuring or supervising work to existing high rise residential buildings – whether maintenance, refurbishment or rebuilding of parts of buildings - to ensure that materials and products used in such work have appropriate fire protection qualities. Staff should, for example, be trained to understand the significance of the compartmentation principle and to appreciate when Building Control should be notified about work to be undertaken.

Access for emergency vehicles

It is recommended that your authority liaise with emergency services to consider access for emergency vehicles to high rise residential buildings, having particular regard to obstructions such as vehicle parking in locations which emergency services might need to use.

Retro fitting of sprinklers

Evidence adduced at the inquests indicated that retro fitting of sprinkler systems in high rise residential buildings might now be possible at lower cost than had previously been thought to be the case, and with modest disruption to residents.

It is recommended that your authority consider the question of retro fitting of sprinkler systems in high-rise residential buildings.

Response

Rule 43A of the Coroners Rules requires that you give a written response within 56 days beginning with the day on which the report is sent. If you are unable to respond within that time, you may apply to me for an extension. The response is to contain details of any action that has been taken or which it is proposed will be taken whether in response to this report or otherwise, or an explanation as to why no action has been taken.

As required by rule 43, I shall send a copy of this report to the Lord Chancellor.

At your request, I am copying this report to Ms Eleanor Kelly, Chief Executive.

Yours sincerely



Frances Kirkham