

Appendix 1:

Report from the Chair of East Dulwich Tenants and Residents Association: Fire at Riseholme House

1. Fire began just before 4pm on January 14th 2004.
2. I arrived at about 4.20pm.
3. There was black, acrid smoke coming from the base of the staircase for part of the building, flats 13 to 38. It was not possible to distinguish the source of the fire at this point, as there was so much smoke. Smoke was pouring up the staircase and out across the open balconies, rendering the stairway completely unusable. There were two fire appliances in attendance by this point and an ambulance arrived shortly afterwards.
4. I could not see any council officers present so at 4.45pm I contacted the maintenance manager at Crown House, who was not until that point of the fire. He informed me he would dispatch an Assistant Contracts Officer to the estate.
5. Another member of the Tenants and Residents Association (T&RA) arrived and we began to speak to the evacuated residents to check everyone was safe and to find out what had happened.
6. We were told that the fire had started (or been noticed) just before 4pm and the fire brigade had arrived shortly afterwards and evacuated the building via the staircase before the smoke had become too bad. Many people were lightly clothed on a bitterly cold evening. The fire appeared to have originated from the electrical intact room at the base of the stairs.
7. Fireman began forcing entry into flat 16 and I again phoned the maintenance manager to let him know of this new development. He asked if I knew why they were doing that and asked if it was every flat. I informed him that it was flat 16 only, but I explained that I could hear another door being kicked as well. As the smoke momentarily cleared, I could see though that the banging I could hear was in fact caused by explosions emitting from the electrical intact room at the base of the stairs. These explosions continued periodically throughout the evening. Firemen had entered flat 16 as they were concerned that the fire in the electrical intact cupboard would find a way through the adjoining wall and spread through the building, but fortunately this did not happen.
8. Although there were two fire appliances in attendance they could not tackle the blaze as the only way to isolate power to the building was inside the electrical intact room. When the electricity company arrived they confirmed that the underground cable would need to be cut, beneath the car park. They estimated that this would take about six hours.
9. On the arrival of an Assistant Contracts Officer I asked that the community centre was opened to give those evacuated somewhere warm to stay out of the cold and

rain. Unfortunately he had not brought the keys, but contacted Crown House and asked for them to be brought over.

10. I was asked by the ambulance crew if there was anywhere warm an elderly lady, who was sitting in their vehicle could be taken, as they needed to free it up in case of emergencies. The repairs manager arrived with the keys and the community centre was opened up. We provided paper for residents to write down their names, addresses, contact numbers and numbers in household, in order that we had a list of those affected. Residents preferring to watch the fire from the car park were asked by T&RA members to register their details at the community centre, so we could account for as many people as possible. Several families with babies and young children elected to go across to the local Sainsburys store where there was a restaurant with more facilities. These people were again asked to register their details and asked to leave a contact number, so that they could be kept informed of the situation.
11. At approximately 5.15pm I asked the maintenance manager what was being done about food and drink for people. I was told that the major incident procedures had been started and a van would arrive shortly with hot drinks, food and blankets.
12. The estate officer arrived shortly afterwards and all three officers stood together outside Riseholme House. None had reflective jackets or uniforms that in any way identified them as council officers and as a consequence few people were aware of who they were. I asked if they could split up so that there was someone both at the building and in the community centre to give people help and advice. All three officers had mobile phones so could be in contact at all times. This request was not actioned. T&RA representatives tried to direct people as best we could and offer help and advice where possible. As the evening drew in more residents began to arrive from work, many accompanied by children. Repeated enquiries were made as to the whereabouts of the refreshments.
13. Information from the fire brigade was that it was likely to be two days before residents would be able to return home. At this point no attempt to extinguish the fire could be made as the electricity had not been isolated.
14. At 7pm I spoke to another council officer, who identified himself as being from the housing department rather than the neighbourhood office, and asked what was being done to provide accommodation for people over night. He told me that he had rung around and there wasn't much bed and breakfast available. I pointed out that the longer he left it, the less there would be.
15. At 7.15pm I approached the maintenance manager and again asked about the whereabouts of the van with hot drinks and food, to be told that it wasn't coming. I asked the maintenance manager to get on the phone immediately and sort something out with the neighbourhood manager, which he did.
16. I then contacted another member of the T&RA and asked her to telephone our ward councillors. I was informed that the neighbourhood manager had agreed to pay for refreshments for those made temporarily homeless and would meet someone at the nearby Sainsburys supermarket. I and another tenant then made a

list of items required. Cllr McNerney arrived shortly afterwards and we asked him to accompany a tenant to Sainsburys to collect refreshments.

17. The officer from the housing department told me that he had found some accommodation, but it would only be provided for those with children. I misunderstood this and assumed that those with children would be found accommodation first, which I felt seemed reasonable. Using the list we had compiled tenants were provided with accommodation according to their bed need. Each tenant was advised that they probably would be able to return to their home at some point during the night and that they could be provided with lighting. When I enquired exactly what form this lighting would take I was informed it would be a couple of candles.
18. There was some discussion about some tenants having gas fires that could be used, or being able to light gas boilers by hand. It was pointed out that no one had a gas fire in their flat anymore, and that it was not possible to manually light gas boilers these days.
19. The first tenant to be offered accommodation was told that the booking had been made for one night only and that the following day the family would have to book out by 10am and go to Larkham Street to fill in temporary accommodation forms. I pointed out that it was unreasonable to expect families to check out and travel some distance only potentially to be booked back into the same accommodation again the next night. It was eventually agreed that it was more reasonable for the housing department to contact them in the morning to let them know whether to return home or stay another night.
20. Council officers agreed eventually to provide accommodation for those who did not have children after being presented with a tenant who has recently been discharged from hospital and required suitable accommodation on health grounds.
21. The fire burned itself out around 9pm.
22. At approximately 10pm, I believe, a selection of hot and cold refreshments arrived. After eating tenants departed for their accommodation. Council officers were unwilling to pay for transport. From speaking to the neighbourhood manager after the incident, I understand that if he had been made aware of this, transport would have been provided where needed. Some residents made their own way to the accommodation, others we shuttled by Cllr Ward to various destinations across the borough. Some residents were housed as far away as Lea Green.
23. A number of tenants were offered accommodation in Ilford, but everyone refused.
24. Each tenant was given my contact number in case of any problems when they arrived at the accommodation or on their return home.
25. We closed the community centre after everyone had departed and returned to Riseholme House. We met an elderly resident who had returned home late and had been allowed by firemen to gather a few possessions from her home. She was

hoping to find somewhere to stay with a neighbour. The neighbourhood manager then arranged for overnight security on the building.

26. On returning home, I received a telephone call from a tenant who phoned very upset to say that she and her daughter could not possibly stay in the accommodation, as she was so disgusted. I rushed back to find the neighbourhood manager for him to sort the situation out. He re-contacted the tenant, by which time she had made alternative arrangements.
27. Tenants returned to their homes the following day when power was reconnected at about 5pm.
28. The following day work began to restore power and was complete by about 5pm. The door to the electrical intact cupboard had been badly damaged so the doorway was left with a curtain over it until the following Monday.
29. Members of the T&RA called on residents over the weekend to check everything was in order and that they had no ongoing problems. There were a number of issues that were raised by tenants.
 - Lack of information from council staff
 - Lack of training of council staff
 - Failure to provide food and drinks for so long
 - Attitude and manner of council staff
 - Failure to provide transport to accommodation
 - State of accommodation (no breakfast, breakfast but no crockery or cutlery, no toilet paper, insufficient beds, dirty rooms/sheets/bathrooms)
 - Failure to notify that the hotel should be vacated
 - Failure to notify safe to return home
 - Failure to offer compensation for losses/loss of earnings
30. Generally almost everyone was extremely unhappy with the treatment they received. To date as far as I am aware, no one has been contacted by the council to check on their welfare. A letter has now been delivered detailing how to claim compensation from the electricity company though.
31. Many residents claim they were only aware they could return to their homes from speaking to the electricity company. Several commented that they only knew to leave their hotels when cleaning staff came to clean their rooms. Two households refused to stay in their accommodation as they were so disgusted by it and yet there has been no follow-up to check on the suitability of accommodation. In one case a party of five was provided with four beds.
32. Whilst we were all grateful for the efforts of the staff at the neighbourhood officer, who I have no doubt did the very best they could in a difficult situation, it was obvious that this was not a situation that they were trained to deal with. The situation required trained staff who were adept at organising and co-ordinating services to minimise the disruption and disturbance to residents. In failing to contact residents after the event, an opportunity to learn from the mistakes made is also being missed.

33. Since the fire however I have had a very productive meeting with the neighbourhood manager and the maintenance manager, where we all had an opportunity to state our various positions, which was a very positive move. One of the points I felt very strongly was that neighbourhood staff should have fire marshal training, as although seldom used, prepares staff for the situations that occur during incidents like this. These are relatively inexpensive and I believe is something that will be looked into.
34. Many people felt that the poor communication that they experienced on the evening of the fire was due in part to poor visibility, and again the suggestion that staff should wear high visibility jackets during incidents of this nature was taken on board.
35. There was some discussion about the type of temporary accommodation that was used to house people overnight. Almost without exception those who stayed in accommodation provided by the council found it totally unacceptable. Whilst conscious of the fact that the Housing Revenue Account is not a bottomless pit of money, I think we have to look at whether we consider sending families with young children to spend the night in hostels frequented by drunks and drug addicts, to stay in rooms where the sheets are dirty and the bathrooms have not been clean, on the rare occasions that incidents such as this occur.
36. I would like to re-iterate that I felt that the neighbourhood staff did their best in the situation, but unfortunately it was a situation that they did not seem well trained for. I hope rather than a witch-hunt this can be seen as an opportunity to learn from the mistakes made.

Steve Hedger
Chair, East Dulwich Estate Tenants & Residents Association

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