

Consultation response

# **Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea consultation**

## **Draft Walkways rehousing policy**

January 2018

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Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

## Summary

- For the residents of the Lancaster West Estate, and the surrounding neighbourhood, the Grenfell Tower fire caused exceptional levels of trauma, in terms of witnessing the horror of the blaze, dealing with the loss or injury of relatives, friends and neighbours, and in coping with the aftermath.
- Such an unprecedented housing and homelessness disaster requires an unprecedented response in terms of the way that residents affected by the fire are treated and helped with rehousing.
- Shelter responded immediately to the Grenfell Tower fire, mobilising a team of housing advisors, solicitors and volunteers from our London Hub to provide rapid support to people affected by the fire.
- Our approach from the outset was to take our lead from the local community, listening and responding to the needs and preferences of individual households and working in partnership with established local agencies, such as the Westway Trust and North Kensington CAB.
- In our view, the borough's existing Grenfell Rehousing Policy for former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk<sup>1</sup> seeks to treat survivors humanely and as a priority. However, in a neighbourhood which already had such severe housing need, this is having the unintended consequence of delaying or limiting rehousing of other residents who are in urgent need of a move.
- It is very important that people who require rehousing as a result of the fire are offered suitable permanent rehousing as quickly as possible. They are desperately in need of a permanent home so that they can feel settled enough to deal with their trauma and to rebuild their lives. It is unreasonable to expect people affected by the fire to make successive moves unless they express a preference to do so.
- It is imperative that all those who are homeless or require rehousing as a result of the fire receive a compassionate, person-centred and efficient service.
- **There needs to be much better information on the borough's strategy for tackling rehousing problems in the neighbourhood, who is responsible and how decisions are being made. This will help residents to make informed decisions and should speed up the rehousing process.**
- **Given that the situation on the ground is so fluid, we also recommend that the final rehousing policy is reviewed in 3-6 months.**
- We believe that the proposal to restricting priority only to residents of the Walkways is too blunt an approach because it is based on the road (or walkway) on which people were living, rather than their proximity to the tower and/or the trauma and disruption they have experienced.
- We are working with households who lived, or continue to live, in the surrounding area who have a very compelling need to move as a direct result of the Grenfell Tower fire but have been told they will be given no additional or exceptional priority.
- **We recommend that, at the very least, residents who are not covered by the Draft Walkways Rehousing Policy but who directly witnessed the fire from their homes, or were traumatised by the fire in some other way, and feel it would be unreasonable to return, should be treated as an exception.**

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<sup>1</sup> [The Housing Commitment to Residents who lived in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk](#), July 2017, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

- We support the policy of including homeless households living in temporary accommodation within the Walkways Rehousing Policy. They have already been through the trauma of homelessness, and may also have been lacking a settled home for a number of years prior to the fire.
- **We recommend it should also apply to other tenants, such as private and housing association tenants who cannot return to their homes as a result of the fire, on the basis that their homes are unreasonable to continue to occupy and they are therefore homeless and entitled to ‘reasonable preference’ in allocation of social housing.**
- We support the granting of specific points to Walkways residents directly affected by the fire, although this should be restricted to walkways residents. But we do not agree that these specific (e.g. 900) points is the maximum that a resident directly affected by the fire should be entitled to.
- **We recommend that households should be prioritised on the basis of cumulative need, with the addition of a category for being traumatised by the Grenfell fire. This should allow households with pressing need (e.g. disability) priority over other people caught by the policy who have less acute or chronic need.** At the very least, there should be a banding system, as there is under the existing Grenfell Rehousing Policy, to allow for more vulnerable households to be rehoused first.
- **We strongly support the desire to balance the needs of residents directly affected by the fire against other residents in the locality in serious need of rehousing. Many of those who approach our services are in highly unsuitable accommodation and are currently unable to bid on any properties.**
- **Ultimately, residents in urgent need of a move must not have to compete for rehousing with those affected by Grenfell. This is completely unacceptable for such a traumatised community, who impressed the world with their solidarity towards each other after the fire. There must be a renewed local authority strategy to address all serious housing need in the neighbourhood.**
- We strongly recommend that the borough reviews its homelessness strategy to set out how it will make sure that sufficient accommodation is available in the neighbourhood to tackle homelessness and poor housing conditions. This should include details of its procurement strategy.
- A series of moves within the space of a year or so is unsettling for any family, but is completely unreasonable for families who are coping with serious trauma and, understandably, feel they cannot trust the local authority to prioritise their welfare or take their concerns seriously.
- **Residents subject to the Rehousing Policy for the Walkways (or, ideally, wider surrounding area) should not have to move into temporary accommodation to receive rehousing priority.** We recommend that households in emergency accommodation receive the additional points but are given intensive help to clearly identify how quickly they may have to wait for a suitable permanent home and make decisions.
- **We disagree with the proposed two-offer policy.** Two offers are not enough for people who might be severely traumatised by the fire. We’re generally averse to limited offers as it creates an unnecessary gamble for applicants. We prefer a continued choice-based lettings approach, where applicants can continue to bid for properties that they would be willing to accept.

## Introduction

The Grenfell Tower fire shocked the entire country and made headlines around the world.

For the residents of the Lancaster West Estate, and the surrounding neighbourhood, the fire caused exceptional levels of trauma, in terms of witnessing the horror of the blaze, dealing with the loss or injury of relatives, friends and neighbours, and in coping with the aftermath.

Six months on, the fire continues to affect the day-to-day lives of residents of the neighbourhood. Hundreds of people have lost loved ones or been physically injured in the fire. The majority of the residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk have not only lost their homes, and in many cases all of their possessions, but remain homeless.

Others, including residents of the surrounding walkways, have homes that are available for occupation, but feel they cannot return or remain in occupation because of the terrible trauma they experienced.

Unlike many people who have to deal with the stress of witnessing traumatic events, residents of the neighbourhood around Grenfell Tower have a daily reminder of their trauma in the form of the burnt-out building. It's likely to remain uncovered until February and it may be much longer before it's taken down.

It was reported at the end of October that 161 households from the surrounding walkways were living in emergency accommodation.<sup>2</sup> Spending the winter living in hotel rooms, where day-to-day tasks like mealtimes or children's bedtimes are much more difficult, is challenging for any family. For those coping with trauma, living in such cramped conditions can be intolerable: trauma symptoms in children can include sleep problems, temper tantrums, disobedience and bedwetting.<sup>3</sup>

**Such an unprecedented housing and homelessness disaster requires an unprecedented response in terms of the way that residents affected by the fire are treated and helped with rehousing.**

Shelter responded immediately to the Grenfell Tower fire, mobilising a team of housing advisors, solicitors and volunteers from our London Hub to provide rapid support to people affected by the fire. Our approach from the outset was to take our lead from the local community, listening and responding to the needs and preferences of individual households and working in partnership with established local agencies.

We quickly set up arrangements with local organisations, including the North Kensington Law Centre and Kensington Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), as well as other groups assisting residents such as the Housing Law Practitioners Association. Shelter advisers are now regularly based in community locations including The Latymer Christian Centre, Westway Trust and North Kensington CAB.

So far, we have worked with 117 households in the locality. These range from households who:

- were living in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk and have lost their homes;
- were living in Barandon Walk, Hurstway Walk and Testerton Walk ('The Walkways') and have homes available for occupation but feel they cannot remain living there;
- were living in close proximity to Grenfell Tower in different forms of tenure and feel they cannot remain living there;
- live in the neighbourhood or wider borough and are not directly affected by the fire, but are experiencing serious housing problems, including the need for rehousing via the borough's allocation scheme.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/home/home/grenfell-committee-accuses-rbkc-of-insensitivity-over-rehousing-policy-52992>

<sup>3</sup> [Supporting children and young people after a traumatic event](#), Institute of Health Visiting

**Our response to the borough's draft rehousing policy for Walkways residents seeks to represent the views and needs of all four groups of our service users but particularly the latter three.**

We have contacted Walkways residents, as well as those who sit outside the policy, who we are working with to find out their response to the policy.

We have more people approaching our services each week, including families who have been living in overcrowded conditions with relatives and friends since the fire, but are now finding this intolerable and are suffering because of their living conditions and secondary trauma.

**Response to rehousing needs to date**

Shelter have consistently demanded that all residents made homeless or in need of rehousing as a result of the fire are offered suitable and appropriate alternative homes within the borough of Kensington and Chelsea, at the same rents and with the same security of tenure, as well as being promptly given the information they need to make decisions.

In the weeks after the fire, in the light of huge local and national public sympathy and anger at the initial official response, assurances were made by both local and national government. Initially, that residents would be offered rehousing within three weeks, and later that former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk would be provided with a new home in social housing within a year.

In our view, the borough's Grenfell Rehousing Policy for former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk<sup>4</sup> seeks to achieve this. People included within this policy are awarded the very highest priority for rehousing to permanent social housing, worth 3000 points on the council's housing register. They are allowed unlimited offers of accommodation and are being given as much time as they need to decide whether to accept these offers.

In fact, this can have the unintended consequence of delaying or limiting the allocations process for other residents of the borough who are in urgent need of suitable rehousing, such as people who are terminally ill or have such severe disabilities or health conditions that their homes are unreasonable to occupy or are damaging their health. Public opinion would likely consider them to be in equally as severe need of rehousing. This highlights the pressing need for the local authority to deal with overall housing need in the borough.

To ensure the most vulnerable households are given the opportunity to be rehoused first, the Grenfell Rehousing Policy contains four bands. We support this more nuanced approach.

1. First band priority – given to anyone who has been bereaved as a result of the fire.
2. Second band priority – given to a household that has a member or members:
  - with a serious physical or mental disability
  - with a serious learning disability
  - who has needs for care and support or carer's needs for support.
3. Third band priority – given to any household which includes dependent children.
4. Fourth band priority – given to all other former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk.

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<sup>4</sup> [The Housing Commitment to Residents who lived in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk](#), July 2017, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

## Service delivery

In our experience, however, the practical implementation of the existing Grenfell Rehousing Policy has been lacking.

### Case study 1: Disabled Grenfell Tower residents offered unsuitable accommodation

We are advising a couple who lived at the top of Grenfell Tower, but weren't present on the night of the fire. Both have serious health conditions and mobility problems. They have moved hotels three times, once because of a disrepair problem. They are in the second band of priority under the Grenfell Rehousing Policy (serious disability) and have expressed interest in properties on offer. They have been offered several properties, none of which were suitable for their needs. They felt that the suitability assessment had not been taken into account at all and they haven't been shown anything they have expressed an interest in. In order to give them accurate information, we have asked the housing authority for a breakdown of the offers made and clarification on how many hotel residents are due to be offered one-bedroom properties before them. In order to accurately advise people, we generally need clearer information on how many households there are in each of the four bands, and how many permanent homes are immediately available.

We appreciate the enormity of the task facing the borough's housing department and the challenges facing individual officers in dealing with traumatised families whose circumstances and needs may be changing from week to week, for example when family members are discharged from hospital. However, in our experience, the housing authority have:

- been unacceptably slow to inform residents of changes to policy and practice;
- not responded adequately to communication from residents, either by phone or email – some households we are supporting have had no response to emails after weeks of waiting or leave phone messages but are never called back;
- not provided continuity of service to residents, who find that their housing officer is changing on a regular basis, necessitating explaining their trauma, circumstances and needs over and over again.

These are not isolated incidents limited to particular cases or as a result of the actions of particular officers, but are systemic. The initial report of the independent taskforce<sup>5</sup>, found that the delivery of many services, including permanent rehousing, has been poor and recommended that the pace of delivery must be increased as a matter of urgency.

While the pace of the response must improve, it is imperative that all those who are homeless or require rehousing as a result of the fire receive a humane, compassionate and efficient service, tailored to meet their individual circumstances, needs and preferences.

We recommend that housing officers working with people affected by the Grenfell fire should have appropriate training and confidence in identifying and responding to trauma. People's motivation and ability to engage with services are heavily impacted by traumatic experiences, particularly if they have been let down by services in the past. It is therefore vital that services are trauma-informed<sup>6</sup>. The initial

<sup>5</sup> [Initial report from the Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce: 31 October 2017](#), DCLG, 6 November 2017

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, S. et al, [Going further back: earlier action on multiple needs to prevent homelessness](#), September 2017, Sheffield Solutions, University of Sheffield

taskforce report recommended that existing and new staff '*need to be trained in working with a community that has been severely traumatised*'.<sup>7</sup>

Our relationship with operational staff is very positive but not very productive. Phone lines are well staffed and staff are friendly and eager to help. They are willing to pass calls through to an appropriate person and happy to give contact details, which is very helpful.

However, record keeping is lacking, for example, there do not appear to be clear customer relationship records. It would be very useful to have a clearer understanding of what information and advice they are giving to residents.

It would be beneficial for the local authority to publish a list of key contacts for specific issues, with their responsibilities, for residents and advice agencies to use.

## **Rehousing policy**

It is very important that people who require rehousing as a result of the fire are offered suitable permanent rehousing as quickly as possible. People in this situation desperately need a permanent home so that they can feel settled enough to deal with their trauma and to rebuild their lives.

As the independent taskforce noted, '*with 320 households in hotel accommodation, attempts to temporarily and permanently rehouse these residents are proving a complex exercise. Permanent rehousing numbers are increasing at a painfully slow rate.*'<sup>8</sup>

It is unreasonable to expect people affected by the fire to make successive moves, e.g. from emergency hotel accommodation to self-contained temporary accommodation to a permanent home, unless they express a preference to do so.

The families who we are supporting are anxious that, until they are permanently rehoused, they will be left in limbo, having to chase the council about their case and unable to properly settle or plan for their future. A series of moves within the space of a year or so is unsettling for any family, but is completely unreasonable for families who are coping with serious trauma and, understandably, feel they cannot trust the local authority to prioritise their welfare or take their concerns seriously.

**We strongly recommend that, while rehousing policies are useful as a framework for assessment, there should not be too rigid an approach to policy and prioritisation. Each individual household affected by the fire has its own unique set of needs and preferences, which may change over time. What is important is that decisions on individual cases are objective and clearly set out.**

Rehousing policies must be flexible to ensure they are person-centred and cases should be regularly reviewed to reflect changes in circumstances and needs. As the initial taskforce report recommended, '*systems, policies and practice need to be designed with people's current needs at the heart as opposed to what is good or convenient administrative practice.*'<sup>9</sup>

**Given that the situation on the ground is so fluid, we also recommend that the final rehousing policy is reviewed in 3-6 months to reassess needs and options a year on.**

The specific housing needs of households affected by the Grenfell fire must be recognised in the long-term, so that they continue to be offered extra help and priority should they experience future housing

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<sup>7</sup> [Initial report from the Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce: 31 October 2017](#), DCLG, 6 November 2017, page 1

<sup>8</sup> As above, page 8

<sup>9</sup> As above, page 5



problems. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is estimated to affect about one in every three people who have a traumatic experience. It can develop immediately or it can occur weeks, months or up to 15 years later<sup>10</sup>, taking a heavy toll on confidence, health, employment and relationships<sup>11</sup>.

It must not be assumed that once families are suitably housed, they will start to overcome the symptoms of their trauma. This could be the point at which symptoms start to appear as a result of delayed PTSD, and where their housing is triggering stress or deterring recovery, they must be prioritised for further housing assistance.

### **Clear written information**

What is important is that there is a framework for all aspects of decision-making, and all information and advice is confirmed in writing by the housing authority, so that it can be scrutinised, challenged and held to account.

In our experience, front line staff are rarely able to give information on the bigger picture, such as how many properties in Kensington Row have been allocated. Although we have gained some additional information from managers, confusing and conflicting information remains a concern for many people. When they approach us, people are often confused by the information provided.

For example, we are aware that the local authority is purchasing properties on the open market but for some time were having difficulty in obtaining information about this. Front line housing staff appear to have little or no contact with the procurement team and cannot provide on the progress of sales, which means that service users have no or confusing information.

A woman we are advising, who lost her home in Grenfell Tower, was told to pick a property online and advised that the housing authority would buy it for her; she had no follow up and established that the housing authority was trying to get a sense of what she preferred and was then looking for similar properties, rather than buying a specific property as she had believed.

We have since learned that in only very limited cases are residents being invited to choose their homes on the open market. In other cases, residents can suggest homes which are for sale, but if these homes were purchased, they would be allocated according to the rehousing policy rather than directly to who suggested it.

**There needs to be much better information on the borough's strategy for tackling rehousing problems in the neighbourhood, who is responsible and how decisions are being made.**

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<sup>10</sup> [Post-traumatic stress disorder](#), NHS Choices

<sup>11</sup> [Understanding the recovery process of PTSD](#), PTSDUK

## Response to specific consultation questions

### Question 1: The draft policy applies only to the Walkways and not to the wider Lancaster West Estate or surrounding area.

The draft policy proposes a special dispensation to the borough's housing allocation scheme, to be known as 'Walkways Priority', to tenants who were living in the three walkways as their main home prior to the fire. It is proposed that this dispensation will not apply to the residents of the wider Lancaster West Estate or the surrounding area.

The council has adopted this stance in recognition of the fact that Walkways residents were deeply affected by the fire, including 'some' who moved into emergency accommodation. It states that *'the overwhelming majority of residents from the area surrounding the Tower who were placed in emergency accommodation were residents from the Walkways'*. It points out that other walkway residents continue to experience severe disruption.

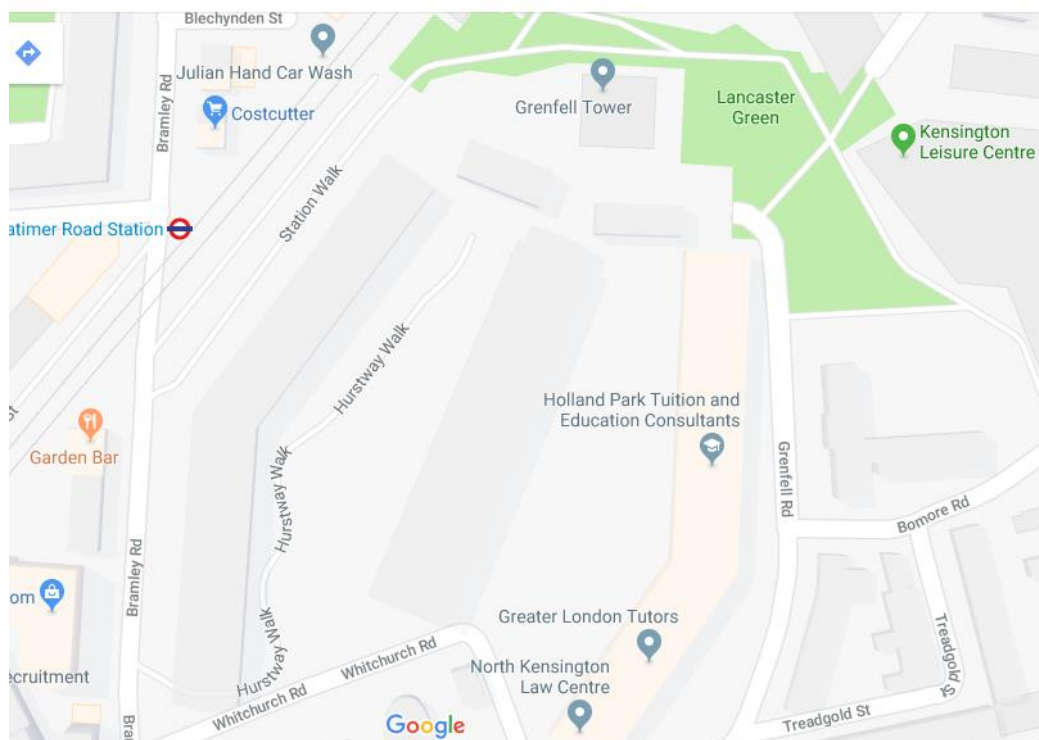
The council seeks views on alternative policies. It suggests one alternative would be for priority status to be offered to all the residents on the Lancaster West Estate and/or the entire surrounding area, but does not wish to pursue this approach *'because it does not reflect the specific circumstances of Walkways residents. It would also present a significant challenge to the supply of available social housing in the borough and would disproportionately disadvantage the 2700 residents on the Council's Housing Register who are in housing need, to whom the Council also has a duty.'*

Instead, residents who do not live on the Walkways but feel they cannot remain in their home will be assessed by the housing authority on a case-by-case basis and will be offered advice and assistance through existing mechanisms.

**While we broadly agree with this approach, we believe that restricting priority only to residents of the Walkways is too blunt an approach because it is based on the road (or walkway) on which people were living, rather than their proximity to the tower and/or the trauma and disruption they experienced. We recommend that the rehousing policy should not be restricted to a street address, but to the need to move as a direct result of the fire; either because a nearby resident directly witnessed the fire from their homes or were traumatised by the fire in some other way.**

For example, as the map below illustrates, Hurstway Walk is a walkway of at least 150m in length, stretching from Bramley Road in the south to Grenfell Tower in the north. Residents at the southern end of the walkway, who remained in their homes on the night of the fire, may not have directly witnessed the fire as it unfolded. However, many residents at the northern end of the walkway will have witnessed the fire directly from their homes, and continue to have a direct view of the tower, which may trigger flashbacks to the traumatic events they witnessed,

This would also be the case for residents of other buildings and streets with a direct, close-up view of the tower, who are not to be awarded Walkways Priority if they need to be rehoused.



We are working with households who lived, or continue to live, in the surrounding area who have a very compelling need to move as a direct result of the trauma caused by the Grenfell Tower fire, but have been told they will be given no additional or exceptional priority. Where they feel they can't return to their homes, they are being advised by the council to make an application for homelessness assistance.

### **Case study 2: traumatised and badly housed family not entitled to priority**

We are advising a resident of a building close to Grenfell Tower but not in the Walkways. Her family, including several young children, witnessed the blaze from the windows of their home. Consequently, she is receiving mental health support, as is one of her children. Dust from the burnt-out tower still collects on her window frames. She is overcrowded, so one child has to sleep in his parents' bedroom. She also has serious disrepair problems in her home which predate the fire, including structural problems, broken windows and extensive damp and mould. About a month after the fire, as a result of a gas leak, her home was without hot water for several weeks. She was advised to shower in the nearby Grenfell Assistance Centre (The Curve)<sup>12</sup>. The response from the housing authority has been slow. It was only after we had intervened on several occasions that she was assigned an assessing officer, who is now treating the case as a 'normal' homelessness application and making enquiries<sup>13</sup>. Our service user is extremely disappointed and angry at not being covered by the Draft Walkways Rehousing Policy and the council's slow and inconsistent response to her housing needs.

We have been told verbally by council officers that, where people are unhappy with the alternative accommodation offered to them under homelessness legislation, they can request a review of its suitability but that it is highly unlikely this would be successful. Where we encounter offers in breach of suitability legislation and guidance, we hope to negotiate with the council, but will ultimately advise and assist people to legally challenge unlawful decisions.

<sup>12</sup> The Curve, 10 Bard Road, W10 6TP

<sup>13</sup> Under Part VII, Section xx of Housing Act 1996

## Exceptions

Housing authority officers appear to be verbally informing some residents who are not covered by the existing Grenfell Rehousing Policy or Draft Walkways Rehousing Policy that they will be awarded the same priority as an exception and will therefore be made direct rehousing offers<sup>14</sup> or awarded 900 points on the housing register.

### Case study 3: bereaved and traumatised family unclear if they have priority

We are advising a man who was living close to Grenfell Tower. He witnessed the fire both from his home and from outside the tower, where his close family members lived. He watched them perish in the fire and was on the phone to them when the fire engulfed their flat. He has been told that he will be treated as exceptional and like he is likely to be *'just under Category A'* (Grenfell Rehousing Policy), with no reference to where this leaves him or what entitlements he will actually have. He feels the local authority have been far too slow to offer accurate information or advice over the past six months.

The lack of a clear exceptions policy, setting out parameters for how applications for an exception might be considered raises several concerns for us. People may have legitimate claims but are not aware they might be accepted. This approach risks causing divisions and resentment, with some people benefiting from the policy and others not.

**We recommend that, at the very least, residents who are not covered by the Draft Walkways Rehousing Policy but who directly witnessed the fire from their homes, or were traumatised by the fire in some other way, and feel it would be unreasonable to return should be treated as an exception.**

An exception policy should include cumulative points for people living in the neighbourhood who:

- Have lost a relative or close friend in the fire. This should include children who have lost a friend or fellow pupil.
- Were communicating with relatives and friends trapped in Grenfell Tower, especially if they perished or are still missing.
- Witnessed the fire at close-hand from their homes.
- Witnessed the fire at close-hand from outside their homes or assisted survivors. This should include those who offered assistance to those trapped in or escaping from the tower.

Decisions made under such an exceptions policy needs to be clear and consistent.

## 2. The draft policy applies only to council tenants and statutorily homeless households placed in temporary accommodation on the Walkways.

This policy does not apply to leaseholders, private tenants or lodgers. The borough has adopted this stance because it has a legal rehousing duty to its own tenants and to those statutorily homeless households placed in temporary accommodation on the Walkways.

Again, the housing authority argues that if it widened this policy, it would disadvantage other households in urgent need of rehousing.

The borough recognises that Walkways leaseholders face different challenges with regard to their homes and require different solutions. They will be developing a separate policy for those who own a home on the Walkways.

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<sup>14</sup> Via allocation scheme under Part VI, Section xx of Housing Act 1996

The borough will help private tenants and lodgers to find an alternative affordable private rented tenancy. Where possible, the housing authority will negotiate a long tenancy term.

**We support this policy. Homeless households living in temporary accommodation have already been through the trauma of homelessness, and possibly trauma as a result of what triggered the homelessness, if a bereavement, relationship breakdown, harassment or eviction. They may also have been lacking a settled home for a number of years prior to the fire.**

We look forward to commenting on the rehousing policy for Walkways leaseholders. We recommend that this covers the formula the housing authority intends to use with regard to valuation.

#### **Case study 4: Walkways resident already homeless and in temporary accommodation**

We advised a woman seeking clarification on her housing options. She is a Walkways resident, but her accommodation is provided as temporary accommodation under homelessness legislation<sup>15</sup> rather than as a secure tenancy. She witnessed the fire, and this has exacerbated existing mental health problems. Although she feels traumatised by what she witnessed, she only wants to move if the first offer is permanent. She is tired of moving around after eight years in four different temporary homes. We advised that the Draft Walkways Rehousing Policy covers homeless residents in temporary accommodation, allowing them to become fully secure tenants of their Walkways accommodation if they wish. Our service user would like to do so and we are requesting confirmation in writing before the property is fully allocated to her. We will offer to guide her through the whole process.

**We recommend it should also apply to other tenants, such as private and housing association tenants who cannot return to their homes as a result of the fire, on the basis that their homes are unreasonable to continue to occupy and they are therefore homeless and entitled to 'reasonable preference' in allocation of social housing.**

### **3. The draft policy awards 900 Housing Register points to Walkways households eligible under the policy who wish to be rehoused elsewhere.**

The draft policy proposes to award 900 priority points to Walkways residents eligible under the policy who elect not to return to or remain in their homes. This will give them priority status on the housing register equal to those who need to be rehoused on medical grounds.

It is proposed that tenants awarded Walkways Priority cannot be awarded any other priority category for rehousing under the main allocation scheme. The housing authority has adopted this stance because its usual allocation scheme normally awards only 100 points to homeless households in temporary or emergency accommodation.

The housing authority suggests that, as an alternative, it could award only 100 points to Walkways residents, in line with its main allocation scheme. This option is not being pursued by the borough because it would not give adequate consideration to the needs of Walkways residents. The 900 points proposed for Walkways residents reflects the impact of the fire and its aftermath on Walkways residents. The Council could award more than 900 points to Walkways residents.

This proposal means it is likely there will be only a relatively small group of people on the register who will have priority over Walkways residents wishing to find a new home. The housing authority is proposing not to award more than 900 points because it has to balance the needs of Walkways residents with the needs of other high priority groups on the register.

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<sup>15</sup> Section 193, Housing Act 1996

**We support the granting of specific points to Walkways residents directly affected by the fire.**

However – as set out above – we would prefer a wider locational policy, based on cumulative need, which focuses on the trauma experienced by the resident and how their existing home might no longer be suitable. At the very least, there should be a published framework for assessing exceptions.

**But we do not agree that these specific (e.g. 900) points is the maximum that a resident directly affected by the fire should be entitled to.**

We recommend that households should be prioritised on the basis of cumulative need, with the addition of a category for being traumatised by the Grenfell fire. For example, a household with people who have disabilities or serious medical problems, whether they predate the fire or are as a result of it, should be given additional priority. Equally, an overcrowded household, who have been waiting on the register for some years, should be awarded additional points for time waiting.

This should allow them priority over other people caught by the policy who have less acute or chronic need. At the very least, there should be a banding system, as there is under the existing Grenfell Rehousing Policy, to allow for more vulnerable households to be rehoused first.

**We strongly support the desire to balance the needs of local residents directly affected by the fire against other residents in the locality and wider borough provided this is done on the basis of cumulative need.**

Many of those who approach our local services have queries about the housing register. They are often in highly unsuitable accommodation, for example due to disrepair or overcrowding, and are currently unable to bid on any properties.

Their situations are sometimes so severe that they would qualify as homeless on the basis that their accommodation meets the threshold of 'unreasonable to occupy'. But if they were to make a homeless application they would then lose priority on the register and may lose their security of tenure by being given a private rented sector offer.

Most of the people we are working with in this position sympathise with Walkways residents and agree that they need some priority for rehousing, but they want information about how long they are going to have their bidding suspended for and how the 900-point priority for Walkways residents will impact them. They are naturally concerned about the impact of having Walkways residents with 900 points entering the register and how long the register will consequently be frozen. Conversations with housing imply that it will be a very long time, but they have no concrete information.

**Case study 5: family waiting in cramped conditions**

We are advising a secure council tenant, who lives in a studio flat with his partner and 18-month old child. So they are very cramped. Prior to the fire, he was bidding on two-bedroom properties and coming second or third. His bidding has now been suspended, along with the rest of the housing register. Our service user is part of the Grenfell activist community, so he is deeply concerned about the rehousing of survivors and people from the Walkways. He does not necessarily disagree with Walkways residents being awarded 900 points. But he is upset and angry that he has received no communication from the housing authority about what will happen to people in his situation, and what their housing options will be going forward. His frustration is exacerbated by the tenant management organisation's failure to carry out repairs in his property. He feels very stuck, and uncertain about whether he should be investing to make the property more suitable in the long term, or if he will be able to bid on properties again in the near future. Essentially, he is not opposed to the Walkways Policy in theory, but is angry at the lack of communication to other residents and sees this as a further example of the council's consistent failure to support and adequately house its residents.

People in severe housing need in the neighbourhood, which predates the fire, must not feel they are pitched against those who have lost their homes or need rehousing as a result of the fire. This is making people feel that the council continues to constrain housing options and expects residents to

compete for the limited suitable homes in the area. This is completely unacceptable for such a traumatised community, who impressed the world with their solidarity towards each other after the fire.

The local housing authority has a clear strategic duty to 'securing that sufficient accommodation is and will be available for people in their district who are or may become homeless'<sup>16</sup>. They have a duty to 'keep their homelessness strategy under review and may modify it from time to time'<sup>17</sup> In modifying its homelessness strategy, it should have regard to its current allocation scheme.<sup>18</sup>

There was already severe levels of housing need and homelessness in this part of the borough before the Grenfell Tower fire.

**We strongly recommend that Kensington and Chelsea reviews its homelessness strategy to set out how it will make sure that sufficient accommodation is available in the neighbourhood via its allocation scheme to tackle homelessness and poor housing conditions. This should include details of its procurement strategy and how long residents in urgent need of rehousing are likely to have to wait for a suitable home.**

#### **4. Walkways households eligible under the draft policy will not be able to apply for the additional points until they move out of hotels into self-contained accommodation.**

Walkways residents eligible under the policy will not be able to apply for their 900 priority points until they have moved out of hotels into self-contained accommodation, either into temporary accommodation or back into their Walkways homes.

This is the most contentious aspect of the draft policy among Walkways residents in hotels.

The borough has adopted this stance because it recognises that hotels are not a suitable environment for any household, especially for families, '*nor are they sustainable in the medium or long term*'. This is presumably referring to financial sustainability. The housing authority is proposing high quality local temporary housing to provide an interim arrangement for residents who do not wish to move back to the Walkways, either immediately or in the long term. The housing authority is contacting residents with the details of this offer.

The housing authority suggests that as an alternative policy, residents could apply for priority status while in hotel accommodation. It has decided not to pursue this option because it recognises that hotels are not a suitable environment for any Walkways household. The local authority claims it understands that people may need time to make decisions about their future and wants them to be able to make those decisions in a more suitable environment.

**We recommend that households who don't wish to move into temporary accommodation or back to their former home because of the impact on trauma, receive the additional points but are given intensive help to clearly identify how quickly they may have to wait for a suitable permanent home, so they can make informed decisions about remaining in hotels.**

Under the suggested policy, tenants would not be given priority for rehousing while remaining in hotel accommodation provided after the fire – meaning they would either be required to move into temporary accommodation or back into their old home before being found a new place to live.

People traumatised by the fire are unlikely to want to return to their homes, particularly while the burnt-out tower is so visible and when the fire happened only a few months ago.

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<sup>16</sup> Homelessness Act 2002, Section 3(1)(b) (Homelessness strategies)

<sup>17</sup> Homelessness Act 2002, Section 3(6)

<sup>18</sup> Homelessness Act 2002, Section 3(7A)(a)

But they are also reluctant to move again into what might be a series of self-contained, temporary accommodation properties. The families who we are supporting are anxious that, until they are permanently rehoused, they will be left in limbo, having to chase the council about their case and unable to properly settle or plan for their future.

It is unreasonable to expect people affected by the fire to make successive moves, e.g. from emergency hotel accommodation to self-contained temporary accommodation to a permanent home, unless they express a preference to do so. A series of moves within the space of a year or so is unsettling for any family, but is completely unreasonable for families who are coping with serious trauma and, understandably, feel they cannot trust the local authority to prioritise their welfare or take their concerns seriously.

In our experience, Walkways residents accommodated in hotels are being encouraged to move into temporary accommodation, less gently than residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk. They are being offered specific properties within the borough. It has been verbally implied that they will not have the right to turn down multiple offers, although we are yet to get confirmation of this in writing.

## **5. Walkways households eligible under the draft policy who wish to be rehoused receive up to two offers of suitable accommodation through the Housing Register.**

The housing authority proposes that it will work closely with households to assess household need and to support them to find a suitable property.

The authority will then make up to two offers of suitable accommodation, giving residents a choice of property, and will keep offers under review with a clear record of engagement in every case. The 900 priority points will be withdrawn if a household rejects two suitable offers and the priority status reduced to 100 points.

The housing authority say they have adopted this stance because the two offers approach is an enhancement of the main allocation scheme and is not usually offered to those on the register. However, Kensington and Chelsea's allocation scheme<sup>19</sup> states that if an applicant refuses two suitable offers through choice-based lettings (or refuses one direct offer of accommodation) their points will be removed and they will no longer qualify. So it is not an enhancement other than for direct offers.

The authority will engage very closely with residents to ensure their needs are understood and that residents are aware of their realistic rehousing opportunities. The authority says it is committed to supporting residents to express an interest in properties that are suitable and that they wish to move to.

The housing authority suggests an alternative policy could instead offer Walkways residents the same terms as the main allocation scheme. This may result in a quicker allocations process and would be less resource intensive for the authority. But the authority has decided not to pursue this option as it would not give adequate consideration to the particular needs of Walkways residents wishing to be rehoused.

Another alternative would be for the housing authority to offer residents an unlimited choice of properties.

### **We disagree with the proposed two-offer policy.**

Two offers are not enough for people who might be severely traumatised by the fire. We're generally averse to limited offers as it creates an unnecessary gamble for applicants. We prefer a continued choice-based lettings approach, where applicants are encouraged to properly assess their current and future needs and preferences, as well as having much better information about the likely options.

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<sup>19</sup> [Housing Allocation Scheme 2017](#), Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, page 20



Many of our clients have complained about being shown inappropriate properties where the council hasn't taken their needs assessment into consideration before making offers. If this practice continues when Walkways residents are made offers, there could well be serious problems.

### **Any other aspects of the draft policy that you wish to make comments on**

#### **Costs of new tenancies offered**

We recommend that the rehousing policy provides clarity on current and future rents and service charges in any new tenancy agreements. If rents on new homes are higher, applicants need clear information on whether they will be capped and for how long.

We suggest that existing and future rents and service charges are capped at the amount the household previously paid.

There needs to be clarity on how any service charge increases will be calculated and applied, as well as who will pay the difference between capped rates and actual charges and for how long.

We recommend that the policy makes clear that households who are rehoused under the policy and might be affected by restrictions on housing benefit (e.g. removal of the spare room subsidy) will not lose out financially throughout the length of their original tenancy. There needs to be clarity on how shortfalls in housing benefit will be covered.

#### **Help to make sure new homes are in good order**

Some of the residents we are working with had invested a great deal of money and time into maintaining and decorating their homes. They now cannot return. They are worried that the new home they are offered will need repairs and full redecoration, including carpets, to bring it up to a standard where they feel it is homely enough to help them recover from trauma.

The Grenfell Rehousing Policy states that keyworkers will assist in furnishing the new home and we understand that Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk residents have been assisted with furniture and furnishings.

**We recommend that the housing authority arranges for a special maintenance team to be available for people affected by the fire and in need of rehousing, to address repairs in the new home and help with decoration before families move in. At the very least, this should be offered to people who do not have the financial means to arrange or undertake such work themselves.**

#### **For more information, please contact:**

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