

Emergency evacuation of four south London tower blocks

By Paul Mitchell
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Hundreds of families in four 13-storey blocks in Ledbury estate in Peckham, south London, have been told by the local Labour-controlled Southwark Council to leave their homes.

Residents of the 242 flats have been sent letters saying they will have to “temporarily decant the blocks over the coming weeks and months” for emergency works. Council officials do not know when they will be able to return.

The council said safety checks carried out following the Grenfell Tower fire indicate the blocks are at risk of collapse in the event of a gas explosion. Workmen are now disconnecting the gas supply and residents are being given electric hotplates.

The council announced the evacuation following an investigation by engineering consultancy company Arup, which revealed that strengthening of the buildings “may not” have been carried out after the collapse as a result of a gas explosion at Ronan Point, a similarly constructed high-rise in east London, in 1968. Four people died and 17 were injured. The reinforcement of vulnerable buildings and the replacement of gas supplies by electricity were fundamental recommendations of the Griffiths Inquiry set up by Harold Wilson’s Labour Party government following the disaster.

The fact that 50 years after the disaster, Griffiths’ recommendations have been ignored at the Ledbury estate, and probably many more blocks around the country according to safety experts, is yet a further warning to those who put their faith in the Conservative government’s announced Grenfell Fire inquiry.

Southwark’s deputy leader and cabinet member for housing, Stephanie Cryan, blamed the failure to carry out Griffiths’ recommendations on the former Greater London Council, declaring, “We didn’t own the blocks

when they were constructed at the end of the 1960s, but all the reports we found suggested the blocks were strengthened following the Ronan Point incident in 1968 to make them safe to include a gas supply.

“Arup’s structural investigations suggest this strengthening may not have occurred, and we have therefore turned off the gas until further investigations can be done.”

Southwark council’s Strategic Director for Housing & Modernisation, Gerri Scott, added, “Earlier today I heard from Arup, who regrettably informed us, based on their structural investigations, that the information we have regarding the history of the blocks may not be correct, and we have therefore taken the decision to turn off the gas supply to all Ledbury tower blocks immediately, and have asked Southern Gas Network to do so.”

Scott assured reporters that the council would offer residents £5,800 to help with moving costs, should they wish to find new accommodation. Some would be able to move into a new block of 80 flats “in the vicinity” of the Ledbury Estate, with others placed at the top of the housing waiting list. Those who don’t want to move will be offered the right to return to the refurbished Ledbury blocks, Scott added.

The latest announcement is a *volte face* that demonstrates Labour is as guilty as the Tories of contempt for council residents.

Back in July, Ledbury residents, concerned by the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, were told at a council meeting that there were “no structural safety issues” relating to the cracks in their flats. However, at the meeting, building surveyor and fire safety expert Arnold Tarling revealed that flammable polystyrene inserted between concrete slabs and flues meant “a fire could travel up the building.”

There were gaps around cabling and gas pipes, Tarling explained, that were wide enough to fit his hand through, which “no amount of fire-stopping would be able to fill.”

Deputy leader Cryan criticised Tarling for springing the issues on the audience, saying that Southwark’s fire safety teams “are already carrying out” safety checks, although residents had not yet been told about them.

Cryan declared, “I have to be very clear that there are no surprises in any of the points made by Arnold Tarling, these are all matters we have been dealing with for some time, with advice from the best and most up-to-date sources of information. We will continue to investigate and carry out works if and when they are required. ...We will keep our residents informed at every step.”

Following the announcement of the evacuation of residents from the towers, Tarling repeated to reporters, “As soon as I walked in and saw the gas supply, I knew it was all wrong ... Southwark council did not listen to me, and you really have to question their competence.”

The sudden evacuation from the Ledbury estate after so many years raises questions over whether this has any connection with Southwark council’s social cleansing policies.

The estate is slap bang in the middle of the council’s “Old Kent Road Action Plan and Opportunity Area”—opportunity being the appropriate word for developers who have made millions from the council’s regeneration schemes.

Published in May 2016, the report points out that a whole swathe of Southwark, including the Ledbury estate, is the latest to be earmarked for “regeneration” by the Labour council. The plan, in explaining that the Old Kent Road is the last remaining undeveloped district in central London, just one mile from Tower Bridge, declares, “Over the next 20 years the opportunity area will be transformed, becoming increasingly part of central London... Located so close to central London, the area’s housing stock has become very popular and house prices have risen accordingly.”

Real estate company Savills has highlighted the problem of “high investment need estates” and “a legacy of poorly designed and built housing.” It has recommended “alternative options for poorly performing stock” and “the need to make difficult choices,” accompanied by “the prospect of leveraging

in private sector investment.”

The council insists the Old Kent Road regeneration will provide 35 percent social housing. But its record shows that this is never achieved.

The notorious public-private partnership (PPP) redevelopment of the Heygate estate at Elephant and Castle, in cahoots with developers Lendlease, led to the replacement of 1,200 social homes with expensive private apartments. Only 82 social homes were replaced and just three of the original households have returned. Lendlease made a profit of £113 million from the venture, while council leader Peter John’s claim the council would get “north of £100m” from it to build new housing, never materialised. It ended up with just £12 million.

Local campaign group “35percent.org” has campaigned to expose the council’s social cleansing policies. It has pointed out that the first major development along the Old Kent Road at the Bermondsey Works has used a “subject to viability” clause in a 19-storey, 158-unit scheme to provide just 10 affordable homes, none of which is social-rented. It has submitted 46 developments in a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman in which affordable housing from private developments was not being delivered.

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