



Creating space to listen

Eight years on from the Grenfell tragedy, **Callum Wilson** and **Joe Philp** reflect on what Kensington & Chelsea LBC has learned about rebuilding trust

All local authorities grapple with the issue of trust. But there are few places where it is more critical than Kensington and Chelsea where, on 14 June 2017, a fire ripped through Grenfell Tower killing 72 people, 18 of them children.

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry found that the council failed its residents before, during and after the fire. As the leader acknowledged in an open letter to the bereaved and survivors, the council should have done more to keep people safe in their homes and to care for them in the aftermath.

That terrible night shattered people's trust in the council, especially survivors, bereaved family members, the immediate community and people living in social housing across the borough.

The challenge since has been to begin to rebuild that trust against the backdrop of a public inquiry, civil litigation and an ongoing criminal investigation.

Where we have made progress, it is because we have found space to listen to our residents, ensuring we don't repeat the failures that made Grenfell possible. Nowhere has this been more important than in designing support for the bereaved, survivors and the immediate community.

In response to tireless campaigning by the community,

we agreed with other parties to fund a restorative justice programme as part of the settlement of civil claims in 2023. This was unprecedented in the UK and the council was asked to deliver it on behalf of the defendants.

It was a painful injustice to many that the same organisation responsible for what happened was also tasked with supporting those affected. So we committed to designing the programme from scratch with the community, with scrutiny from an independent expert partner, Involve and Collaborate.

We were uncertain about what this meant in practice and, at first, were sceptical about the value of yet more scrutiny. The community was also unsure. They were unconvinced by the claims about independence and reminded us they were the real experts.

We worked with the bereaved, survivors and residents to shape the programme over more than a year. Alongside this, the new scrutiny team interrogated our work, reviewed our materials, looked at our data, met with the community and made suggestions for how we might improve our approach.

The team's independence generated a degree of community confidence in the process, which was welcome. More importantly, they encouraged us to take a step back and reflect again on the circumstances we found ourselves in and the harm that had been done.

In doing so, they helped us create space for some of the (often unspoken) things that were most important to the community: the pain of living through a public tragedy, the profound impact of the fire on those living close to the tower, the exclusion and injustice people felt after the tragedy and the low levels of trust in the council.

Hearing these reflections led us to change our approach. We began to share challenges more openly with residents and found ways to talk about what the programme could and could not do against the wider backdrop of delayed justice and the community's frustrations at the slow pace of change.

We took time at each stage to play back findings and discuss them with residents. We found new ways to draw on the huge strengths of the community, setting up new steering groups and using restorative techniques and independent facilitation to make decisions at every stage. The consultation took more time than we had anticipated, but was stronger as a result.

We heard from hundreds of people over four phases and agreed a final model for the programme in summer 2024. Since then, we have been working with the community to implement the new support, with the final elements launching later this year.

There is no consensus on the new programme and it will not put right the harm that was done, but we think people understand how we made the decisions we did and how they can be involved in shaping changes over the next four years.

We have since used some of the same approaches elsewhere, focusing on listening and building relationships. We worked with the bereaved, survivors and residents to shape the council's response to the inquiry report and are establishing an Independent Advisory Panel to oversee the commitments we have made.

Grenfell and the Grenfell community are unique and so too are some of the issues the council has faced since 2017. But the challenge of trying to build trust with residents is a problem all local authorities face, not just ones recovering from a major disaster.

Our experience has shown that it starts with listening to what matters to people. Sometimes local authorities need help to do that. We shouldn't be afraid to ask. ■

Callum Wilson is strategic director of Grenfell, communities and transformation and Joe Philp is director of Grenfell legacy and corporate strategy at Kensington and Chelsea LBC

Rebuilding trust is everyone's business

Restorative approaches developed after the Grenfell tragedy are relevant everywhere, argue **Dawn Plimmer** of Collaborate CIC and **Sarah Castell** of Involve

There is a lot of talk about relational public services, and a growing number of inspiring examples of 'doing with', not 'doing to'. But what does this mean in the context of trauma where trust has been broken?

Collaborate and Involve have explored the potential of a restorative scrutiny approach to help councils repair relationships. We think this model could and should be applied more widely.

In 2023 we were appointed to provide independent scrutiny of a new support programme for bereaved, survivors and the local community around Grenfell. The programme aimed to help residents with the ongoing impact of the tragedy.

Our role was to scrutinise the way the council developed the programme and to see whether it was 'restorative'.

But what could be meaningfully restorative, given the ongoing trauma in the relationship between the council and the people impacted by the tragedy? And how could scrutiny help?

We took our responsibility seriously. The bereaved, survivors and local community members had suffered great harm and understandably had low trust in public bodies. We needed to explore what a restorative consultation and programme might look like, without minimising the past, people's experiences, or their ongoing fight for justice.

'Restorative scrutiny' felt almost like a contradiction in terms. Critiquing things that have gone wrong to ensure people are held to account is vital, especially in the case of the Grenfell tragedy. But the programme we were scrutinising aimed to help rebuild trust. The scrutiny we were tasked with could not be adversarial or punitive, because that might worsen divides – between the council and the people impacted, and also between the bereaved, survivors and community members themselves.

We used the scrutiny process itself to model restorative practice. This increases shared awareness of power dynamics, behaviours and needs that are often hidden beneath the surface in group conversations and processes. It helps everyone feel heard, to break through deadlocks in relationships and increase the choices available to groups when making decisions together.

In this case, it helped everyone identify their role

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in the relationship and helped the council move from 'power over' towards 'power with'.

We engaged with the bereaved, survivors and the local community and provided real-time feedback and course-correction on the consultation, based on restorative principles that we ourselves also tried to adopt.

Our recommendations to the council included building in more space for meaningful engagement alongside setting clear boundaries for discussions.

Previously, the council had feared that boundaries might disrespect those who had experienced trauma. But the reverse happened – clarifying constraints, what was up for decision, and the level of influence participants could have, made difficult conversations more honest, relational and productive.

People with marginalised experiences have low trust in public services, so it is important to proactively nurture trauma-informed relationships to help repair and prevent future harm

A restorative approach allowed residents and the council to step into shared responsibility for navigating the trade-offs the new programme would need. The council became an active participant, appointing an external facilitator so they could share their experiences and needs, too.

Putting relationships at the heart of our scrutiny, and the council then doing the same in consultation and programme design, was a marked departure from the norm.

It moved the consultation process from extracting insight, to building a relationship where all parties could contribute to shaping a different future.

Early in our scrutiny, participants told us that in order to be trusted, the new programme needed to go alongside an improved wider experience of the council in everything – from housing services to the visibility and behaviours of council leadership.

We recommended the council define the kind of relationship it wanted with residents overall, and use that vision to guide its approach across all services and functions.

Grenfell is an example where there are specific needs. We can all think of other tragedies where this kind of approach could have helped, but we believe a restorative approach is valuable for all councils.

Many people, especially those with marginalised experiences, have low trust in public services. So it



A section of the Grenfell Memorial Community Mosaic, an art project that has brought hundreds of local people together

is important for public services to proactively nurture strong, trauma-informed relationships to help repair and prevent future harm.

Other councils are also taking action. Stockport Family – Stockport's integrated children's services are underpinned by restorative practice – are working together with children and families to build and repair relationships and develop shared plans that build on families' strengths and local resources.

Camden has launched a centre for relational practice to deliberately design relationships into the fabric of the organisation.

Fostering strong relationships needs to be seen as

everyone's role across all local government functions – even those like scrutiny, finance, legal and asset management that may seem transactional at first glance.

These functions can undermine trusting relationships and trauma-informed approaches without this being an intentional focus. It is only when local authorities embed these ways of working at the heart of their operating model that we will truly realise the benefits of relational public services. ▸

Dawn Plimmer is director of practice at Collaborate CIC and Sarah Castell is chief executive of Involve