

# A GUIDE TO PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Themes include: the impact of grassroots action and refusals to be bystanders to injustice. Responsibility remains with educators to ensure that materials are age appropriate for their students.

## Ronan Point 1968 and the Newham Tower Block Tenants' Campaign of the 1980s

At 5.45am on 16 May 1968, a tenant in the brand new 22 floor Ronan Point flats struck a match to light her stove. Leaking gas exploded and blew out the loadbearing external wall. Floors and external walls down one side of the building gave way. Four people were killed on the day and one more died a fortnight later in hospital. Many more were injured. A report later found: "Despite the terrifying nature of the incident, particularly for those who had found that half of their flat had suddenly disappeared, there was no panic. People made their way out of the flats and down the stairs... Many went first to make sure their neighbours needed no assistance". The BBC said "local stevedores and dockers are at the site to help clear the rubble as doctors and nurses treat the injured".

An inquiry found that the collapse was due to faulty design. The Large Panel System of building, where prefabricated concrete blocks were joined together, had never been used on such a tall building before. The Building Regulations and Codes of Practice were out of date and risks had been overlooked. The Griffiths inquiry recommended that, with 'strengthening', such buildings all over the country would be safe to live in.

By the early 1980s Ronan Point was occupied again and tenant groups were active. Newham's Community Links had a touring bus where people could come for free advice. Tenant leader Sue McDowell asked Community Links to advise on setting up a campaign. The group helped establish local tenants' groups and convened the Newham Tower Block Tenants Campaign. They ran a large national conference in 1983, creating the National Tower Blocks Network.

The problems alarmed campaigning architect Sam Webb who had become an expert on Large Panel Systems after researching the Ronan Point collapse. Tenants could hear televisions or smell cooking in flats several floors away suggesting the flats were not sealed units. Tower block safety requires that each flat can contain fire or fumes for at least one hour. Webb dropped a 10p coin behind a skirting board in one flat and it hit the floor in the flat downstairs. The flats were not sealed.

Photo thanks to Frances Clarke



Tenants packed out council meetings, met journalists and produced evidence based briefings. Key members of Newham's Housing Committee, including Fred Jones and Jean Reeves, accepted what tenants wanted. Tenants were re-housed and Social Work Team Leader Liz Lowe was part of a multidisciplinary council team which worked with residents to redevelop the site with low-rise buildings. Later structural tests on Ronan Point showed gaps in the joints between panels and found that some were stuffed with newspaper rather than concrete. During a fire test in one flat, fire spread so quickly that it had to be extinguished after 11 minutes. In Newham, new housing did not include tower blocks and Ronan Point was demolished in 1986. Structurally unsafe tower blocks all over the UK were reinforced or demolished after the government issued instructions to local authorities to address the problems.

# JOURNEY TO JUSTICE

## STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

The campaign succeeded for many reasons. Local people pressed for change, helped by a trusted community group. It included committed experts and used the media effectively. The local MP Nigel Spearing wrote to government ministers and they had to respond. The campaigners made allies among the council which had the power to make change happen.

Between Ronan Point in 1968 and Grenfell Tower in 2017 there have been other tower block incidents in the UK, including the Lakanal House fire in Camberwell in 2009 in which six people died. Speaking after Grenfell Tower, Sam Webb said: "It isn't a tragedy, it's an atrocity, and it is being directed at poor people."



Campaigners want safe social housing in which the lessons of the past have been learnt. Frances Clarke, one of the original campaigners: "...austerity policies have reduced the resources available to support tenants – for campaigning and for representation using legal aid." The importance of listening to and involving tenants in housing maintenance and design is clear.

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# JOURNEY TO JUSTICE

## STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

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Frances Clarke is now involved with a new campaign on tower block safety. Details can be found here - <http://www.towerblocksuk.com/>

Special thanks to everyone who gave of their time and expertise to help compile this guide, which was researched by Bethan Rigby. In particular: Frances Clarke, Liz Lowe, Sam Webb, and Colin Grainger. All mistakes are our own!

To download this and other stories of community action for justice in Newham go to <http://journeytojustice.org.uk/projects/newham-history/>