

Preventative measures

Emma McClarkin explains why we need further action from the EU on fire safety in buildings



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Nine months after the Grenfell tower tragedy and ahead of a procedural hearing held by the Grenfell Inquiry in London, it is essential that we remind ourselves of the grief the residents and the local community in North Kensington must be going through. We must take a moment to consider their bravery and strength in the face of this disaster. Our priority must continue to be to help the survivors rebuild their lives, and ensure that this tragedy never occurs again. To this end, I hope that the independent Grenfell Inquiry, ordered by the British Prime Minister, provides the survivors with the answers they deserve and the UK Government with authoritative evidence on how to prevent a repeat of this terrible tragedy.

Keeping this tragic event in mind, it is also important that the EU considers what sensible steps member states and the European Commission should take to improve fire safety in buildings. In times like these, it is essential not to rush to ill-thought regulatory responses or point the finger of blame wherever we can. Instead, it is the responsibility of member states to ensure fire safety regulations and standards are implemented by industry and effectively enforced by national authorities. I have been campaigning for years in the European Parliament to raise fire safety standards in Europe, including submitting a Written Declaration

with cross-party support that called on the Parliament to take further action on improving fire safety in buildings. I have also tabled a parliamentary question to the Commission enquiring about the existence of an inter-service working group on fire safety to monitor the consistency of fire safety in EU legislation and raise awareness about the importance of maintaining high standards. However, there is still much that the EU can do to enhance fire safety and, in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster, it is imperative that further action is taken.

In particular, the EU can improve fire safety in three ways. First, through enforcing existing regulations and standards, second, by exchanging

best practices between member states and third, by prioritising prevention through improving fire safety standards for high buildings. First, it is essential that existing national regulations and standards at member state level are effectively enforced. Due to differences between the positions of member states on the use of flame-retardants, the Commission has noted the difficulties associated with introducing legislation for fire safety. Instead, the European Committee on Standardisation (CEN) holds the mandate to develop fire resistance standards. CEN is currently drafting new standards, including fire resistance tests for service installations and the reaction to fire tests for building products. In tandem with this important work however, member states must also make the effort to ensure that their existing standards and rules are enforced fully. This includes in the UK.

Second, member states' national authorities must exchange best practices on fire safety to forge collective solutions to this complex problem. The Commission has established a Fire Information Exchange Platform (FIEP), intended to facilitate the communication and exchange of information among national authorities and stakeholders. I welcome this positive step by the Commission towards facilitating an open and cooperative dialogue. Through the sharing of information and best practices, national authorities can take a more holistic approach towards fire safety that is cognisant of the advantages and disadvantages of the regulatory choices made by member states across the EU. Nonetheless, it is important that the EU take this further by actively encouraging national authorities to engage with this platform and share insights both in person and through a digital platform.



Finally, prevention must be the priority going forward. This can only take effect through the rigorous review of existing rules relating to the design, construction and maintenance of buildings, particularly high-rises. The Grenfell Inquiry should inform the way forward regarding approaches to reviewing building regulations. If the evidence gathered by the inquiry demonstrates the need for specific regulatory changes to improve fire safety standards in high buildings, the UK government must be prepared to take action. Likewise,

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individual EU member states are also conducting fire safety reviews, and these must maintain focus on developing preventative measures.

We owe it to those who lost their lives and those who survived the Grenfell tower tragedy to get fire safety standards in buildings right. Although the EU has taken positive steps towards developing fire safety standards and facilitating information sharing between member states' authorities, it must go further by actively engaging national authorities to enforce existing regulations and share best practices in person and online. Prevention needs to be the priority for policymakers, to ensure that the Grenfell tower tragedy is not repeated and deliver the standards of fire safety our citizens deserve. ★

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EVERY FIRE VICTIM IS ONE TOO MANY, WRITES
QUENTIN DE HULTS



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Europe has achieved substantial improvements in fire safety, with fire fatalities dropping by 65 per cent over the last 30 years, but recent tragic events have rightly triggered renewed attention on how to improve fire safety in Europe. As Executive Chair of the Modern Building Alliance, I believe all stakeholders must intensify their efforts to find and implement effective solutions. As representatives of the plastic industry in the construction sector, we are committed to playing our part.

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To facilitate the exchange of best practices, the European Commission set up the Fire Information Exchange Platform (FIEP) in September last year. FIEP has identified five workstreams to focus on. The most instrumental will be the first one, on statistical data. Currently data from different countries can be incomplete and is not necessarily based on harmonised definitions and methodologies. If we want to work together to improve fire safety, we need to start by speaking the same language. Existing statistics show that the change in rate of fire deaths varies between Member States. Analysing these differences will help us to recognise best practices. More comprehensive and comparable data will give the EU and national governments the opportunity to better identify the most effective fire safety measures.

The domestic environment should be a clear focus - there is room for

improvement with easily and readily implementable measures. For instance, smoke alarms provide a critical early warning at negligible cost; however, only some Member States have made them mandatory in housing. In addition, sprinklers should be considered in some situations such as high-rises and high risk buildings. Finally, awareness campaigns and prevention work by fire brigades have been shown to be very efficient.

It's the responsibility of the whole construction value chain to ensure the proper use of products and therefore compliance with national building regulations. As manufacturers, we should all be willing to engage with stakeholders and policy makers to find the most appropriate solutions to ensure our products deliver their maximum benefits with regards to performance, safety and sustainability. The Modern Building Alliance and its members will closely monitor the conclusions of the investigation on the Grenfell Tower fire and stand ready to respond in an appropriate way when it comes to fire safety in high rise buildings.

Setting up FIEP was a crucial step and our industry is committed to contributing to this constructive dialogue. We encourage Member States and other stakeholders to do the same. Local authorities, fire safety professionals and industry must work together to collect accurate data, identify best practices and ensure recommendations are widely shared and implemented. We ask MEPs to support FIEP and to champion solutions to increase awareness, prevention, detection and protection. By doing so, I believe they will effectively continue to improve fire safety in Europe.

Quentin de Hults is Executive Chair of the Modern Building Alliance