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Seventy-two people were killed in the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017

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Ex-fire safety chief: Grenfell council has made some flats less safe

Engineer who joined the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea after the disaster and then quit says it is still putting people at risk

[James Beal](#), Social Affairs Editor | Adam Branson

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The council accused of failings over the Grenfell tragedy has made some of its residential blocks less safe since the disaster, its former head of fire safety has said.

The experienced fire risk and building safety engineer, who did not want to be named, joined the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) in 2022 believing he was going to help

make improvements in the borough where the Grenfell blaze killed 72.

But he quit seven months later, citing workplace bullying and claiming that some work to increase fire safety in residential blocks put residents at greater risk of harm. The council says the allegations are “unsubstantiated”.

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He also detailed an incident in which David Lindsay, the councillor who was then the mayor of Kensington and Chelsea, made an alleged racist remark during a Black History Month event at a fire station close to Grenfell Tower.

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Lindsay was asked to leave the fire station after he referred to a senior fire officer from London Fire Brigade as having a face “as black as the ace of spades”.

The council, in correspondence seen by The Times, admitted that the mayor should not have made the comment, which has not been disclosed publicly before.



David Lindsay, then the mayor of Kensington and Chelsea, allegedly made a racist comment

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The engineer, who is black, said he was speaking out to try to shine a spotlight on the culture of senior leaders at RBKC, one of the organisations implicated in the deadliest residential fire since the Second World War.

Before the Grenfell inquiry report — to be published on Wednesday — he said: “After taking time to reflect on my time at RBKC I came to the conclusion that I had to speak up and call it out.

“Residents of the borough rightly expected that fire safety issues were being tackled and I couldn’t look my kids in the eyes without calling out the racism seemingly directed towards myself and others.”

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The engineer, a father of two, was headhunted by RBKC as its head of fire safety in October 2022 after working for the London Fire Brigade.

The council has faced criticism for its actions before and after the blaze at Grenfell Tower, a building it owned and was landlord of, in June 2017.

It was accused of putting pressure on those overseeing the tower’s refurbishment project, before the fire, to appoint the cheapest contractor, the public inquiry was told.

The council’s building control department signed off the refurbishment after combustible cladding, which did not meet building regulations, was wrapped around the tower.

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RBKC was also accused by lawyers at the Grenfell inquiry of describing displaced residents as “hostile” after the fire.

But the engineer saw his job at RBKC as the chance to help put things right. He said: “It was ground zero as far as our industry is concerned. I went there with the expectation of: ‘OK, if these guys can’t get it right, who [can]?’”

Campaigners have been fighting for justice over the Grenfell disaster for years

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But during his tenure, he claimed he encountered numerous fire safety problems. They included, in one instance, the introduction of a fire door halfway up the single staircase of a

tower block — something the engineer claims would have endangered the lives if there were a blaze on the lower floors. He said: “Anybody on the upper floors wishing to escape ... gets a face full of smoke.” The door, he says, was removed after he objected.

RBKC said the door was installed after the recommendations of an independent external fire risk assessor in 2021.

Other changes included the introduction of fire doors to other residential blocks, which the engineer considered dangerous, and a focus on improving “dry risers”.

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Dry risers are vertical pipelines installed within buildings to facilitate the rapid delivery of water during firefighting.

The engineer believed the “great expense” on updating them could have been better spent on smoke control, fire detection, warning, compartmentation and suppression methods in flats, for instance with the installation of sprinklers.

He said: “In the context of life safety there were other things that could and should have been prioritised.”

He also revealed that one Grenfell survivor was rehoused by RBKC in a groundfloor flat with a fire shutter that closed automatically — blocking the main door — if it detected smoke.

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The survivor was eventually rehoused, the engineer said. He never got to the bottom of why the shutter was there.

He added: “I couldn’t work out why you would place somebody in this property in this condition, let alone somebody who’s considered so traumatised by their previous life experience.”

RBKC said it did not install the shutter, which had now been removed.

The engineer said he found so many problems he “wasn’t even looking for” that senior council workers told him he needed to stop auditing fire safety.

He said: “I needed to speak to people. I needed to visit certain sites. I needed to understand why certain decisions were made.”

The engineer conceded that perhaps others, with different opinions, had been consulted over fire safety, but added: “I absolutely consider that the things that I came across were problematic.”

RBKC acknowledged “differing professional opinions amongst fire engineers”.

The engineer claims he was bullied and micromanaged in his job and also described experiencing a culture of “institutional racism”. This stemmed from the incident — only two weeks after he had started, in October 2022 — involving Lindsay.

The engineer had attended a Black History Month event at North Kensington fire station, close to Grenfell Tower, organised by the London Fire Brigade, where Lindsay was also present.

But the event organiser told the engineer, who was there with his young son, that he had to ask Lindsay to leave.

The engineer added: “He [the organiser] said: ‘I’ve had to ask the elected mayor of RBKC to leave this event because he made reference to another senior officer of the London Fire Brigade in terms of his face being ‘as black as the ace of spades’.”

The engineer says he was stunned. He said: “It was a Black History Month event with black food, black people being celebrated. The words that the then elected mayor said are the antithesis of that.”

He added: “How could I achieve anything with such views held by senior leaders? Then there’s the question that’s been asked post-Grenfell during the course of the inquiry. Did race play a part in any of the decision making?”

After the fire, survivors and the families of those killed have said that “systematic racism” played a part in the disaster.

After the incident with the mayor, the engineer said: “I couldn’t really conceive of how we were going to improve this situation, when the culture quite clearly accepts and tolerates that. He [the mayor] wouldn’t have said it if he didn’t feel empowered to do so.”

Lindsay served as mayor from 2022 to last year.

A spokesman for RBKC confirmed a complaint about Lindsay's remark was addressed at the time after being taken "very seriously". The spokesman said Lindsay "remains hugely apologetic for his comments" and had taken training and advice since.

The engineer resigned from RBKC in May last year, making a complaint of workplace bullying and institutional racism, including serious allegations regarding building safety.

His bullying complaint was not upheld. RBKC said he had not provided sufficient details of safety issues.

In response, the engineer repeated an offer to take members of the senior leadership team and representatives of resident associations to the buildings concerned to explain "contraventions and compliance issues".

He wrote to RBKC saying that decisions made by the senior leadership team had made a number of buildings — naming at least ten — in the borough "worse than existing".

He also recounted the incident at the North Kensington fire station in his complaint.

In an email response to him, Debbie Morris, then the director of HR at RBKC, wrote that she was "aware" of Lindsay's comment, and said the council's monitoring officer responded to a complaint about it with advice from its independent ethics panel.

She said Lindsay was "truly sorry". Morris, who has since left the council, added: "We took the complaint very seriously as the use of such language is deeply offensive and entirely inappropriate. The comment made should not have happened and the council apologised."

On Tuesday RBKC called the engineer’s fire safety allegations “unsubstantiated”. The council alleged that he was asked on several occasions to provide specific details relating to building safety, locations and defects but did not do so.

A spokesman said: “We have a fire risk assessment programme and there are no substantial risks on any of our buildings. All our new buildings include sprinkler systems and we are fitting them in existing buildings retrospectively, where appropriate and in agreement with residents. Sprinklers are one part of the picture when it comes to fire safety, and we have also been prioritising fire door replacement, door closers and upgrading alarm systems to include smoke detection in every room.”

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