

Grenfell should have been a wake-up call—but the UK still doesn't take fire safety seriously

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In March 2023, a fire in Tower Hamlets, east London, claimed the life of Mizanur Rahman, a 41-year-old father-of-two from Bangladesh. [Five](#)

[fire engines and 35 firefighters](#) attended the call to the two-bedroom flat in Maddocks House, on the Tarling West housing estate, in the early hours of the morning.

Rahman, who had only recently arrived in the UK, was rescued and taken to the Royal London Hospital suffering from smoke inhalation, where he died from his injuries. On the night of the [fire](#), estate residents claimed that [18 men](#) had been sleeping in the flat's three rooms including a converted lounge—despite the premises only being licensed to accommodate a maximum of three people.

While the fire itself was caused by a [faulty lithium e-bike battery](#), an inspection by the London Fire Brigade prior to the fire had [raised serious safety concerns](#), finding that the flat "was not in good condition with multiple people living in it."

Seven months after the fire, Tower Hamlets Council took the flat's landlords to court for breaches of the 2004 Housing Act. They have subsequently [pleaded guilty](#) to nine charges [including](#) multiple failures to comply with license conditions, carry out inspections and have a valid gas safety certificate, as well as allowing the premises to be overcrowded. The landlords await sentencing.

However, following the inquest into Rahman's death, the assistant coroner did not comment on overcrowding in the property in his [prevention of future deaths report](#). He did, though, recommend that the government introduce standards regulating the sale of lithium batteries for e-bikes.

Ahead of the court case, [Grenfell United](#), a group of survivors and bereaved families founded days after the Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, 2017, [pledged its support](#) to all those affected by the Maddocks House fire, stating:

"Seven months since the Tarling West estate fire in which an innocent man lost his life ... We stand with the family, residents, friends and all those campaigning for justice."

The Grenfell disaster—the UK's worst post-war residential fire—claimed the lives of 72 people in [London's richest borough](#), Kensington & Chelsea. The [inquiry into the disaster](#) is expected to make a host of recommendations about the need to strengthen residential fire safety when it is finally published after [yet more delays](#), in 2024. But this is too late for Mizanur Rahman.

Indeed, more than six years after the Grenfell fire, community groups and homelessness charities have taken matters into their own hands to support renters and tenants who continue to be endangered by unsafe housing conditions in London and throughout the UK. But despite their best efforts, the risks facing residents of multiple-occupancy housing appear largely undiminished. Worryingly, policymakers have seemingly forgotten the lessons from the UK's [past experiences of mass-fatality fire](#).

Another Grenfell-style fire?

The Maddocks House fire added to widespread concerns that, despite Grenfell having been [an eminently avoidable disaster](#), another major fire involving a large loss of life could happen in a bedsit, converted flat or other [house in multiple occupation](#). In part, this is the result of safety being neglected by [rogue landlords](#) who ["knowingly flout their obligations"](#) by renting out unsafe and substandard accommodation to tenants, many of whom may be vulnerable."

Another [recently completed case](#) saw a landlord and property management company [fined £480,000 plus costs](#) for leasing an unlicensed 22-bedroom property with multiple fire safety and damp-

related risks in the same borough, Kensington & Chelsea, in which [Grenfell Tower is located](#). Throughout the UK, local authorities [face multiple challenges](#)—including lack of resources, limits to their legal powers, and cultural barriers—when reactively trying to regulate the standard of privately rented accommodation in houses in multiple occupation (known as HMOs).

[Housing](#) and [fire safety](#) campaigners have repeatedly warned of complacency over enforcing safety in the UK's private rented sector, among others. In recent years, the government's own safety experts have [expressed concern](#) about ministers' failures to tackle "potentially catastrophic life safety implications" in buildings ranging from tower blocks and HMOs to schools and hospitals.

Since 2022, the [cost of living crisis](#) has left [record numbers](#) of disadvantaged people living in overcrowded, unfit and unsafe accommodation—including families with young children, frail older people, those with long-term health conditions, university students and migrants. They have little hope of accessing affordable and safe housing. And people living in the private rented sector are [twice as likely to feel unsafe in their home](#) as owner-occupiers, because of their fear that a fire might break out.

A generation of rogue landlords

While the campaign for improved standards of safety in HMOs originated in the 1960s, it intensified during the early 1980s following [several mass-fatality fires](#)—as I chart in my new book, [Before Grenfell: Fire, Safety and Deregulation in Twentieth-Century Britain](#).

Shortly before Christmas 1981, [fire gutted a residential property](#) in Notting Hill Gate, west London, killing eight residents and injuring many more. The property comprised 56 bedsits across three converted

terraced houses on Clanricarde Gardens, a once-fashionable cul-de-sac which, with its low-quality bed-and-breakfast-style accommodation, by then aimed at the cheaper end of London's rental market. Although estimates vary, almost 100 people are thought to have been sleeping in the property on the night of the fire, which started around four o'clock in the morning. Local newspapers quoted a resident being woken by "a tremendous shouting and screaming":

"At first I thought it was a Christmas party—but then I knew from the sound that this was no party."

[Fire investigators](#) would later find numerous defects in the property, including combustible partition walls, unprotected staircases, a maze of corridors without fire-stopping doors, and a dangerously high electrical loading.

Six of the eight people who died were adult migrants who had come to Britain from Latin America and eastern Europe to study and work; the other two were elderly British men. Many of the residents were employed in the low-paid hospitality sector.

The survivors, having lost their possessions, were clothed and put up in hotels—then interviewed by officials from the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea (RBKC) to determine their eligibility for rehousing. Due to a shortage of available housing, many were rejected. Some had no option but to [move into the property next door](#) to the burnt-out shell of their former home.

The Clanricarde Gardens fire inquest exposed a generation of rogue London landlords who had placed profits before safety in their [unregulated "Victorian hostels"](#). Major shortcomings were also revealed in the level of oversight from RBKC, which was identified as having some of the [worst housing conditions](#) in the capital, with unregistered

HMOs comprising between a quarter and a third of its housing stock. [Early warnings](#) about the dangerous condition of the Notting Hill property had not been acted upon by officers at the time of the fire, and the council was subsequently [found guilty of maladministration](#).

The jury at the inquest returned a verdict of death by misadventure, but found no evidence of negligence by the landlord. [The coroner](#) angered campaigners and survivors by declining to add recommendations for the government to improve safety. He claimed that the need to reconcile cheap accommodation for homeless people with "expensive" fire precautions was "insoluble."

In the aftermath, the Campaign for Bedsit Rights (CBR)—led by tenacious housing activist [Nick Beacock](#)—published a [guide to fire safety](#) for tenants, issued a semi-regular newsletter, and collaborated with sympathetic members of parliament who advocated for statutory licensing and regulation of these "[Dickensian](#)" lodgings. The urgency of the situation was marked by the scale of homelessness across the capital at that time, with rough sleeping [on the rise](#) due to cuts in housing benefit.

Yet, in February 1983, a [private members' bill](#) to introduce licensing was defeated by the government despite enjoying strong cross-party support. Ministers defended the decision on the grounds of public spending restrictions and, [in a quote attributed to housing minister George Young](#), a reluctance to "add unnecessarily" to landlords' costs in a way that might "discourage them from making accommodation available." Throughout the 1980s, landlords' interests were largely prioritized ahead of tenants," in a decade that saw the [deregulation of the private rental market](#).

Four decades on, even after the public outcry following the Grenfell disaster, cases continue to highlight that, around the UK, local authorities vary widely in their interpretation and enforcement of their obligations

over licensing rental properties. In many cases, they simply [lack the resources](#) to track landlords.

In July 2023, the [Social Housing \(Regulation\) Act](#) was given royal assent, introducing a more proactive system whereby complaints about the standard of [social housing](#) can be investigated by the regulator. It has taken [almost six years](#) of campaigning by Grenfell United, Shelter and other organizations to get to this stage. However, the act does not cover the private rented sector, and much work is still needed to protect these residents.

Years of inaction

Over the decades since the 1983 defeat of the licensing bill, it is hard not to conclude that several deadly fires might have been prevented had the UK government introduced mandatory licensing, backed up by strong powers of enforcement.

[One notable incident](#), in November 1984, involved the death of a 27-year-old Bangladeshi woman, Mrs. Abdul Karim, and her two young children, aged three and five, in a five-story HMO in Westminster, central London. Despite being a priority for rehousing, the family had lived in a single room at the top of an unenclosed staircase for the previous nine months. In all, more than 50 people lived on the property, including 18 families who had been accommodated thereby Camden Borough Council.

Firefighters found as many as seven people sleeping in a single room and rescued a baby sleeping in a cot in a bathroom. "It was a miracle more people were not killed," a survivor told a local newspaper. A local homelessness charity representative described the fire as highlighting "all the things we have been saying about the conditions homeless families are forced to live in." Eventually, following a [two-week occupation](#) of

Camden town hall by furious families, councilors rehoused the survivors in improved accommodation within the borough.

This fire exposed [historical racial inequalities](#) within London's housing market, with many non-white families left to the whims of exploitative landlords. While the national media showed little interest, author Salmon Rushdie wrote an excoriating piece for the Guardian, which was cited in a [House of Commons debate](#):

"When it started, no alarm rang. It had been switched off. The fire extinguishers were empty. The fire exits were blocked. It was night time, but the stairs were in darkness because there were no bulbs in the lighting sockets. And in the single, cramped top-floor room where the cooker was next to the bed, Mrs. Abdul Karim, a Bangladeshi woman, and her five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter died of suffocation."

Rushdie pointed the finger of blame squarely at the racist landlords and councilors who persistently ignored the complaints of black and Asian families. He wrote: "Those of us who do not live in slum housing get used with remarkable ease to the fact that others do"—not least because black and Asian families "are far more likely than white ones to be placed in such 'temporary' places."

After a Camden councilor was quoted by journalists as complaining that the town hall occupation had been "manipulated" by Bengali families "to jump the housing queue," Rushdie sarcastically added that "presumably not enough people have been burned to death yet" to improve the situation.

Following compelling evidence of systematic neglect of the property by its landlord, the inquest jury returned an open verdict on the deaths. Campaigners again called for powers to license hostels: Mel Cairns, an

experienced environmental health officer, told a local paper: "People who look after dogs and cats need licenses, and the same should apply to landlords who have human beings in their charge."

The coroner concurred, demanding of ministers that "action be taken to prevent the occurrence of similar fatalities." [Chris Holmes](#), director of the Campaign for the Homeless and Rootless (and a future government adviser on reducing street homelessness), [concluded](#):

"The fire at Gloucester Place tragically shows the need for there to be a legal duty on local authorities to inspect this kind of property. If an HMO Act had existed, that family need not have died."

Yet, despite compiling its own evidence on the extent of the risk, successive consultations by Conservative governments during the 1980s and 1990s rejected mandatory licensing on the grounds of proportionality and cost. [Four in every five HMOs](#) were identified as having inadequate means of escape in a fire, while the risk of death or injury due to fire was ten times greater for people living in an HMO than in a single-occupancy family house, according to Home Office figures from the early 1990s.

In 1994, a fire in a Scarborough hostel in which a 33-year-old woman and her two-year-old child died finally led the prime minister, John Major, to [pledge](#) his government to investigate "the feasibility of introducing a licensing system to control such establishments." However, the following year, the Department of the Environment [concluded](#) that licensing "would lead to excessive cost and bureaucracy by forcing every local authority to follow a standard licensing approach."

After further government obfuscation and more avoidable deaths, licensing of HMOs was finally introduced in the early 2000s. Although the ruling Labour party had [promised to introduce licensing](#) in the lead-

up to both the 1997 and 2001 general elections, it took further campaigning to secure the legislation through the [2004 Housing Act](#). The legislation also introduced other measures to improve fire safety, including the [housing health & safety rating system](#), which required local authorities to take legal action against landlords letting homes with serious hazards.

In 2006, statutory regulations were introduced to guarantee minimum standards within both the [licensing](#) and [management](#) of multiple occupancy-style rental accommodation. Though far from the endpoint in the fight for safe housing for all, it signaled a major victory for campaigners such as Beacock. In recent years, however, owing to the growing housing crisis in London and other large UK cities, the problem of rogue landlords who are prepared to "game" the licensing regime has re-emerged.

Across the UK's private rented sector, we see examples of landlords operating even after being refused a license. Some fail to sign tenancy agreements, evict tenants without legal grounds, and allow unauthorized people to live in licensed properties. Such has been the scale of the problem that in 2019, the government issued [advisory guidance](#) to local authorities to "clamp down on these rogue landlords and force them to improve the condition of their properties, or leave the sector completely."

'A price tag on our lives'

London has a [history](#) of housing managed by a small number of unscrupulous private landlords prepared to use illegal and immoral practices to profit from the poor. Perhaps most famously, [Peter Rachman](#) operated in Notting Hill during the 1950s and '60s, exploiting and intimidating his tenants so much that the phrase "Rachmanism" entered popular vocabulary. In 2019, his "[inhumane activities](#)" were still

being highlighted in a Lord's debate on social housing.

But nor are local authority landlords exempt from criticism, as the Grenfell disaster exposed. At the time of the fire, the tower block was owned by the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, with management services provided by its tenant management organization (TMO). Many of its residents were tenants of the local authority or a local housing association, while a small number owned the leasehold to their flats or were private renters.

During testimony to the [Grenfell Tower inquiry](#), witnesses criticized both the borough and its TMO for ignoring safety concerns raised during the tower block's refurbishment in 2015-16. [Residents](#) reported being made to "feel like second-class citizens—a nuisance, troublemakers, who should take what they were given and be grateful." As one survivor, [Emma O'Connor](#), said in her testimony:

"I don't think it's fair ... that all these corporate companies were allowed to be given the choice to choose what the price tag on our lives should be."

Some local authorities are beginning to tackle the problem through criminal proceedings. In [Camden](#), a property management company was fined more than £49,000 in 2023 for fire safety breaches at an HMO and added to the Mayor of London's "[rogue landlord database](#)". In 2020, Coventry City Council obtained a [banning order](#) against a landlord who had a "flagrant disregard for housing legislation," including fire safety measures.

Research commissioned by the UK government into local authority enforcement of housing standards revealed that [non-compliance with the law is rife](#) across the private rented sector. Under half of local authorities in England reported that over 90% of notices served for the most serious

[category-1 hazards](#) had been complied with in 2019-20, while nearly a quarter (23%) reported that fewer than 50% of hazard notices had been complied with.

Much work remains to be done around enforcement by local authorities to ensure that all landlords meet minimum safety requirements. In the meantime, some appear unconcerned about the risks—and potential consequences—of playing with fire.

Another avoidable death

In March 2023, Rahman's death in the Maddocks House fire exposed once more the problems facing many people who live in a permanent state of precarity, often at the mercy of an exploitative housing market. The flat was licensed for occupancy by three people across two families, yet [18 men](#) reportedly occupied the flat on the night of the blaze.

The landlords had converted three rooms into dormitory-like sleeping spaces to pack in as many tenants as possible, [allegedly earning](#) over £100,000 a year in rent. [One survivor](#) described how some of the residents, mostly Bangladeshi citizens, were "sleeping in the kitchen, some sharing beds, some sleeping on the floor"—a significant breach of the license. There was a single shared toilet and bathroom, and the kitchen was out of bounds for cooking. For this, each tenant paid rent of up to £100 a week.

The [survivors](#), who lost everything including their phones and passports, were housed in emergency accommodation by Tower Hamlets council, which owns the freehold to the property. The council [passed an urgent motion](#) declaring the fire "an abuse of the most socially and economically vulnerable residents and workers by a greedy, vulturous and predatory class of landlord."

The landlords, Sofina Begum and her husband Aminur Rahman (no relation to the victim), recently [pleaded guilty](#) to a total of nine criminal charges at Thames magistrates court in east London, and are due to be sentenced in January 2024.

Anthony Iles, chair of the tenants and residents association, [commented](#) that the case provided "some small trickle of justice" and "serves as a warning to other landlords in the borough." Conditions in Maddocks House were [described](#) by one resident as "worse than slums in Bangladesh."

Yet the men living there, many of whom worked as delivery drivers, restaurant and warehouse workers (some while also studying at university), had been afraid to complain to the council about the conditions because of their fear of being made homeless.

Tower Hamlets council has [rehoused those residents](#) "who are entitled to recourse to public funds." It recently [resumed responsibility](#) for managing its housing stock, and [approved plans](#) to renew an additional licensing scheme for HMOs under its jurisdiction.

However, some of the Maddocks House residents have international student visas, which means they are [not entitled](#) to homelessness assistance or housing benefit. They have been forced back into the informal housing sector, the ongoing victims of an affordable housing crisis in which the average private rent in Tower Hamlets has [risen](#) 33% since 2021 to £2,560 a month—far in excess of the earnings of these Maddocks House survivors.

Given the shortage of affordable housing in London and other UK cities, HMO-style accommodation remains the most, perhaps the only, practicable option for many people and families. In 2019, [nearly 500,000 properties](#) were officially registered as HMOs in

England—although recent reports indicate the [market is now retracting](#), due to the introduction of [tighter licensing rules in 2018](#) that extended provisions to cover two-story HMOs.

But HMOs vary widely in terms of their size, occupancy, building type and amenities, which makes them immensely challenging for local authorities to regulate. These same local authorities suffered [major reductions](#) to their funding from central government in the ten years prior to the COVID pandemic, and council leaders [are warning](#) they are likely to face "a new wave of austerity" during the next parliament, whoever is in power.

Fire *does* discriminate

Contrary to the popular mantra that fire doesn't discriminate, the poor and disadvantaged in UK and other societies are [disproportionately affected by fire](#) because they are forced to live in unsafe or overcrowded housing.

Over a span of more than 40 years, the fires at Clanricarde Gardens, Gloucester Place, Grenfell Tower and Maddocks House—and many others besides—show us that residents who raise safety concerns with their landlords are too often ignored or dismissed as troublemakers.

The survivors, bereaved, and local communities affected by fires have repeatedly called on the government to act more decisively and comprehensively in the interests of residents rather than landlords. In the wake of the Grenfell disaster, they have again spoken out bravely, holding senior ministers to account for their [pledge](#) that "no stone will be left unturned" in the quest to learn lessons from Grenfell. While their representative bodies continue to fight for justice and safer housing, their legal counsel at the Grenfell inquiry [warned](#) that, if we allow the lessons from Grenfell to be forgotten, we risk facing "another inquiry,

following another disaster ... where all the same points are being made."

The UK government claims its response to Grenfell, via the [Building Safety Act](#) (2022), has been to introduce "groundbreaking reforms to give residents and homeowners more rights, powers and protections—so homes across the country are safer." But this does not extend to large numbers of disadvantaged people and homeless families with children, all struggling to cope in the cost of living crisis.

Some landlords are adept at identifying loopholes in the legislation that enable them to evade their obligations towards tenants. Central government has been slow to close these or equip [local authorities](#) with the powers to force greater levels of compliance. There is little in the government's "landmark" legislation (and related [safety funding plans](#)) that indicates any more willingness than its predecessors to tackle the problem of rogue landlords within the private rented sector.

As long ago as the 1980s, pioneering campaign organizations like the Campaign for Bedsit Rights (which [became part of Shelter in 1997](#)) recognized that fire safety is a social equality issue. Forty years and many fires later, it is long overdue that everyone in a position of power recognizes this principle—and acts upon it to reduce fire inequality. It is too late for Mizanur Rahman, who died inside Maddocks House, and for the 72 people who lost their lives in Grenfell Tower in 2017. How many more lives must be lost?

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