

Inner Southern District of Greater London

The Coroner's Court
1 Tennis Street
London SE1 1YD

Her Honour Frances Kirkham CBE
Assistant Deputy Coroner

28 March 2013

Mr Ron Dobson CBE QFSM FIFireE
London Fire Commissioner
London Fire Brigade
London Fire Brigade Headquarters
169 Union Street
London, SW1 0LL

Dear Mr Dobson

Lakanal House fire 3 July 2009

I write concerning the inquests into the tragic deaths of Catherine Hickman, Dayana Francisquini, Thais Francisquini, Felipe Francisquini Cervi, Helen Udoaka and Michelle Udoaka, who died in a fire at Lakanal House, Camberwell, on 3 July 2009.

The jury brought in Narrative Verdicts in respect of each of the deceased.

I write to you pursuant to Rule 43 of the Coroners Rules (as amended) which provides:

“(1) Where

- (a) a coroner is holding an inquest into a person's death,
- (b) the evidence gives rise to a concern that circumstances creating a risk of other deaths will occur, or will continue to exist, in the future; and
- (c) in the coroner's opinion, action should be taken to prevent the occurrence or continuation of such circumstances, or to eliminate or reduce the risk of death created by such circumstances,

the coroner may report the circumstances to a person who the coroner believes may have power to take such action.”

I announced at the end of the inquests that I would be sending a report to you as evidence adduced at the inquests gave rise to concern of the type identified in Rule 43. Your Brigade has power, I believe, to take action as set out in this report.

Before I set out my recommendations, I acknowledge that London Fire Brigade have already undertaken extensive work to learn from their experience with the fire at Lakanal House, have introduced new policies and have reviewed existing policies in respect of a number of matters of significance, including:

- guidance to crews making risk assessments for sites in their area
- guidance as to matters which should be noted by crews making familiarisation visits and visits pursuant to section 7(2)(d) Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, including the gathering of information regarding flats or maisonettes with unusual layouts and access for aerial ladder platforms and other specialist vehicles
- cooperation with three London Boroughs to develop a pilot scheme for the provision of “premises information plates” at buildings
- awareness that fire can spread downwards and laterally in a building and that burning debris might fall through open windows or on to balconies
- awareness of the risk of spread of fire above and adjacent to a fire flat
- procedures for moving a bridgehead
- communication between Brigade Control and those at an incident
- guidance as to the handling of fire survival guidance calls and training for officers dealing with such calls
- introduction of Mobile Data Terminals
- introduction of a forward information board.

I therefore do not make any recommendation in relation to such matters. I do, however, make the following recommendations.

Public awareness of fire safety

A number of former residents of Lakanal House gave evidence. There was little awareness of fire safety advice published by London Fire Brigade, whether through leaflets, the website or home fire safety visits. Residents of high rise residential buildings need to be aware of the dangers associated with fire in such buildings and to have a clear understanding of what they should do in case of fire. Whilst this is a matter which concerns housing providers, it is recommended that your Brigade also consider how to improve dissemination of fire safety information to achieve effective communication with residents of such buildings.

Visits made pursuant to section 7(2)(d) Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, general familiarisation visits and home fire safety visits

I note that the Brigade now has guidance as to how such visits should be conducted and the type of information which crews should gather. As you recognise, “gathering of operational knowledge has little value unless it can be stored, disseminated, accessed and updated when most needed ie at incidents when the use can save valuable time and inform critical command decisions.”

It is recommended that the Brigade review procedures for sharing information gained as a result of section 7(2)(d), familiarisation and home fire safety visits with crews both within the station in question and at other local stations.

Incident Commanders

During the Lakanal House fire there were six changes of Incident Commander (IC) with some serving as IC for brief periods.

It is recommended that the Brigade review its policy and procedures concerning incident command, having regard to whether it is effective for the choice of IC to be tied closely to the number or type of appliances attending an incident and the effectiveness of a policy which

may result in rapid and frequent changes of IC. It is also recommended that consideration be given to training of ICs and potential ICs to enhance their performance in relation to the following

- use of the Dynamic Risk Management model and other management tools to enable ICs to analyse a situation, and to recognise and react quickly to changing circumstances
- to recognise when to escalate attendance by more experienced ICs
- to anticipate that a fire might behave in a manner inconsistent with the compartmentation principle
- to be aware of the risks to those above and adjacent to the fire flat
- handover from one IC to the next and effective deployment of outgoing ICs
- the collection of information from all possible sources
- use of methodical search patterns.

Brigade Control

I note the steps already taken by the Brigade in relation to guidance to and training for those at Brigade Control who are involved in handling calls from members of the public, and fire survival guidance calls in particular.

It is recommended that the Brigade consider whether training be given to operational crews about Brigade Control practices and procedures.

Communications

It is recommended that the Brigade consider whether it would be beneficial to use additional breathing apparatus radio communications channels and personal radio channels at major incidents to reduce the amount of traffic on each channel.

Response

Rule 43A of the Coroners Rules requires that you give a written response within 56 days beginning with the day on which the report is sent. If you are unable to respond within that time, you may apply to me for an extension. The response is to contain details of any action that has been taken or which it is proposed will be taken whether in response to this report or otherwise, or an explanation as to why no action has been taken.

As required by rule 43, I shall send a copy of this report to the Lord Chancellor.

Yours sincerely

Frances Kirkham