

Tenant Pulse - Fire Safety

TPAS Cymru has recently given evidence to the National Assembly for Wales's Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, inquiry into fire safety in high rise blocks in Wales. To inform our response, TPAS Cymru issued a short survey to the Tenant Pulse community, to gather their views on fire safety in Wales. Given the short time window for collecting the views of tenants, the survey was only issued to those members of Tenant Pulse who had stated that they were prepared to take part in surveys on line. Paper copies will be available for our subsequent surveys. The following document sets out what our Pulse Community told us about fire safety in Wales.

53% of those who responded to our survey live in a house or bungalow, 40% live in a flat, and a further 6% live in other accommodation (included a supported housing project, and a maisonette)

How have landlords in Wales communicated with their tenants as to what they should do in the event of a fire or any other emergency?

The response of the Pulse community demonstrated the wide range of approaches that have been adopted by landlords in Wales when communicating with their tenants on fire safety. Amongst the approaches noted were:

- Notices placed in the property
- Items in tenant newsletters
- Information available online through the landlord
- Information set out in Tenant Handbooks
- Arranging for members of the fire service to come and visit tenants
- Organising open meetings for tenants with members of the fire service and relevant staff members at the local authority/ housing association
- Use of media
- Information leaflets
- Telephone help line
- Text messages
- E-mail communication
- Letters
- Regular tenant meetings
- Tenant Panels

Whilst the Pulse Community noted a number of approaches, used by their landlords to communicate with them on fire safety matters, a number of tenants noted that they had received no information at all. In other circumstances tenants felt that they were required to ask for the relevant information as opposed to being provided with it automatically.

How effective do tenants in Wales feel that landlords have been in communicating with them on fire safety matters?

Tenants were provided with five options when asked how effectively their landlord had communicated with them on what they should do in the event of a fire or another emergency. Of these, two were positive options; very effective, or effective. Two were negative options; ineffective, very ineffective. The fifth option was neutral; neither effective nor ineffective.

55% of our Pulse community felt that the means of communication used by their landlord on fire safety issues was either effective or very effective. By contrast, only 27% of tenants felt that the communication methods used by their landlord had been either ineffective or very ineffective.

Interestingly tenants who live in flats feel that their social landlords have been more effective in communicating with them on fire safety issues than those tenants who live in houses/ bungalows. Of our respondents who live in flats 63% felt that their landlords had effectively or very effectively communicated with them as to what they should do in the event of a fire or an emergency, with the figure dropping to 53% when tenants who live in houses/ bungalows were asked the same question.

Why did tenants believe that their landlords had communicated with them effectively/ ineffectively?

The Pulse community provided us with a number of reasons as to why they felt their landlord had been effective/ ineffective in their communication strategy.

Amongst the reasons that were given by tenants who believed that their landlord had been effective in their communication strategy was regular contact with their landlord. Such regular contact included face to face contact at tenant meetings/ panels and individual visits from the landlord. Other examples of regular contact included the publication of newsletters, and the sending of letters, e-mails and text messages.

Many respondents also noted that they felt that meeting with members of the fire service had allowed their landlord to better communicate with them what they should do in the event of a fire. Examples of when tenants had been given the opportunity to meet members of the fire service included open meetings, individual flat visits and during regular fire testing.

Ease of access to information was also felt to be important. Tenants felt that having notices in their property on what should be done in the event of an emergency was of assistance to them, as was having such information available in their tenant handbooks and on their landlord's website. Tenants also felt that it was important that such information was provided in a way that was easy to understand. One tenant provided an example of good practice, noting that their landlord had invited tenants to provide feedback on how understandable they found an information leaflet that was to be sent to the wider tenant body.

Tenants who had felt that their landlord had not communicated effectively with them cited three major reasons for why they felt the way they did.

First, several tenants noted that their landlord had not communicated with them at all as to what they should do in the event of a fire or another emergency. One tenant noted that they had only had access to such information having made a request for it.

A second major concern was where information had not been updated for a number of years. One tenant noted that, prior to the Grenfell Tower disaster; they had not received any correspondence from their landlord on fire safety since moving into their property 8 years earlier.

The final major reason that was given by tenants was that they felt that their landlord did not always consider the need of those with disabilities when identifying and communicating strategies as to what should be done in the event of a disaster.

How confident do you feel you'd know what to do in the event of an emergency?

Tenants were provided with five options when asked how confident they felt that they'd know what to do in the event of a fire or another emergency. Of these, two were positive options; very confident, or confident. Two were negative options; unconfident, very unconfident. The fifth option was neutral; neither confident nor unconfident.

73% of our Pulse community felt either confident or very confident that they'd know what to do in the event of an emergency, with the number rising to 91% for those tenants who live in flats.

14% of tenants who lived in houses/ bungalows felt either unconfident or very unconfident with a further 20% feeling neither confident nor unconfident. The number feeling neither confident nor unconfident in flats dropped to 9%, with none reporting that they felt unconfident. There is a need for landlords in Wales to ensure that tenants in all their properties, not just those who live in flats, feel confident that they know what they must do in response to a fire, once the immediate aftermath of Grenfell disaster has subsided.

Why did tenants feel confident/ unconfident?

An important reason that was given by tenants for why they felt confident in their ability to react correctly in the event of a fire was the presence of adequate safety equipment at their property. This equipment included smoke alarms, carbon monoxide alarms and, in some circumstances, sprinklers, and the fact that these were regularly tested provided tenants with confidence.

Tenant who had attended fire safety training or who had benefited from the advice of the fire service also felt confident in their ability to react to a fire in a safe way. One tenant also noted that, having been in a fire previously, they felt that they had gained experience that would be of assistance in any future fire.

Amongst other reasons that were provided by tenants was the existence of more than one exit, the fact that they felt reasonably mobile and their confidence in their common sense. It

should be noted that some tenants who had reported receiving no communication from their landlord still felt confident in their ability to react to fire on this basis.

Interestingly, the reasons provided by tenants who felt unconfident in their ability to react to a fire bore close relations to those provided by tenants who felt confident. Disabled tenants in particular felt concerned that they would not be able to get out of their property in the event of a fire. This concern was compounded in circumstances where tenants only had one viable exit option, with one tenant noting that the windows in their house/ bungalow was too high for them to climb out of, if the route to their house door was blocked.

Whilst some tenants had cited their common sense as something that gave them confidence, others felt that they were being left to “rely” on it. This made some tenants feel unconfident and they felt that they would feel more confident if there was a clearer emergency action plan published in advance.

The presence of cladding also had an impact on how confident tenants felt. Some tenants felt more confident following reassurances given by their landlord that the cladding used was not of the same sort used at Grenfell. It should be noted, however, that a number of tenants, in particular those who live in houses/ flats were concerned about the presence of cladding and the potential implications of this.

A final concern that was posted by a tenant did not relate to fire. One tenant living in north Wales noted that they often had problems with wind in the winter, given the location of their home. The tenant was worried that there was no contingency plan for what would happen to them if the wind damage ever reached a point that meant that they would have to move out of their home.

How have landlords consulted tenants on fire safety?

Our Pulse community’s responses suggest there’s a broad spectrum in terms of how landlords have been consulting with their tenants. This ranges from no consultation at all, to visits by the fire service to consultation at regular tenant meetings and panels. Some tenants reported that whilst they had not been consulted with previously, they knew their landlords had plans to do so in light of the events at Grenfell. It should be noted that the responses we received suggest that tenants that live in flats have been consulted with more regularly than tenants who lives in homes/ bungalows.

What information, if any, has your landlord provided you with since the Grenfell Tower fire?

Perhaps unsurprisingly tenants that live in flats have been provided with far greater information than those that live in homes/ bungalows following the Grenfell Tower fire. Tenants who live in flats noted that their landlords had organised additional tenant meetings, had sent them letters, updated tenants as to the nature of the cladding that was on their properties/ informed them on when tests were taking place, and had sent members of staff around their block of flats to reassure tenants and to provide updates.

By contrast tenants who live in houses/ bungalows report that they their landlord had only issued general statements or issues no information at all. Whilst some tenants did not consider this to be a problem, others were concerned about how safe their homes were post Grenfell. For example, one tenant noted that their landlord was about to install "*cladding of unknown origin*". It would appear that there is a need for greater communication with tenants across the board.

Do you feel more or less confident that you would know what steps you'd need to take to stay safe in the event of an emergency since the Grenfell Tower fire?

Tenants were provided with five options when asked how confident they felt that they'd know what to do in the event of a fire or another emergency post Grenfell. Of these, two were positive options; very confident, or confident. Two were negative options; unconfident, very unconfident. The fifth option was neutral; neither confident nor unconfident.

Interestingly, nearly half of our Tenant Pulse community, 48% did not feel any more confident or unconfident following the Grenfell disaster, with only 6% (all of whom lived in houses/ bungalows) feeling more unconfident.

The majority of tenants who lived in flats, however, 54% actually felt more confident that they would know what to do in the event of an emergency following the Grenfell Tower fire, with none feeling any less confident. This suggests that the approach adopted by landlords who have tenants who live in flats has been particularly effective in reassuring their tenants.