

Tarling West Estate Residents' Association Report 1/04/2023 on Recovery of Residents' of 18 Maddocks House Possessions After the Fire on Friday 17 March 2023

As many will be aware, there was a serious fire in the early hours of 5 March on our estate, at 18 Maddocks House. One of the residents, Mizanur Rahman subsequently died from smoke inhalation. The flat was severely overcrowded, 17 survivors of the fire are now homeless. Residents had raised concerns about overcrowding in the flat for the previous 2 years at least. This is documented in our report dated 13/3/2023, available here: <https://tarlingwestestate.wordpress.com/2023/04/01/a-report-by-tarling-west-residents-association-on-the-maddocks-house-fire-published-on-13-3-2023/>

This report covers events on Friday 17 March and leading up to it. The key points of the report cover:

- Conduct by THH colluding with the landlord and agents to facilitate the landlord attempting illegal entry to 18 Maddocks House
- Conduct by THH acting as agent to the landlord and agents for the landlord attempting to interfere with the private possessions of residents of 18 Maddocks House
- Actions by THH and LBTH which frustrated and obstructed the legal rights of tenants of 18 Maddocks House to obtain access to their possessions
- Actions by THH and LBTH which withheld and obstructed their access to their identity documents
- Actions by THH and LBTH which put the victims of the fire at 18 Maddocks House in danger
- Threats to the survivors made by the landlord and agents of the landlord of 18 Maddocks House
- Threats to residents of Tarling West Estate, representatives of the Residents Association, members of the Maddocks House Support Group and advisors acting on behalf of the survivors of the fire and tenants of 18 Maddocks House
- The seriousness and illegality of several of the actions listed above.
- The unnecessary additional distress caused to survivors of the fire by LBTH and THH's mismanagement of the situation.
- The concern that the actions and events listed in this report seriously compromise investigation of the fire, and were carried out possibly wilfully and knowingly by officers within both LBTH and THH.

People involved

David Tolley, Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards, LBTH.

Neil Isaac, Director of Finance, THH.

Gulam Hussain, Neighbourhoods Officer, THH.

Gabriel Brown, Leasehold Services Manager, THH.

Darren Creuce, Head of Asset Management and Compliance, THH.

Julie Liu, Health and Housing Team Leader Environmental Health and Trading Standards, LBTH.

Robert Nartey, Environmental Health Officer Health and Housing Team Environmental Health and Trading Standards, LBTH.

Abul Kalam, Service Manager - Housing Management & Procurement, LBTH.

Councillor Ana Miah, Shadwell Ward.

Sam Harney Senior Political advisor to the Mayor

Ann Sutcliffe Head of Property and Capital Delivery at London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Prior to the Fire

The situation prior to the fire was that at any given time there were 20 people making regular rent payments to the leaseholder and living in the small, 2 bedroom flat 18 Maddocks House. The flat is owned by a private landlord and leaseholder on a Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) managed estate (THH is managing agent for the LBTH Council, the freeholder). During the past two years, there have been multiple formal and informal complaints to THH and the Council from neighbouring leaseholders and residents about this, and the Fire Brigade had assessed the overcrowding as posing a fire risk in November 2022, caretakers had included concerns about overcrowding at this flat in their monthly fire risk report. In spite of these warnings, and of THH itself putting the landlord on notice for non-compliance (in May and June of 2022), the landlord was granted an HMO licence in August 2022.

Survivors Urgent Concerns About Their Possessions After the Fire

Survivors of the fire had been provided with proof by Police guarding the flat since the fire showing several intact items of luggage. Survivors were certain that key possessions of theirs, specifically identity documents and other valuables had survived the fire. After the fire they found themselves destitute and were concerned that without their documents their ability to prove their identity and access vital services would be made impossible. They also expressed the concern on several occasions that the landlord or landlord's agent had threatened them (prior to the fire, after the fire) and was motivated to interfere with their

possessions, and even use possession of their identity documents to extort money or otherwise blackmail them.

During the week commencing 13 March survivors listed approximately 20 items of luggage, locations and key contents of the luggage, as well as additional items.

A member of Tarling West Residents Association and Maddocks House Support Group, Anthony took up these concerns and sought to recover the survivors' possessions from 18 Maddocks House by contacting THH officers. Anthony communicated the concerns of the tenants, and their urgent need of access to their documents and possessions, firstly to Darren Creuce in person during a site visit on Thursday 16 March at midday, secondly to Julie Yui and other unknown members of Tower Hamlets Environmental Health, whom I found at the property, 18 Maddox House on Thursday 16 March, to whom I put it that since access to the property had now been handed from Police to them, that they should now allow the tenants access, and that it was important to do so before giving access to the Landlord and leaseholder, or his agents. This was then reiterated via email David Tolley (Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards, LBTH), also CC'd to the Mayor Luftur Rahman and Apsana Begum MP. We were told both that the keys would be handed to THH, and that the keys would be handed to the landlord. During each conversation the danger of pursuing this course and the urgency of returning possessions to tenants was made clear. All afternoon on Thursday 16 March various members of Tower Hamlets Environmental Health were either at the burnt property, or in the building knocking on doors of neighbours, 'gathering evidence' for an investigation.

Morning Friday 17 March

Early on Friday 17 March, residents association members contacted members of London Renters Union for advice and help. LRU in turn sought legal advice and by 10.00am confirmed that the legal situation supported recovery of their possessions by the tenants. LRU talked to Sam Harney Senior Political advisor to the Mayor and Ann Sutcliffe Head of Property and Capital Delivery at London Borough of Tower Hamlets throughout the course of Friday 17 March receiving assurances on several occasions that the tenants rights would be respected. By the end of the morning agreement was reached that at 6pm THH would attend the flat with the landlord of 18 Maddocks House and provide access to and recovery of the possessions of the tenants held in the property.

Friday 17 March

The process was extremely convoluted and distressing for the survivors as they awaited its outcome in the nearby Residents' Hall. From about 5.30 to 9 pm, we (estate residents and supporters from London Renters' Union) dealt with THH's Neil Isaac (Director of Finance), who came to the estate. He liaised by phone with the landlord and Sofina Begum (in whose name the lease is, and who is a partner, sibling and possible proxy for the landlord), communicating the landlord's position to us. Also present were Neil Isaac, Director of Finance, THH. Gulam Hussain, Neighbourhoods Officer, THH, Gabriel Brown, Leasehold Services Manager, THH and Abul Kalam LBTH Services Manager. THH.

Gabriel Brown, Gulam Hussain and Neil Isaac were the main negotiating parties. Abu Kalam appeared to take the role of observer. Cllr Ana Miah was seen at 6pm near Maddocks House, conducting a TV interview with a Bengali news channel. He then mediated between the landlord and THH. The landlord was adamant that no survivor nor member of the residents' association enter the flat. Nonetheless during this period while we were waiting, we later learnt that he had approached the community hall several times to verbally abuse and threaten survivors of the fire, tenants of 18 Maddocks House.

Isaac presented us with a series of ever more unfavourable terms for the process by which the survivors would recover the belongings. These began with asking the 10 or so of us assembled (quietly, with no placards) to stand behind a fence as the landlord "felt intimidated" to finally getting us to concede that we would wait downstairs while THH and the landlord went up to the 4th floor and emptied the flat. As THH and the landlord entered the ground floor foyer of Maddocks House, two unknown parties ran in (these turned out to be son and daughter of the landlord), after shaking hands with the landlord and his family members in the foyer, Isaac and the other THH workers went up to the 4th floor.

Attempted Illegal Entry to 18 Maddocks House

At this point, seeing that the negotiated arrangement had been broken, and that THH and the landlord were attempting entry to 18 Maddocks House leaving us outside the block we called the police. Over the phone we told the police that THH were facilitating illegal entry and that we had repeatedly warned them that the landlord was likely to tamper with evidence, interfere with the residents' private possessions and use their possessions to extort or threaten them. Because tenants had put a small padlock on the door to secure the safety of their possessions, the landlord and THH were not able to enter the flat, as they apparently intended to. While they waited for a locksmith to come, an LRU legal advisor and the police arrived. The LRU legal advisor reiterated the tenants rights to both THH, the police and landlord. The final agreement negotiated with the police was that neither I nor the landlord would enter, but that the THH staff would empty the flat under police vigilance. Gabriel Brown, Gulam Hussain and Neil Isaac proceeded to empty the flat of the tenants possessions, this in itself presented a breach of licence and breach of the tenants rights, nonetheless by this point we were primarily concerned to access the possessions safely and without further delay.

Threats and Abuse

During this event, the landlord physically and verbally threatened residents and representatives of the residents association and a member of LRU in front of the police, as well as abusing and threatening the survivors (including threatening that he would force them out of London, there are also two witnesses both neighbours who know the landlord and saw this incident and attempted to intervene to calm the situation down). Furthermore on several occasions the landlord and his son attempted to interfere with luggage being removed from the flat, attempting to read luggage labels for unknown motivations, this occurred in front of THH officers, Police officers, LRU members and Residents Association members.

Resolution

After about 10 hours of negotiations by phone and in person with members of the Council and THH, the survivors finally got their belongings back. The delay, grief, abuse and humiliation suffered in order to do so, was completely unnecessary and something no one should have to go through.

We Demand:

A Public Inquest into the Fire at Maddocks House

Criminal investigation of the landlord of 18 Maddocks House

Investigation into the conduct of THH and LBTH before the fire

Investigation into the conduct of THH and LBTH in response to the fire

Compensation for Mizanur Rahman's Family, the Survivors and all Residents of Maddocks House

Leave to remain in the UK for all survivors of the fire

Accommodation and support to get over the fire and rebuild the lives of all the 17 survivors