

The Grenfell Tower public inquiry: Managing expectations

Difficult messages about the scope of the inquiry must be communicated now to avoid damaging trust and confidence in the process further down the line, explains Emma Ireton

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Those responsible for the Grenfell Tower public inquiry face the formidable challenge of managing the expectations of both the participants and the public over its scope, or risk undermining confidence in the inquiry, potentially derailing it before it has really begun.



The consultation period on the inquiry's terms of reference, which allowed survivors, local residents, and others to express their views, has now come to an end. Sir Martin Moore-Bick, the chair of the inquiry, will now make recommendations about the terms of reference to the prime minister, who will make the final decision.

As with any inquiry, if the terms of reference appear too narrow, many will be concerned that the government is seeking to conceal information, deflect criticism, or avoid accountability. If the terms of reference are very wide, it will inevitably lengthen the duration of the inquiry and may introduce extraneous questions that confuse the essential issues.

The initial indication was that the terms of reference would be narrow, focusing on how the fire started and spread. Sir Martin stated: "I'm well aware that residents want a much broader investigation... whether my inquiry is the right way in which to achieve that I'm more doubtful. There may be other ways in which that desire for an investigation can be satisfied." That might well be the case. However, he will face an uphill battle to convince participants and the public that a narrow inquiry, with wider issues dealt with in "other ways", is the best way to proceed. Many will see it as an attempt to sweep key matters under the carpet.

A clash of expectations between the panel and participants in the 2010 detainee inquiry resulted in participants boycotting that inquiry, contributing to a series of other difficulties, and it was ultimately discontinued. Similarly, many residents have indicated they will refuse to cooperate with the Grenfell Tower inquiry if the terms of reference are not broadened.

Recent indications from the government and Sir Martin suggest broader terms of reference are now being considered, including systematic issues such as allegations that concerns about fire safety were ignored.

We saw a similar situation with the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, where terms of reference were increasingly widened following pressure from participants. Many now fear that the scope of the inquiry has become so broad as to be unmanageable, which is something that must not be ignored. An interim inquiry report is to be produced on the Grenfell Tower fire “as early as possible” to address the immediate lessons to be learned. Significantly widening the terms of reference will inevitably delay the delivery of the answers and recommendations for change that are so urgently needed.

Those hoping for an inquiry that is both quick and broad, encompassing wider social and economic issues, will be disappointed. It is essential that expectations about what the Grenfell Tower inquiry is designed to address, and by when, are well managed. There are difficult messages to be communicated at this stage to avoid damaging trust and confidence in the process further down the line.

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