

EDITORIAL

CULTURE CHANGE IN BUILDING SAFETY



Dr Scott Steedman

In time, we will see the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire as just as significant a turning point for the construction sector as the Piper Alpha disaster was for the offshore industry 30 years ago. Back then, the Cullen Inquiry triggered widespread changes in operating practices and regulations, notably through the introduction of the 1992 Offshore Installations (Safety Case) Regulations. This required owners and operators of rigs and other installations to submit a safety case that gave full details of how they would manage health and safety on offshore installations.

Published on 17 May, *Building a Safer Future: Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety* by Dame Judith Hackitt DBE FREng has similarly recommended an enhanced regulatory framework, especially for high-risk or high-rise mixed-use buildings. As part of this new framework, the report recommends that a new regulatory body should oversee the safety of people for the entire life-cycle of a building, throughout design, construction and operation. This radical proposal will prompt a rethink by government and the construction industry of the often complex web of responsibilities for safety in building construction and use.

Two further recommendations in the Hackitt Review will be essential for this proposal to be implemented effectively. Firstly, any new system of through-life safety management will require the industry to embrace digital record-keeping throughout, from the building products to construction, through handover to operation and maintenance. This will be costly to implement but will bring long-term benefits through improved safety and operational efficiency. With notable exceptions, the sector has been slow to adopt common standards for creating and managing information throughout the life-cycle of a construction project. This process is key to giving owners and operators the information they need to manage their buildings.

Secondly, the Hackitt Review highlights the question of how engineers demonstrate and maintain professional competence. No system of life-safety management can function without a robust, comprehensive and coherent qualification framework that covers all the disciplines that work on such buildings. In future, regulation may require the use of suitable, qualified professionals who can demonstrate that their skills are up to date. The roster of professions could be long, and is likely to include as a minimum not only the fire engineers and engineers designing, installing and maintaining fire safety systems and other safety-critical systems, but also fire risk assessors, fire safety enforcing officers and building control inspectors.

The question then is how to balance the role of regulation with the role of industry. Dame Judith's advice is that there has to be cultural change across the sector. Her central recommendation is that the regulatory regime for high-rise buildings urgently requires overhauling. This must deliver clarity over what is required under the law (and is the responsibility of government

to police) and what is guidance for engineers.

The challenge is how to stimulate everyone involved in building and managing high-risk buildings 'to do the right thing' and to realise that the responsibility for safety rests with them and them alone. Regulation can provide only the most basic of safety nets. In the end, industry has to aspire to deliver higher quality outputs.

James Brokenshire MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, is in no doubt. As he said on 17 May after the publication of the Hackitt Review: "Let me be clear: the cladding believed to be on Grenfell Tower was unlawful under existing building regulations."

More regulation is not necessarily the answer, certainly not in the short term. The immediate problem is how to ensure existing regulations and supporting technical statutory guidance are clear and complied with.

Public trust matters. Implementing the recommendations in the Hackitt Review will add to the cost of construction and use of high-risk and high-rise mixed-use buildings, but by bringing clarity to the question of who owns the safety risk throughout the life of the building, it will also help the professionals involved to understand their role and responsibilities.

Dame Judith's review argues that the industry should approach the safety case for such buildings as it does for high-risk industrial facilities. This sounds like common sense, but it is a radical step for a construction industry that is struggling to throw off its traditional image. Reform of the regulatory system is inevitable and long overdue. Now we need to engage the engineering profession behind the culture change that is so clearly needed if safety is to be at the forefront in the construction and management of high-risk buildings.

Dr Scott Steedman CBE FREng
Editor-in-Chief