

Out of the Shadows

The role of social workers in disasters

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Grenfell: the worst moment of my professional life

Lucy Easthope

Professor Lucy Easthope is a leading authority on recovering from disaster, who was an advisor following the Grenfell Tower fire, 14 June 2017. Her areas of research include mass fatalities planning, legal aspects of emergencies, identifying lessons post-incident, the effectiveness of public inquiries, interoperability and community resilience in practice. She is a co-founder of the After Disaster Network, University of Durham, which was set up to examine learning from these major tragedies. Below, Lucy reflects on her personal and professional response to the disaster, advises on how best to support practitioners, and discusses what she learned from both frontline social workers and survivors about best practice in disaster contexts.

☀ The realisation that Grenfell was happening was devastating – it was the worst moment of my professional life. It was obvious from the early hours of 14 June that this would be incredibly complex, and a terrible tragedy. In many ways, any disaster simply highlights existing problems and cracks in the system; whatever else is going on in society at that time is highly relevant. My immediate concern was about support and resources because there had been so many cuts to them. I knew that this was going to be very difficult for the community and authorities to respond to. There was, of course, the context of austerity, which social work is highly vulnerable to, not only in terms of larger caseloads but also in terms of being both affected by and responsive to societal change.

There were a number of factors that I feared would make it a worst-case scenario. People were extremely traumatised by what they had seen that night and what they had lost. There was a collective sense of bereavement throughout the wider community. To lose that number of people and in such circumstances. I work a lot with forensic colleagues and I knew that social workers that went in would be working with families who had lost loved ones, but may have had no chance to see a deceased loved one. I am a national advisor on disaster mortuary provision and the care of the deceased and the bereaved, so I had a real sense of the challenge at that point.

I wasn't sure what the role of the social workers would automatically look like. London had well developed plans for supporting families in the days after disaster but there were a number of problems here that are currently being examined by the public inquiry, and much of the community felt abandoned. Logistically there was a challenge because many local areas contract with charities like the British Red Cross to provide family contact points, but a large proportion of the responders had been sent to Manchester for a terrorist attack three weeks earlier.

Then we heard the call for the development of a 'key worker' service, utilising London's social workers. Almost immediately they were given quite a significant portfolio which saw them deploying into areas that I had previously seen held by police family liaison officers (FLOs). I had lobbied government for more training for social workers for this scenario, supporting the families through the policing process after loss etc, but had always been told by central government that police FLOs would do it.

The fire took place in an area of huge community resilience, but equally in a place where there were high levels of deprivation and child poverty. There is a significant social disparity between North Kensington and South Kensington (Gentleman, 2017). An additional factor was that many families required translation services and other support, which meant responding was highly complex. Aside from any language barriers, there were also cultural differences to consider. Up until that point, the British approach to emergency planning had assumed a very white British model of response. When I think back, few of our traditional messages would have landed. As an example, a lot of UK literature responded to the importance of insurance, which is problematic in the context of Islam. All our mental health checklists ask about alcohol use. Some government forms used such specific terminology that they made no sense if translated into another language.

I learnt so much more about practices, harms and clumsiness. At one point, families were given John Lewis cards to replace the cookware they had lost. Some of the Eritrean and Somali families, who had lost everything, were saying *'We lost what we brought over – you can't get that in John Lewis'*.

When it came to communicating with diverse survivors, social workers were the most humbling to watch. Many of them were local to the area and such passionate advocates. They were incredible translators of what worked,

the right practices, and how to communicate. They couldn't just reach for existing tools or checklists because so many of them were inappropriate. Many of the government documents for the immediate post-disaster stage use terms like '*regeneration*' and that was a highly controversial term. It had become synonymous with gentrification and being forced out, so all of those documents could not be used. I have never seen such fast document turnaround and sharing.

Social work response

Looking back, it was almost as if I was a bag of broken pottery in the first year; responding to Grenfell broke me down. It was the social workers and the charity workers and the community and families who rebuilt me but also taught me. I had responded to many 'mass fatalities' incidents by then, and many had similarities, but this was an incredibly hard environment. Decisions by central government were so at odds with established disaster principles that I had to constantly shift and reshape any preconceived ideas (Eyre and Dix, 2014).

I was used to a big toolkit of existing leaflets and documents but all of those had to be rewritten and rethought.

The individual social work responses that I saw were phenomenal. Frontline workers taught me about understanding cultural competency (and incompetence) and considerations in a way I thought I understood but had not truly lived through until that point. They constantly required me to think, learn and innovate. To check. Events would be scheduled and then I would double check and they would clash with an important religious holiday. My message there would be to always check and to ask the community and their advocates, which is what many of the key workers were.

It made me realise what it takes to be a social worker in modern Britain.

The social workers who responded to Grenfell were very, very aware of their responsibility. And one of the things that was very useful to learn was that they stayed as social workers throughout the response. I was constantly in awe of their professional decision-making and professional boundaries. They understood supervision and escalation better than any other response I have worked on. I have trained what are called 'care teams' or 'crisis teams' for organisations all over the world. People who are brought in

to help families, just for the first few weeks. Here it was clear that the 'key worker' service would stay for much longer, with a bigger remit than I had seen before. The social workers poured every ounce of their past experience into the response.

Often, as a consultant, I am brought in to teach and train. And of course, that is something that happened – but it was a true exchange of knowledge and learning. I taught social workers about the return of personal effects, victim identification processes, things to think about in a post-disaster community space. They were teaching me about the structural racism that is faced constantly, and the bureaucracy that families face. It also taught me to communicate so much better. I spend a lot of time with police and other emergency planners and you can slip so easily into a world of assumed knowledge and acronyms.

I am forever changed from the amount I have learnt.

Message to social workers

Thank you.

The amount of work you do behind the scenes is humbling.

I have written before about the hidden work of disasters. I call it the 'bricolage' – there are many spidery threads, which are often not seen by either other responders or survivors, and so much heavy labour that goes into this sort of response. But I see it.

One of the difficulties that we always have with families after a disaster is that they don't know what life might have been like without the social workers. It is so very difficult to measure impact, but please know that the difference you make is life-changing. I honestly do not know what would have happened without you.

Social work managers

Never deploy staff to a disaster setting without training.

This should include specialist training on being present with the families during what is called the *disaster victim identification* process. This process

will be run by the police, supporting the family through giving detailed information, medical information and DNA, supporting the family to possibly visit a mortuary and supporting the family all the way through to release of the remains and a funeral. It is important because with so many of our most serious incidents it will be used but so little is known about it. Unfortunately, when it came to Grenfell, there was no time to do anything pre-emptively.

At one level, this was really saddening; however, there was something very organic and authentic about the way people responded, which meant it was from the heart. I also was able to challenge and examine every one of my own guidance documents in a different way than before.

One of the things that really got me was when the social workers that I was working with realised that they were treading a path that many others have walked before. Some of them became quite distressed when they saw the amount of resources that were out there. Families from other large fatal fires who had written testimonies of their experiences raised the same issues that the Grenfell families were feeling. It gave the social workers permission to ask me more and more difficult questions and that felt very necessary.

To illustrate this, many of the families had not been able to see the bodies of their loved ones. Social workers were working through that, not as bereavement counsellors, but by working with people who said they did not believe their loved ones had really gone in the absence of a body. This is a very common reaction to disaster loss but was an area that social workers needed training in. They took a lot of comfort from books like *Collective Conviction* by Anne Eyre and Pamela Dix (2014). This talks in depth about families' experiences of this from other UK disasters.

The social workers were then really upset to realise that was such a common reaction for this kind of sudden disaster. They were very hungry for past experience and knowledge – organisations owe them this, and also owe it to survivors.

I remember running a training day at a point when personal effects had just started to be returned to families. There had been some mistakes and some misunderstanding, but this was a key area of my work, so we basically could run very challenging 'question and answer' sessions. Some social workers challenged me because the families had been offered everything back that

could be salvaged, *'even underwear'* (the families can, of course, refuse items). There was also distress because the items had *'put people back to the day of the fire'*. This is an area where I had lots of videos and personal accounts from other bereaved families who spoke movingly of initially being distressed by items, but over time being able to look at them and process them. We spoke about this at length and arranged for longer storage of the items. Together, the social workers and I lobbied that the families also needed more time for this process, because they were living in hotels so this one box of precious items loomed large in the room and also caused further distress.

Another key message is to keep up-to-date records. There was a huge pressure from central government put on local deliverers to step outside of existing frameworks, and make problems go away. The social workers were in constant fear of being undermined, because they would hold the line on various issues, which would then be overruled by authority. So having accurate records in these contexts is a must.

Be honest with your teams, that this is new to you too. Sometimes the first time that the managers would be able to share was in my training, and then their staff would realise they had no hidden agendas or secret extra resources. They really were in it together.

Finally, and crucially, ensure that staff well-being is prioritised. Annual leave needs to be taken and people need to be allowed to switch off.

After 20 years in the field, I have learnt a fair amount about the importance of self-care, and regularly invest in updates and support around how self-care should be done.

Usually, as a consultant in disaster recovery, the person who looks after me is me. But if needed, I have a trauma debriefer – no one can do this alone, and the same goes for social workers.

Conclusion

The knowledge, skills and understanding gained by social workers in disaster contexts belong not only in their hearts and minds, but in spaces such as these where future practitioners, managers, directors and policy-makers may learn

from them. The accounts underscore the value of social work presence in disaster contexts; it is undoubtable that the creativity, insight, compassion, resilience and person-centred practice demonstrated by each contributor would have had a lasting impact on the victim-survivors they supported in ways both tangible and non-tangible. Each extract provides a raw, honest account of the unique challenges social workers can face in disaster contexts, including (but not limited to) the need to balance conflicting risks, the emotional impact of processing traumatic events, cultural differences, and, on a top-down level, a lack of governmental investment, contingency planning, and guidance. A key emerging theme was the way in which systemic inequalities (poverty and racism to name just two) not only increase the likelihood that individuals will face disasters, but also decrease the extent to which they can access effective services. BASW maintains the view that without addressing structural inequalities and austerity, any disaster response will fail to create long-term change.

Reflective questions

- Supervision can be a significant source of professional support. How might this be utilised during a disaster?
- How can employers/organisations offer learning and support and exercise their duty of care in the context of disaster work?

Taking it further

ADASS and BASW (2019) Response and Recommendations from the Task and Finish Groups Looking at: The Role of the DASS and Social Workers in Disaster Recovery. [online] Available at: www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/ADASS%20-%20BASW%20Joint%20Statement%20on%20the%20role%20of%20SW%20as%20Keyworker.pdf (accessed 11 January 2022).

BASW (nd) *CPD Guidance on Social Work Roles Undertaken during Disasters*. [online] Available at: www.basw.org.uk/system/files/resources/181086%20CPD%20guidance%20on%20disaster%20social%20work%20V2.pdf (accessed 11 January 2022).