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### **Learning from Lakanal House**

Following the fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell on 3 July, in which six residents lost their lives, Roger Southam, founder and chairman of London-based property management company Chainbow, is urging managers, developers and local authorities to take their role seriously so that similar catastrophes can be prevented.

Residential apartment blocks are not regulated by the same government building standards as commercial blocks. Under the Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation Regulations (HMO) 2006 and Fire Safety Order (FSO) 2005, the managing agent has a duty to ensure that the day-to-day management of fire safety is properly undertaken and that essential routine maintenance and emergency repairs are properly carried out. Unfortunately this responsibility is not always fulfilled.

According to The Daily Telegraph, following the fire, Lakanal House residents described how the building lacked adequate fire exits and how belongings and rubbish were often left in the stairwells making escape difficult.

Mr Southam commented: "It was only a matter of time before a tragedy of this scale happened and made people realise how dangerous poor property management can be. The safety issues highlighted by the Lakanal House fire need to be addressed for residential blocks across the country. The simple act of keeping common areas and fire doors clear of rubbish and personal belongings could be the difference between life and death and failure to do so is just a matter of complacency on the part of managers and residents."

"Chainbow has always taken fire safety seriously and will actually remove personal belongings from corridors, stairwells and electrical cupboards as well as ensuring fire doors always remain closed. These are the precautions that ultimately save lives. Many people also don't know that it is not a legal requirement to provide fire extinguishers in residential apartment blocks which may seem irresponsible however using the incorrect extinguisher will only exacerbate the fire."

However the responsibility of ensuring health and safety of residential blocks does not solely lie with the managing agents. There needs to be strict control of build quality and design to ensure all fire safety precautions are carefully constructed and maintained.

Mr Southam continued: “Chainbow consulted on a block of 300 apartments at Canary Wharf where we were astonished to find incomplete fire breaks that did not reach the ceiling and gaps under the fire doors! This level of construction negligence and complacency can cost lives.”

“The onus is therefore not only on the builders but on the council and building authorities to monitor the planning and construction phases to ensure necessary precautions and measures are in place. The problem then becomes who will pay for retro-fits and upgrades as these may not be recoverable through the service charge.”

Chainbow was founded by Roger Southam in 1989 and specialises in residential property management on behalf of owners, freeholders and developers. Chainbow aims to provide real value for money for its customers as well as changing their perceptions of property management. Chainbow does this through the provision of a clear charter aimed at setting out its values and promises to leaseholders, as well as an annual customer satisfaction survey intended to benchmark progress and identify areas for improvement.

Chainbow currently manages 80 developments with 3,700 leaseholders across the South East and intends to become the provider of choice property management and consultancy services in London.

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