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“Sharing responsibility is only way to honour Grenfell victims”

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The building services industry cannot claim to have learned from the Grenfell Tragedy unless every member of every supply chain takes full responsibility for their safety role. This was one of the key messages to emerge from the recent Building Engineering Services Association (BESA) National Conference.

Arup transformation director Gill Kernick told the conference she was “appalled” that commercial pressures were still driving poor design decisions and unsafe practices. “Until we take a systemic approach to change, we cannot say that we have learned from Grenfell or honoured those who died.

“The merry-go-round of buck-passing is our failure. Nobody across the [Grenfell] supply chain did the job the way they were meant to do it,” Kernick told conference delegates. “It’s not helpful to say construction hasn’t changed. We must ask why it hasn’t changed and what needs to be done.”

Several conference speakers said that too many firms are still waiting to be told what to do rather than getting on with reforming their processes in line with the new Building Safety Act, which has been in force since April.

Fundamental
CIBSE technical director Hywel Davies believes that up to 70% of the industry are doing nothing to prepare for the provisions of the Act, which he described as “the most fundamental reform of building work since World War 2”.

He also said many people were still under the illusion that the Act only applied to high rise residential buildings whereas it covers “any building work to which the Building Regulations apply”.

BESA technical committee chair Will Pitt said responsibility for fire safety needed to be shared and the practice of passing risk down the supply chain was undermining efforts to make buildings safer.

“This is not entirely on the consultant, but they shouldn’t be throwing it over the fence to the contractors either,” he said, before adding that the way safety critical products were tested also needed to change.

“We test products, but not how they work in systems. They are tested against a specification, but if that changes on-site, then you face problems of compatibility,” said Pitt.