

EMBEDDING A RISK-BASED CULTURE

Residential property management company FirstPort is transforming its approach to safety assurance

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ith a refreshed strategy, led by Safety Assurance Director Keith Scott (who joined from Kantar in September), FirstPort is committed to empowering colleagues to stay ahead of safety challenges and fostering more meaningful customer conversations.

Here, Keith and his senior team – Alexander

Peck, Dawn Ward and Tom Smith – discuss how they are integrating and managing all elements of organisational risk, and how they are embedding safety assurance into day-to-day business practices.

“To set the scene on how the risk landscape has evolved in recent years for us, there’s been a significant change in hazard profile, unlike anything I’ve witnessed in other sectors,” says Keith.

“Grenfell shone a light on the potential loss of life and significant business risks that could incur if risks aren’t managed well. It elevated the risk profile in the property management industry from medium to very high in an extremely short space of time. I’d suggest it’s now aligned with the level of safety governance applied in the oil, gas and nuclear sectors and we’ve moved to a safety case regime. For an industry to undergo such a rapid hazard profile change is, I think, very unique.”

Tom adds: “The Piper Alpha disaster in 1988 is comparable in that it triggered massive industry change in the oil sector, but that

Keith Scott



didn’t affect people’s individual lives in the same way. When you’re in a business dealing with people’s homes, the stakes are higher and it’s crucial that people feel safe where they live.

“At the same time, residents’ expectations changed dramatically overnight. I was in our customer service centre the morning after Grenfell and the volume of calls coming in was off the scale. Customers wanted to understand the risk immediately and expected an immediate plan of action.”

UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND GAPS

FirstPort has been on its own journey in recent years – managing the aftermath of Grenfell, responding to an evolving legislative landscape and keeping residents and their safety at the centre. The business has had to be adaptive and responsive in many areas, not least data governance.

Dawn explains: “One of the risks identified was that the industry didn’t know enough about the make-up of buildings. Information was missing. Each building is unique and needs to be understood on its own terms, with building data logged, retained and updated.”

Tom adds: “The golden thread, and our statutory duties around it, have accelerated work on how we collate and maintain data – from the construction phase through to key

IMAGE: TAJAT DAVID / SHUTTERSTOCK



IMAGE: JESSICA GIVAN / SHUTTERSTOCK





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information required throughout a building's lifetime. This is a huge task for any company. At the same time, we need to use this data to manage life safety-related issues across all our buildings.”

“We also identified a gap in competencies,” Tom continues. “By that, I mean the availability of people able to assess and inspect buildings. Our small, reliable pool of skilled and competent contractors is now nowhere near enough to manage the increased level of risk we are being asked to manage because of changes in legislation, particularly the Building Safety Act.”

“We need to constantly horizon-scan for what's coming next,” Dawn explains. “For example, additional requirements around Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) coming in April 2026 and the Welsh Government progressing its Building Safety Bill through Parliament. We've had to adapt our service and make sure we're organisationally equipped to respond.”

RESPONDING TO RISK

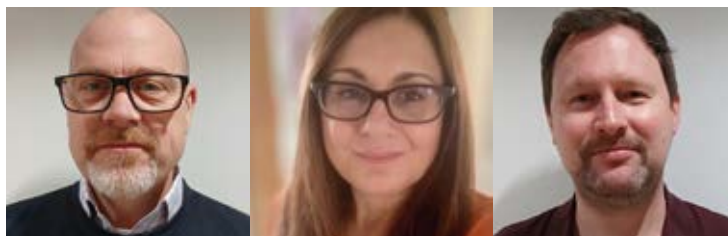
There are several ways FirstPort has responded, and continues to respond, to these challenges.

Alex explains: “We've had to completely review and reinvigorate our organisational arrangements around safety assurance and risk management. We focused on clarifying responsibilities within our risk management framework. We've taken the whole organisation on a journey so everyone understands their role and the part they play in managing risk.”

“Every single person in FirstPort is responsible for safety assurance and should have a route into the conversation,” Keith adds. “Our HR team has a training and development role in ensuring everyone has the right competencies, our finance team manages the budgets needed for the right resources and our customer experience team helps provide clarity and confidence to customers through strong engagement.”

The organisation has also responded from a technology perspective. Alex says: “We're fortunate as a managing agent to have a real-time safety management system. Every manager can see all compliant assets in an up-to-date format immediately. The data stays with a building and doesn't disappear if a colleague leaves.”

Tom adds: “We've also risk-rated all properties using outputs from our compliance system, which provides vital information for operational colleagues to prioritise high-risk properties and manage risks effectively.”



LEFT TO RIGHT: Alexander Peck, Dawn Ward and Tom Smith

“We constantly publish and update best-practice guidance for our colleagues,” Dawn continues. “We are also developing training sessions focused on the Life Safety First Strategy and we've introduced a ticketing system for colleagues to raise questions with the Safety Assurance Team, moving away from emails to real-time monitoring.”

“This allows us to manage risk in a more controlled way,” Dawn explains. “We can prioritise the highest risks and ensure we have the right competencies and skills to respond.”

For FirstPort, the biggest impact of this change in direction is a shift in culture. “Safety is now the starting point of every conversation and meeting agenda,” Alex says. “Everyone, from executive leaders to individual teams, has a seat at the table and recognises both their statutory obligations and the benefits of promoting a positive safety culture.”

“Our Safety Assurance Team is now set up to work holistically, reviewing and managing whole-system risk rather than isolated elements,” Alex adds. “They are working to a revised safety assurance framework and escalation process that is embedded across the entire organisation.”

Customers remain at the heart of decision-making. As Dawn explains: “Building confidence with our customers is essential. We are driving our life safety strategy across the business to ensure residents are engaged and confident in our approach. We have resident engagement strategies that will be supported by new Building Safety Managers, who will work alongside operational teams to share building safety information and rationale so that customers feel part of the solution.”

Keith concludes: “We've come a long way, but there is much still to do. This year, every relevant development will have a resident engagement plan supported by a dedicated Building Safety Manager, ensuring customers understand both their building and the decisions behind every safety action. We're now in the perfect place for what's coming next to better support our colleagues, the business, our residents and our developments.” ♥

Find out more at www.firstport.co.uk

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