

Longboat Quay?" confirmed the taxi driver. "The place with all the fire problems?"

The Bernard McNamara-built apartment complex on the south side of the Liffey near Dublin's Grand Canal basin has indeed become a byword for fire-safety problems and residents of its 298 apartments face an evacuation order. If faults identified by Dublin's chief fire officer are not rectified by the summer of next year, they risk being ordered out of their homes.

The taxi driver taking The Sunday Times to the complex earlier this month said that the emergence of the problems in the McNamara building made him grateful he had paid a substantial fee to a fire-safety expert to vet two apartments elsewhere he'd considered buying with his wife. Robin Knox, the fire safety and building regulations consultant he hired, advised the taxi driver against buying both on the grounds that they represented unacceptable fire risks.

Knox, who also works as an adviser to families of the 48 victims of the Stardust fire in 1981, is damning about building standards in Irish apartments. "I'd probably fail nine out of every 10 I inspect," he said. "It's like a car doing the NCT with bald tyres - that's a fail. So in a house or apartment with no proper ventilation or proper fire separation in walls, it's the same: a fail."

While Knox says some safety issues can be rectified at reasonable cost by the potential house purchaser, he concludes in more than 50% of cases the extent of the breaches are so severe that clients should not buy the property.

Those who purchased apartments at Longboat Quay, including the former president Mary McAleese and her husband, who own two units, are embroiled in a fight to hang on to their investments.

Management fees at Longboat Quay have increased by almost €700 on last year, and now range up to €2,775. The management company says legal fees are part of the reason for the increased charges, as is an "alarm levy". Last year the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA), which owns the common areas and has an interest in 37 apartments, spent €1.2m upgrading the Longboat Quay fire alarm system.

The installation was carried out after a receiver - appointed in 2010 when McNamara lost control of Gensong, the complex's development company - hired Ryan & Associates to evaluate 17 apartments. The Ryan report was the first to find fire safety problems at Longboat Quay, and said it was "urgent" that a new alarm system be installed. When this report was forwarded to the chief fire officer, the DDDA decided to proceed with the work.

A subsequent DDDA-commissioned report by Michael Slattery and Associates identified further work necessary to make Longboat Quay safe. The DDDA estimates the cost will be €3.88m.

For McNamara, who has returned to work as a developer following his 2012 bankruptcy, the negative publicity about Longboat Quay, which included criticism by the taoiseach Enda Kenny, could hardly come at a worse time. Although he has no remaining legal responsibility for the development, McNamara has taken the unusual step of renting an apartment on the Grand Canal side of Longboat Quay to give his staff access to the complex. McNamara's team have been busy surveying the block to assess the criticisms made by Ryan and Slattery. His team claims the construction method used provides each apartment with more fire protection than expressed in either report.

In letters to residents, the developer has said that each apartment is a standalone "concrete box" made from twin walls filled with concrete that can withstand fire for three hours. This separation of apartments is described as "compartmentation" in the fire-safety industry, but it has been found wanting by both Ryan and Slattery.

Eoghain Ryan, owner of Ryan & Associates, has been threatened with a defamation action by McNamara if he does not withdraw his allegedly "misleading" report. Last week Ryan said he could not comment for commercial reasons. Slattery said he undertook detailed inspections and is fully confident of his report's accuracy.

So far McNamara has only accepted one criticism from Slattery, that the size of some ventilation shafts are too small. He insists all the rest of Slattery's findings relate to upgrades or repairs. He has particularly latched on to the conclusion that the original alarm system was in "substantial compliance" with fire-safety regulations, subject to two other issues being resolved, as proof that the €1.2m spent on the new alarm was unnecessary.

John Greaney, McNamara's fire-safety consultant on the project, is drawing up a detailed response to the Ryan and Slattery reports which he intends to show to residents. He is critical of the cost of the new fire alarm. "It was taxpayers' money flushed down the loo," said Greaney, who has been a fire consultant since 1982. "Nobody I speak to can understand how anyone can spend €1.2m on a fire alarm."

Longboat Quay," he said. "People were sent over to look my my place. One of the more bizarre suggestions for the mould problem was to blame it on the family's heavy breathing at night. Now I know the mould and damp were only the tip of the iceberg as far as the development's problems were concerned."

Last September, Pullen attended a residents' meeting organised by the new management company at which they were informed about the fire-safety problems and the threat of evacuation.

"I couldn't believe what I was hearing," said Pullen. "Only last summer new fire alarms were installed in the complex but we didn't read into why this was happening. We were also told residents would have to pay between €9,000 and €18,000 each to foot the bill for any remedial works required in the development. I stood up and said I didn't have €9,000, and shouldn't the DDDA be footing this bill?"

Since then, the management company has sued the DDDA in the High Court over liability for the repairs. McNamara has offered to carry out the work for €1.5m, but has so far not been taken up on his offer.

DEIRDRE FOX, who chairs the Apartment Owners Network, a co-operative of owners who offer advice and information to other multi-dwelling building residents, said she believes the spate of problems with various complexes will result in apartment living in Ireland losing its appeal.

"I don't think people want to live in an apartment any more," she said. "You've Longboat Quay, Priory Hall and Aras na Chuaine [a development in Clondalkin], and complexes where part of their roofs blew off over the new year. That is unbelievable."

Many apartment owners are joining forces to run their own management companies, while legislation has been passed to strengthen the

rights of those living in multi-unit dwellings, but Fox stresses: "All the work associated with a management company and being a director is a hole-in-the-head job."

Bryan Maher, an owner-occupier in an apartment on Dublin's Navan Road, said being involved in a management company was like having a second job. Last Wednesday night he checked all the outdoor lights in the development, which took an hour. "We recently had 19 new bulbs put in at a cost of €3,500, so that will give you an idea of the kind of costs you're up against."

In 2011, the Multi-Unit Developments Act set out how developers, management companies and their directors should operate. The Property Services Regulatory Authority was established the following year to regulate management companies. It has statutory powers to impose sanctions on property service providers for improper conduct. Maher believes, however, that the complexities of running owners' management companies (OMCs) and the challenges they face are not fully understood by the regulator, courts or government.

"Many OMCs are simply treading water - struggling to pay recurring bills each year with little or no savings," he said. "The state will have a big problem in years to come as many OMCs may not be able to repaint walls and will not be able to replace lifts. It's akin to the pensions time bomb."

Diarmaid Condon, an overseas property investor, said: "We just don't seem to have taken apartment living seriously enough in most of Ireland to plan it and execute it properly."



Pullen felt he had picked a bargain, but faces costs he can't afford

## TAXPAYERS' MONEY DOWN THE LOO. NOBODY I SPEAK TO CAN UNDERSTAND HOW ANYONE CAN SPEND €1.2M ON A FIRE ALARM

Greaney said that the construction system used in Longboat Quay was the first of its type in Ireland. "It's one of the safest buildings I've been in," he said. "You couldn't make it any safer than it is. Things have been done in the past nine years [since it was completed]. I stand over the certificate I issued [in 2007]."

Shay Pullen moved into the Docklands complex in 2008 after buying a €245,000 townhouse in a scheme run by the DDDA. In Pullen's eyes, the purchase was a bargain. Prior to the property crash, these homes fetched €575,000 on the market. To snap one up at less than half that was "too good to pass up".

Within six months of moving his family in, however, Pullen said he noticed interior walls were damp and mould had started to form on surfaces. "That's what my battle has been about since I moved into



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