

Statement to Parliament: Statement on Grenfell Tower: 20 July 2017

Five weeks have now passed since the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

Nothing that has happened in those 5 weeks will have diminished the grief of those who lost loved ones.

Nothing will have negated the trauma of those who lost their homes.

But across the public sector...

...in local and central government, in the emergency services, in hospitals, in schools and more...

...dedicated public servants have been doing all they can to deal with the aftermath and help the community to recover.

Over the past 5 weeks, the government has endeavoured to keep the House up-to-date with these developments.

This is the third oral statement I've made on the subject.

The House has also heard from the Prime Minister and the Housing Minister, who also answered questions in Westminster Hall before Parliament formally returned.

There has been a full debate in the Commons, 4 written statements, and a number of letters that have been sent to all Members.

My aim today is to provide an update before the House rises, and another opportunity for Hon Members to ask questions.

And I'd also like to let the House know exactly what action we'll be taking over the summer.

Victims

The Police continue to list 80 people as either dead or missing presumed dead.

39 victims have so far been formally identified, with 39 inquests opened by the coroner and adjourned pending the public inquiry and police investigation.

2 adults remain in hospital.

I know that some local residents remain concerned that the number of people in the tower on the night has been underestimated.

I would continue to urge anyone with further information to come forward.

We've been very clear that we don't mind if those affected were subletting or have immigration issues.

All we care about is getting to the truth.

Rehoming

Turning to the rehoming programme, everyone who lost their home in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk has been made at least 1 offer of good quality, fully furnished temporary accommodation in the local area.

As of 10am this morning, 35 of these have been accepted and 10 families have moved in.

Those numbers are slightly down on the figures that were published recently as some people have changed their minds, as they are perfectly entitled to do.

Where residents have turned down an offer we are finding suitable alternatives to offer them.

Where residents aren't yet ready to engage with the process, they don't want to make a decision right now, or they would rather wait for a permanent home to be offered, we will respect that.

At DCLG questions this week, the quality of the accommodation being offered was raised.

I'd like to repeat the Housing Minister's offer to the opposition front bench to visit some of these homes so they can inspect them for themselves.

I don't believe they've yet taken us up on that offer so far, but it still stands.

In the longer term, we're continuing to seek out and secure suitable permanent accommodation.

The first such homes for Grenfell families will be ready within days, and specialist teams are ready to start matching them to families and start making offers.

RBKC / Recovery Taskforce

At the town hall, we're continuing preparations for the return of control of the recovery effort from Gold Command to Kensington and Chelsea council.

I've spoken at length with the new leader of the council and been very clear that Gold won't hand over the reins until it's clear that the council is ready and able to cope.

We saw last night the very raw anger that some in the community still feel towards the council.

It's entirely understandable – as the Prime Minister herself has said, the initial response from the local authority was simply not good enough.

There's not a lot of trust there, not a lot of confidence.

And that's why, once Kensington and Chelsea council takes over the recovery operation, it will do so under the supervision of the independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce.

It is important to stress that the role of the Taskforce is not to investigate the causes of the fire or to apportion blame – that's for the public inquiry and for the police investigation.

Rather, it is there to provide advice and support and see to it that council does the job that's required of it.

We're in the process of finalising the Taskforce membership, and I hope to make an announcement soon.

I can confirm that the handover from Gold to Kensington and Chelsea will not happen until the Taskforce is up and running.

Other towers / Testing

Away from Kensington, Madam Deputy Speaker, the fire safety testing programme continues.

We now believe that no more than 208 local authority and housing association residential blocks over 18 metres tall have been fitted with aluminium composite material cladding.

189 of these have had cladding samples tested by the Building Research Establishment, they've been tested by proxy or they have already had taken their cladding down.

None of them have passed the limited combustibility test.

Samples from a further 12 towers have been submitted this week and they are now being tested.

The BRE has yet to see samples from 7 towers, all of them managed by housing associations.

A month after the tests began, this is simply unacceptable.

And I expect to see them all submitting samples without any further delay.

On the advice of the Independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, the BRE is now undertaking system testing that will help establish how combinations of different types of ACM panels with different types of insulation behave in a fire.

An Explanatory Note, setting out the process and the timetable for further

advice, will be published very shortly.

It has taken a short time to design and set up the test, but we expect the first results to be available next week.

As soon as results are available we will share them first with local authorities and housing associations who have confirmed that their properties are clad in the same combination of materials that are used in that test.

We will also, of course, share them with the local fire and rescue service.

The results will provide further information that building owners and their professional advisers can use to take decisions about what, if any, remedial action is required.

Although legal responsibility for fire safety enforcement lies with local authorities, I do have the power to direct an authority to consider these test results as part of their duty to keep housing conditions under review.

If necessary, I will not hesitate to use this power, which could lead to enforcement action being taken against a landlord if a fire risk is not dealt with.

I do hope it will not come to that.

Public inquiry

Moving on to the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick is continuing his preparatory work.

I welcome his decision to extend by 2 weeks the consultation period for the terms of reference.

While we're all anxious for the inquiry to get underway, it is important that the remit is appropriate and that everyone affected has had an opportunity to share their views.

Updates over the summer

With the House due to rise later today this is the last statement I'll be making before the summer recess.

But work on the recovery effort and testing regime will obviously continue at pace while Parliament isn't sitting.

And my department will be writing regular letters to all Members to keep them abreast of progress.

Thanks to MPs / conclusion

And finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to pay tribute to the many Members on both sides of the House who have assisted with the emergency response and recovery effort so far.

They've provided insight, support, scrutiny and a voice for your constituents, both in public and behind the scenes.

The weeks, months and even years ahead will be unimaginably difficult for those that have been caught up in the fire and those who have lost family and friends.

There's nothing any of us can do to bring back those who died or erase the trauma of that terrible night.

But I'm sure the whole House shares my determination to take care of those that have been affected by the fire...to make sure the truth comes out and that justice is done, and to see to it that a tragedy like this never ever happens again.