

The Grenfell Tower inferno

As feared all too many people died in the fire. The government has rightly set up an Inquiry. We need to know what caused the fire, why the fire spread so fiercely and rapidly, and what differences in the building could have prevented it or lessened the impact. We need to know if people were given the right advice on what to do on that fateful night. It is harrowing to hear of what happened and to learn that even now we do not know who died and where they died. Relatives live with dreadful uncertainty and are now warned that if their loved ones have died they may not be able to identify the bodies. We all are grieving for those lost and are appalled by the extent of the losses.

A full independent Judge Inquiry is needed and has been agreed between government and Opposition. However, these take time and do not satisfy the immediate need for some answers and urgent action elsewhere if other blocks are at risk. We will need statements from the government, Councils and housing management companies about the safety of all the blocks in the country. The government needs to advise Parliament if it wants to change fire regulations or issue any new guidance to Councils. Individual Councils need to review their housing and debate the matter in each locality. They are the main owners and purchasers of social housing with planning and building control functions that go to heart of this matter. Management organisations need to talk to tenants and review their homes, so they can either reassure or improve their safety.

I am glad the government has said it is now reviewing urgently all tower blocks and will report back. It has said it will make sure all those who have lost their homes from the fire will be housed by the government. It has made emergency money available to the local Council and has helped set up a local co-ordinating committee to deal with all problems. It has made money and other assistance available to those who have lost their homes.

Many say the new cladding put in to improve thermal insulation, cut tenant heating bills and improve the appearance of the block for residents and the wider neighbourhood may have speeded the progress of the fire. If this is so it follows that other buildings with the same system need safety improvements, and future improvement schemes need reviewing. It looks as if fire alarms and response systems were not good enough or did not exist. It would be prudent for all other public sector landlords to review their estates – and private sector ones as well for that matter.

Ensuring the safety of tenants or leaseholders should be the overriding priority. Local and national government needs to work hard and swiftly with that in mind.