

Speech: Fire Safety Conference 2017: Fire Minister's speech

This is a good time for experts on fire safety from across the country to gather in the same room and have a conversation about what we need to change.

This is a room full of experts, I am not one. I just happen to be the man who is Minister for the police and the fire service.

On day 2 of my service in that role, we all woke up to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and I think it is important to get that into perspective, that we are dealing with, in terms of loss of life, the biggest disaster that has hit this country since Hillsborough and a scale of fire that arguably we haven't seen since the Second World War. We are talking about an individual fire, which Commissioner Cotton, as I stood alongside her on that fateful morning said, was a fire unlike any she had seen in her 29 years of service. I hope you'll allow me just to take a few moments to reflect on that tragedy because obviously it changes everything.

I'm sure everyone in this room feels like me in terms of the way our hearts go out to the victims of that tragedy. They are victims because this should not have happened. Whether they have lost loved ones or whether they are still waiting to hear whether they've lost loved ones, which is the case for many, or whether they've lost everything which many of them have or whether they've been in a situation where they've had to see and hear things that people should never have to. That goes for the residents but also for the firefighters who arrived within minutes at that scene and took some very big decisions in terms of the risks they were prepared to take to go into that building and to save 65 people. It of course wasn't just the firefighters on the scene, we should also remember the people that were not at the building but who were on the end of a phone line, listening to people in the hours of growing desperation and despair and the ripples of trauma from this event go very wide.

And for that reason, we as a country and as a society have got to do 3 very important things. We've got to make sure that we provide the support for that community of victims, relatives and residents. We've got to help them through the process of a public inquiry and a criminal investigation and to get to the truth of what happened that night and to make sure there is proper accountability for what happened that night.

Thirdly, that we have got to make sure that we reassure the public that we all serve about the safety of buildings they are in and increase levels of public confidence about the whole system which we manage together, to manage the risk of fire and to give the public reassurance. That system is now being scrutinised more than ever before. And actually, I'm being very frank, as events unfold and we get clearer pictures of the reality of some of the buildings we are inspecting, we have to contemplate, and I hope we have time to discuss this so I can get your views on this, that actually we are maybe

looking at a system failure, built up over many years, which we now have to address urgently.

Let me just say something briefly about the Grenfell Tower response.

The first priority is to ensure that [people who have been directly affected by the fire are cared for and receive all the support they need](#). The second, as I've said, is to ensure that people in similar buildings are safe and, feel safe, in their homes.

On the first point – about care and support for those directly affected by this tragedy – as I've said before, it is clear that the initial response of the emergency services was absolutely exemplary. However, the support on the ground, as we've been really frank about and put our hands up, was simply not good enough. A remarkable community effort sprang up overnight while official support was frankly found wanting.

That failure was inexcusable, and it is right that a new team, led by John Barradell – the Chief Executive of the City of London, is now coordinating the response on the ground. We have got to learn to ensure any future civil emergencies are responded to as effectively as possible.

The government has also taken steps to provide support to residents and to the local authorities. The Department for Communities and Local Government has activated the 'Bellwin' scheme, which you may be familiar with, which provides emergency financial assistance to local authorities. They have also established a unit dedicated to supporting the victims and which provide a single point of access into the government for those involved in the support effort.

On the ground, staff from 6 government departments including from the Home Office and Department of Work and Pensions, as well as local health services, the Red Cross and the Citizen's Advice Bureau are present at the Westway Assistance Centre to provide advice and support to residents.

We have also set aside £5 million for the [Grenfell Tower residents' discretionary fund](#) to cover all the immediate costs for the victims of this terrible incident, for example, replacing their clothing, their phones, their toiletries – most people lost absolutely everything they owned. Almost £2.5 million has been distributed so far, to 112 households.

We are also committed to making sure all families are re-housed locally and our priority is to ensure those who have lost their homes are offered a decent place to live, and can start rebuilding their lives. The Prime Minister made a commitment to offer families temporary housing in Kensington or a neighbouring borough within 3 weeks and we are confident we will achieve this by tomorrow.

Public inquiry

In terms of the public inquiry and as the Prime Minister has announced, there will be an [independent, judge-led public inquiry, led by Sir Martin Moore-](#)

[Bick.](#)

The inquiry's immediate priority will be to establish the facts of what happened in order to take the necessary action to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again.

But beyond that immediate focus it is also important that all the wider lessons from both this catastrophe, and the checks of other buildings around the country that followed it, are identified and learnt.

We must, and I'm sure everyone in this room will agree, get to the truth about what happened, so no stone will be left unturned by this inquiry. The inquiry will also produce an interim report to ensure we identify lessons as early as possible.

Expert panel

And as I've already said, it's essential that people in similar buildings to Grenfell Tower are safe and feel secure in their own homes.

Building regulations and fire safety systems have been developed over many decades.

Until the Grenfell Tower fire, it could have been said these systems worked. The numbers of fires have fallen as you know by half over the past decade and the number of fires in purpose-built high-rise flats has fallen by 43 percent since 2009/10.

But at Grenfell Tower we witnessed a catastrophic failure on a scale that many thought impossible in 21st century Britain. It is clear that this failure must be understood and rectified without delay, and the government is determined to ensure that happens.

As an initial step, DCLG has established an [independent expert advisory panel](#) to provide independent advice to my colleague the Communities Secretary on any immediate measures needed to ensure people living in high rise buildings are safe.

The panel is made up of a range of building and fire safety experts, chaired by Sir Ken Knight, and will draw in wider technical expertise as necessary to inform their advice.

In particular the panel will:

- focus on providing advice relating to fire and building safety, and in particular how to ensure the public are safe in high rise buildings
- consider whether there are any immediate additional actions that should be taken to ensure the safety of existing high rise buildings

- consider whether there are any changes or clarifications required to existing regulations, and provide advice on possible changes, including making recommendations on the use of specific materials
- consider whether the current processes for checking building safety are fit for purpose, and whether any changes are required. I'd encourage anyone in this room who has expertise or views on this to share it

Implications for fire safety

I also need to address the issue of cladding, although cladding is clearly not the whole story but it is a priority.

It is estimated that there are around 528 blocks with similar cladding to Grenfell Tower which are being tested for their combustibility by the Building Research Establishment. So far, all the [samples of cladding tested have failed](#) – that is 181 out of 181.

As the [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government said in the House of Commons yesterday](#), it is clearly disturbing that there is such a large number of buildings with combustible cladding, and the priority now is to make those buildings safe. I know that many of you here in this room this morning will be involved in that work. I was talking briefly to colleagues in Wales about this, and I'm sure that everyone is working flat out to monitor the buildings in their area.

Where appropriate, mitigating measures cannot be implemented quickly, landlords must provide alternative accommodation while the remedial work is carried out, and that is exactly what happened with the 4 tower blocks in Camden. It is worth reminding ourselves here, that the primary issue on those tower blocks was not the cladding. It was the condition of the buildings themselves and the lack of fire doors.

The problem of unsafe cladding is not unique to social housing or residential buildings. The government has asked other owners, landlords and managers of private sector residential blocks to consider their own buildings, and we have made the testing facility freely available to them.

Our primary concern has been any buildings over 18 metres or 6 storeys in which people stay at night.

We are also considering the safety of all public sector buildings which includes hospitals and schools. These should have tailored fire safety plans in place and safety checks are being done as I speak.

We have also taken independent advice to ensure that our testing regime is correct because there have been some views raised on that. This was done by the Research Institutes of Sweden, which confirmed that they believe the process to be sound.

The safety of people living in and using these buildings is our primary concern and the government is determined to ensure that residents have as much peace of mind as possible.

Role of fire and rescue services

Clearly fire and rescue services have a vital role to play in advising property owners and their residents about fire risks and what to do to reduce them. You have a range of enforcement powers available to require landlords and others to improve fire safety measures in the common areas, or take remedial action where necessary, including in those buildings where the external cladding fails the combustibility test.

In London, over 2,500 fire safety audits were carried out in 2015/16 in purpose-built flats 4 storeys or more, compared to over 1300 in 2009/10.

The events of the last few weeks have highlighted the importance of these fire safety audits. We will, working in coordination with the sector, consider what changes, if any, are needed to the fire safety audit regime. I'd really like to hear your views on that.

This will complement other reviews already underway and the work being undertaken by the [Grenfell Recovery Task force for which I sit on, which is chaired by the Prime Minister](#), its sub-group on building safety matters, which I also sit on, which is chaired by the Communities Secretary and DCLG's expert advisory panel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wanted to try and keep my remarks short so that we can have a proper discussion as you are the experts and I am not and clearly as I have said, Grenfell changes everything.

As I said, as we get a sense of the condition of some of these buildings are and as we get a better sense of what is happening in terms of compliance with building regulation and as we get a sense of what is and isn't happening in terms of inspection and risk assessment, we may have to confront an awkward truth. That over many years and perhaps against the backdrop of, as data shows, a reduced risk in terms of fire, in terms of number of incidents and deaths, that maybe as a system some complacency has crept in. There is no room for that and Grenfell changes everything. We have a responsibility, as partners in this process to move as quickly as we can to reassure ourselves that the system we are all part of is fit for purpose and to reassure the public that the buildings they go to sleep in are safe.

It is quite clear that the tragedy at Grenfell Tower will have enduring implications for all those involved in fire and building safety. It will cast a long shadow over all of our thinking and all of our future work together on the reform agenda. It is right that we take this opportunity to reflect on that here today.

I'm sure everyone in this room shares the single objective, which I feel very

very strongly about, that we should never be in a situation where another community goes through what the Grenfell community and Kensington community went through that night and will continue to go through in the weeks and months and years ahead as they rebuild their lives. It simply cannot happen again and it is our responsibility to ensure it is never repeated.