

Statement to Parliament: Grenfell Tower and building safety

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the on-going response to June's tragic fire at Grenfell Tower and our wider review of building safety.

It is now 6 months since the disaster.

Last week a number of events were held to mark this sad milestone, including the national memorial service at St Paul's.

I had the privilege of attending the extremely moving service, alongside the Prime Minister... ..the Minister for Grenfell Victims... .. and of course the Rt Hon Gentleman opposite, among others. The scale and the impact of this disaster is unprecedented in recent times, and I couldn't hope to cover all aspects of the response in one statement.

So today I want to concentrate on areas where I have new information to share.

However I am very happy to take questions on any aspect of the tragedy and the response to it.

I'll start with an issue that I know is particularly important to Members, Hon Members, and to me.

And that's finding new places to live for those who lost their homes.

Responsibility for rehousing lies with the local authority, the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea.

However, I have been closely involved with the process to ensure everyone is rehoused as quickly as possible...

... and my department has been providing the council with support to help bring that about.

The council has been tasked with finding places to live for 207 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk.

To date, 144 households – almost 70% – have accepted an offer of temporary or permanent accommodation.

According to the latest figures from the council, 102 of these households have now moved in.

For those who remain in other accommodation, the council has offered the opportunity to move into private rented accommodation while a permanent home is found.

Some have taken up this offer, others have made clear that they do not want to move twice – something that I completely understand.

The council was undoubtedly slow off the mark in starting the rehousing process.

But, with its own change of leadership, the help of the Independent Recovery Taskforce, and pressure and support from DCLG, consistent progress is now being made.

But I am far from complacent.

I've always been very clear that we should move at the pace of the families involved...

... and that nobody should be rushed or pushed into making a decision about where to live.

But to have so many families...

...including some children...

...still living in hotels and other emergency accommodation 6 months after the tragedy is simply not good enough.

The situation is undoubtedly complicated.

But I have been very clear with the council that I expect them to do whatever is necessary to help people into suitable homes as swiftly as possible.

I'm confident that the council is capable of doing that.

But, along with the task force, I will continue to monitor the situation and work with the council to ensure that it happens.

The issue of rehousing has an added poignancy with Christmas just around the corner.

Whatever your faith, this a time for family and friends, and that makes it a difficult time for anyone who has suffered loss or trauma.

Nothing anyone can do will make this a normal Christmas for the bereaved and the survivors.

But we are doing all we can to offer extra support over the coming weeks.

A range of activities and events are being staged for local children, particularly those still living in hotels.

Social spaces have been booked in 4 of the hotels where families are staying, so there is room for people to spend time together.

And NHS outreach workers are visiting residents in the local area to offer specialist mental health support.

This builds on the excellent work the NHS has already done on mental wellbeing.

Specialists have screened almost a thousand adults for signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.

426 are currently in treatment for PTSD, while a further 62 have completed their treatment.

110 children have also received or are receiving specialist help.

The dedicated NHS Grenfell helpline remains available, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Local organisations are also providing health and wellbeing support on the ground, including culturally sensitive support that reflects the diverse make-up of the borough.

And [last month's Budget](#) made available a further £28 million to pay for mental health and emotional support...

... a community space for those affected...

... and investment in the Lancaster West estate over the next 3 years.

Of course, it's not only government that has been providing funds.

In the aftermath of the tragedy the British people responded with incredible generosity, donating more than £26 million to various charities.

The majority of that money, more than three-quarters of it has already been paid out to survivors and to the next of kin of those who died.

Of the remaining £6 million, around £2 million is being held back for people who are entitled to payments but have not yet claimed it...

...and for those whose applications are still being processed.

Payments for those who haven't yet claimed will be looked after by the charities until the individuals are ready to engage.

The remaining £4 million will go towards providing long-term support and community projects.

As people are rehoused and take the time to grieve, the distributing charities will work with them...

... identifying their changing needs and ensuring money goes where it can best meet the needs of the community.

The House can rest assured that every penny that was donated will be spent on the people it was intended for.

The generosity of the British public demands no less.

Another issue where the views and wishes of the local community must be paramount is the future of Grenfell Tower itself.

The tower is currently being wrapped in white sheeting, a process that will be completed early next year.

This isn't being done, as some have claimed, to make people forget about what happened.

It is being done because many members of the community – people that have been directly affected by the fire – have said that covering the tower will help them to begin the healing process.

I acknowledge the current anxieties about the long term future of the site from those who have been most affected.

And I can categorically state that no decision has been taken about the long-term future of the site on which the Tower sits.

Those decisions will not be led by myself, the government, this House, or the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea.

It is the bereaved, the survivors and the wider community that will lead and be at the heart of the decision-making process.

My colleague the Minister for Grenfell Victims is working directly with them to agree a set of written principles that will guide the way forward for the future of this site.

When decisions are taken we want them to have the broadest possible support from those that have been affected...

...particularly those who lost loved ones...

...not just following the views of those with the loudest voices.

The principles we're drawing up will help us to make sure that happens.

And the principles will include a firm commitment from the Council that if the bereaved, the survivors and the wider community do not want the site to be redeveloped for housing...

... then the site will not be redeveloped for housing.

As well as dealing with the aftermath of the tragedy, we're determined to do everything possible to prevent such a disaster happening again.

And a crucial element of that is the Public Inquiry, which recently held its first procedural hearings under the chairmanship of Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

I know that some members of the community are concerned about the inquiry's remit, its structure and its personnel.

Some have called for Sir Martin to be supported by an extended panel that

reflects the diverse population of the Tower.

The decision on that rests with the Prime Minister.

She has given a commitment to consider the composition of the panel once Sir Martin has determined what further expertise is needed..

... and she is now giving active consideration to the issue.

Meanwhile, Sir Martin has said he is actively considering plans for a consultative panel of local people who could talk to and receive information from the inquiry.

Such a panel has been established successfully by the Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse as a way of closely involving victims and survivors in the work of that Inquiry.

Sir Martin has said that any decision on the establishment of such a panel for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry will be taken in consultation with tower residents and the bereaved families.

Whatever happens next, I can assure the House that legal representatives of core participants will have access to all relevant documents.

They will be able to offer opening and closing statements at certain hearings.

And they will be able to suggest lines of questioning for witnesses.

The needs of the community have been at the heart of the inquiry since it was first announced, and that will not be changing.

And Mr Speaker, learning lessons for the future will be a crucial part of Sir Martin Moore-Bick's inquiry.

But it's not the only piece of work looking at how building safety can be improved.

Earlier this year, the Home Secretary and I asked Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out an Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety.

The current system is complex and confusing, a situation that has developed over many years and under successive governments.

Today Dame Judith has published her [interim findings](#), which show there is a need for significant reform.

And I can confirm that the government has accepted all of Dame Judith's recommendations.

We agree with her call for a change in culture and a more effective system that will encourage people to do the right thing and hold to account those who try to cut corners.

Everyone who is part of the system – including government – has an important role to play in delivering this change in culture and mind set.

We fully support this direction of travel that has been signalled in Dame Judith's report.

Achieving culture change will, inevitably, take time.

But while Dame Judith explores these issues further, she has also identified a number of areas where we can also make a start today.

These include work on restructuring guidance and tightening restrictions on the use of desktop studies.

On desktop studies, we will revise the Approved Documents on Fire Safety and commission work to produce a new British Standard on when and how such assessments can be used.

On guidance, we will work quickly with industry experts to complete work on clarifying the Approved Documents on Fire Safety.

More widely, we will consider how the entire suite of guidance on compliance with Building Regulations can be restructured and reordered to make it more user-friendly.

We will work with experts across the sector to explore how this can be done.

Dame Judith recommends that consultation with fire and rescue services be carried out early in the design process and then acted on...

...and that fire safety information on a building should be handed over at the right moment.

We will write to building control bodies to highlight these recommendations.

The government will play its part in making the system work better and fixing the problems.

And I urge the construction industry, the building control bodies, the fire and rescue services, landlords and others to play their parts too.

In January Dame Judith will host a summit on building regulation and fire safety.

It will form the springboard for the next phase of her review, and I encourage leaders from across the sector to take part and help design a better system.

While Dame Judith continues her vital work, we are continuing to support wider work to make buildings safer.

In the past 6 months we have overseen a comprehensive set of fire safety tests on cladding components and systems.

Fire and Rescue Services have visited and checked fire safety in every residential tower that has been identified as having cladding likely to constitute a fire hazard...

... or which they consider a priority for other reasons.

Across the country, we've seen swift action taken to improve fire safety systems and to put in place interim measures where risks are identified.

We have provided detailed advice to local authorities, the housing associations and to private landlords on how to ensure their buildings are safe.

DCLG's Expert Panel has issued advice to building owners about carrying out the necessary work to address the fire risks of certain cladding systems.

There is undoubtedly room for improvement in the way the Building Regulations system works and is managed in the future.

However, Dame Judith makes clear that her report should not be interpreted as meaning that buildings constructed under the existing system are unsafe.

The system needs to be made stronger for the future, but the action taken since June is helping building owners make safer homes today.

Mr Speaker, 6 months ago 71 people lost their lives and hundreds more lost their friends, their loved ones, homes and their possessions.

Six months on, progress is being made.

The situation is moving in the right direction.

But there is still a long, long way to go.

And as long as that's the case, I will not stop working with and fighting for people who have suffered more than any of us could bear.

They must not be forgotten. They will not be forgotten.