

# Statement to Parliament: Statement on Grenfell Tower: September 2017

With permission Mr Speaker I would like to make a statement on the latest progress following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower 12 weeks ago.

Over the summer the Prime Minister, the Housing Minister, the Minister for Policing and Fire and myself have been meeting with the people of north Kensington to make sure that their concerns are being listened to and, more importantly, acted upon.

As a result, the Grenfell Recovery Taskforce has been appointed and started work.

The process of removing control of properties from the tenant management organisation has begun.

The remit of the public inquiry has been set.

A temporary school has been built.

Work is underway on the scaffolding that will surround the tower.

And I would like to pay particular tribute to the incredible team recovering and identifying the remains of those who died.

They are doing an exceptionally difficult job in the most trying of circumstances.

So far they have identified 57 victims, hopefully bringing some measure of comfort to their loved ones.

Obviously we would all like to see this process completed as quickly as possible.

But I'm sure all Hon Members appreciate the need for both accuracy and dignity as well as speed.

My statement today is going to focus on two areas the House has previously shown particular interest in: the rehousing of residents, and our building safety programme.

However, I will be happy to answer questions on any area that Honourable Members wish to cover.

And my door is always open to anyone who wants to discuss the issues in greater detail.

First, rehousing.

151 homes were lost to the fire.

A number of households have said they would like to be re-housed separately, leading to 196 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk needing a new home.

Everyone who was ready to engage with the process was offered a temporary home within three weeks of the disaster.

61 households have accepted an offer and 29 have moved in.

153 households, including all but two of those who suffered a bereavement, have had face-to-face meetings with the team responsible for offering a choice of permanent homes.

164 households have used the online allocation system to look at what permanent accommodation is available.

127 have expressed an interest in one or more properties.

Viewings are continuing this week.

So far 10 households have accepted offers and two have moved in.

21 households that accepted offers on temporary accommodation with housing associations have asked for their tenancies to be made permanent.

This is entirely fair, and the council is working to make it happen.

The number of people who have moved into temporary or permanent homes continues to rise, but I know that the overall total is still low.

One reason for the low take up of temporary home offers is that some residents simply don't want to move twice and they have said it is their preference to stay where they are until a permanent home becomes available.

Meanwhile, residents who have accepted an offer of a permanent home have been given the opportunity to make choices about furniture and so on before they move in.

That obviously takes a little time too.

But we're talking here about peoples' homes and their lives.

What matters to us isn't ticking boxes but working at a pace that suits the needs and circumstances of individual residents.

We don't want to rush anyone.

That's why, at the request of residents, the council extended the "expressions of interest" period for permanent homes.

I don't want to see anyone living in emergency accommodation for any longer than necessary.

But nor do I want to see families forced to move or to make snap decisions

simply so I have better numbers to report at the despatch box.

Turning now to testing and building safety.

Of course, the issues raised by Grenfell extend well beyond Kensington.

Across England there are 173 social housing buildings that are over 18 metres tall and clad with some form of aluminium composite material, or ACM.

In July, the Building Research Establishment began a series of large-scale fire safety tests on ACM cladding systems, comprising both the visible cladding and the internal insulation.

The aim was to establish whether each system, when properly fitted, complied with the relevant Building Regulations guidance, BR135.

Three of the seven cladding systems that were tested were found to meet the criteria set out in BR135.

The other four fell short of what was required.

The cladding systems that passed the test are in use on eight social housing towers.

Systems that failed are in use on 165.

The owners of affected buildings have been given detailed advice drawn up by our independent expert advisory panel.

This covers steps to ensure the safety of residents including, where necessary, removal of cladding.

We have also been holding weekly update calls with local authorities, housing associations and other building owner groups.

We have today published further advice that brings together all the results and the views of the expert panel on the implications for building owners.

We will shortly be meeting with local authorities and housing associations to discuss further steps.

This will include the process by which we will ensure that remedial work is carried out.

We have made the BRE tests available to all private residential building owners too.

While 89 private buildings in England have tested their cladding through those facilities, I continue to urge all private owners of similar blocks to submit samples for testing.

I have also asked housing authorities to ensure the same steps are taken for all private sector residential tower blocks in their areas and to collect the data so that we understand the scale of the issue and we can track the

remedial action.

Inspections carried out since the fire have also highlighted other safety issues related to building design.

For example, structural engineers studying Southwark's Ledbury Estate said that strengthening work may be needed on blocks constructed using the concrete panel system that, in 1968, failed with devastating effect at Ronan Point.

They also raised concerns about cracks that appeared cosmetic but could compromise fire-safety compartmentation.

We have been in contact with Southwark Council and the engineers to discuss these issues, and have engaged the Standing Committee on Structural Safety to advise on their implications.

Meanwhile, all local authorities that own similar buildings have been advised to review their designs and to check whether any strengthening work was properly carried out.

Separately, the British Board of Agrément has told us that, based on their investigations following incidents in Glasgow, some cladding systems may be designed and installed in such a way that they could fail in strong winds.

We're not aware of any injuries caused by this kind of failure.

However, we are taking advice from the independent expert panel and have written to building control bodies to draw their attention to the issues that have been raised.

The wider issues of competence and certification will also feed into Dame Judith Hackitt's review of building safety, the terms of reference for which were announced last week.

Finally, I have also established an Industry Response Group, which will help the sectors required to improve building safety and to coordinate their efforts.

Mr Speaker, for all the work being done, nothing can match the strength and determination shown by people of north Kensington.

We saw it in their initial response.

We've seen it in the dignity and courage that has been shown by survivors.

We saw it in the deeply moving scenes at this year's Notting Hill Carnival.

For me, the biggest sign that the people of Kensington will not be beaten was the amazing results achieved by local children in their GCSEs and A-levels.

I'm thinking particularly of a remarkable young woman named Inês Alves.

Just 16 years old, her family lost their home in the fire but she still

received a string of top grades.

That included an A in chemistry, despite Inês sitting the exam just hours after fleeing the burning tower.

Inês is due to start her A-levels this month.

I wish her all the very best.

Her achievements should be an inspiration to us all.

If a teenage schoolgirl who has suffered unimaginable trauma can do something so incredible, we in this House have no excuse for failing to do everything possible to support the victims of Grenfell and to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again.

I hope all Honourable Members will join me in doing just that.