

Statement to Parliament: Statement on the Grenfell Recovery Taskforce Report

Introduction

With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the independent Recovery Taskforce that is working with the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea in the wake of June's tragic fire at Grenfell Tower.

The people of North Kensington have been failed by those who were supposed to serve them.

They were failed by a system that allowed the fire to happen.

And they were failed once again by a sluggish and chaotic response in the immediate aftermath.

It was clear that if RBKC was to get a grip on the situation and begin to regain the trust of residents it would have to change and change quickly.

That started with a change in leadership of the council, new senior officers, and new support brought in from other councils, and central government.

To ensure that this translated into better service for the victims and people of North Kensington and assure me that the council would be capable of delivery, I announced on 5 July 2017 that I was sending in a specialist independent Taskforce.

The Taskforce is made up of experts in housing, in local government, public services and community engagement.

I deliberately appointed independent-minded individuals who would not hesitate to speak their minds.

I have now received the [first report](#) from the Taskforce, reflecting on its first 9 weeks on the ground.

The report has been shared with the Rt Hon Gentleman opposite.

And I will be placing copies in the library of the House, and it will be published in full on [GOV.UK](#).

Green shoots

It is clear from the report that progress is being made. That much-needed change has happened and continues to happen. That the council today is a very different organisation from the one that failed its people so badly back in June.

And the Taskforce is satisfied that RBKC under its new leadership recognises the challenges it faces and is committed to delivering a comprehensive recovery programme. For that reason, they do not see any practical advantage for a further intervention at this time, which would risk further disruption.

Room for improvement

But while the green shoots are there, the report pulls no punches about the fact that there is still significant room for improvement.

The Taskforce has identified 4 key areas in which the council need to step up.

The first is pace. The speed of delivery needs to be increased, more work needs to be done more quickly.

The second area is innovation. The scale and impact of the fire was unprecedented in recent history but RBKC is relying too much on tried-and-tested solutions that are not up to the task. The council should be much bolder in its response.

The third area is skills. Too many of the officers and councillors working on the response lack specialist training in how to work with a traumatised community. This needs to change.

And the final area, arguably the most important going forward, is a need for greater empathy and emotional intelligence. The people of Grenfell Tower, Grenfell Walk and the wider community have already suffered so much.

Yet the Taskforce has heard too many accounts of that suffering being compounded by bureaucratic processes that are not appropriate. When so many deeply traumatised men, women and children have complex individual needs.

So a greater degree of humanity must be put at the heart of all of RBKC's recovery work.

I have discussed these recommendations with the council's leadership and they have accepted them all without question. Culture change is never quick or easy to achieve in any organisation. But I am in no doubt that the leadership and staff of RBKC genuinely want to do better. It is their community too, and they desperately want to help it heal.

I am particularly encouraged that the council are now drawing on NHS expertise to secure specific training for those front-line staff responsible for providing direct support to the survivors.

I have assured the council that I will continue to support them in building capacity. However, I have also made it clear that my support will not be uncritical or unqualified. I expect to see swift, effective action to deal with all the issues highlighted in the report. I am not taking any options off the table if progress is not made, and I shall continue to monitor the situation closely.

Meetings

Until now, one aspect of that monitoring has involved weekly meetings, chaired by myself, that bring together ministers from across government and senior colleagues from RBKC.

Although these have proved effective, the Taskforce expressed concern that meeting so often is beginning to become counter-productive the time required to prepare properly is cutting into the time available for frontline work.

As a result, the report recommends that we meet less often. I have accepted this recommendation. However, let me reassure the House that this does not mean our priorities are shifting elsewhere or that the level of scrutiny is being reduced.

It is simply a matter of ensuring time and resources are focused to the maximum on those affected by the fire.

Rehousing

One area to which the House knows I have been paying particularly close attention is the rehousing of those who lost their homes in the fire.

Whilst I have always been clear that rehousing must proceed at a pace which represents the needs, wants and situations of survivors, I have been equally adamant that bureaucratic inertia must not add delay.

Clearly some progress is being made.

The latest figures that I have from RBKC are that 122 households out of a current total of 204 have accepted an offer of either temporary or permanent accommodation. 73 of these have now moved in, of which 47 households have moved into temporary accommodation, and 26 households have moved into permanent accommodation.

However, the report is also clear that that the process is simply not moving as quickly as it should.

RBKC's latest figures show that 131 Grenfell households still living in emergency accommodation. Behind every one of these numbers there are human faces.

There can be no doubt that there are families who desperately want a new home but for whom progress has been painfully slow.

Almost 5 months after the fire, this must improve. Responsibility for rehoming ultimately lies with RBKC. However, in central government we cannot shy away from our share of responsibility.

I expect the council, in line with the Taskforce's report, to do whatever is necessary to ensure households can move into settled homes as swiftly as possible.

I will continue to do all I can to ensure this is done.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, when I announced the creation of the Taskforce, I said it would stay in place for as long as it was needed.

Based on this first report, there is still much to be done, so the Taskforce will remain for the foreseeable future. I have asked the Taskforce to ensure that proper action is taken on all the fronts they identify, and to come back to me in the New Year with a further update, which I will, of course, share with this House.

I must of course thank the 4 expert members of the Taskforce for their tireless efforts:

- Aftab Chughtai,
- Javed Khan,
- Jane Scott,
- and Chris Wood.

Mr Speaker, this weekend I read the Right Reverend James Jones's excellent report on the appalling experiences of those who lost loved ones in the Hillsborough disaster.

It's a sobering piece of work reminding us that, and I quote, "the way in which families bereaved through public tragedy are treated by those in authority is in itself a burning injustice".

We saw that all too clearly in the hours and days after the Grenfell fire.

The clock cannot be turned back, the woeful inadequacies of the early response cannot be undone.

But I can say, once again, that as long as I am in public life, I will do all I can to ensure the failures of the past are not repeated and the people of Grenfell Tower get the help and the support they deserve.

The Hillsborough families had to fight for a quarter of a century to get their voices heard. To be taken seriously. To be treated properly by those in authority.

We cannot allow that to happen again. I will not allow it to happen again.

The Public Inquiry established by the Prime Minister will play the major role but for its part, I am confident that the continued work of the Taskforce will also help ensure that the survivors receive the support and the respect they deserve.