

Statement to Parliament: Statement on Grenfell Tower: 20 July 2017

Five weeks have now passed since the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

Nothing that has happened in those 5 weeks will have diminished the grief of those who lost loved ones.

Nothing will have negated the trauma of those who lost their homes.

But across the public sector...

...in local and central government, in the emergency services, in hospitals, in schools and more...

...dedicated public servants have been doing all they can to deal with the aftermath and help the community to recover.

Over the past 5 weeks, the government has endeavoured to keep the House up-to-date with these developments.

This is the third oral statement I've made on the subject.

The House has also heard from the Prime Minister and the Housing Minister, who also answered questions in Westminster Hall before Parliament formally returned.

There has been a full debate in the Commons, 4 written statements, and a number of letters that have been sent to all Members.

My aim today is to provide an update before the House rises, and another opportunity for Hon Members to ask questions.

And I'd also like to let the House know exactly what action we'll be taking over the summer.

Victims

The Police continue to list 80 people as either dead or missing presumed dead.

39 victims have so far been formally identified, with 39 inquests opened by the coroner and adjourned pending the public inquiry and police investigation.

2 adults remain in hospital.

I know that some local residents remain concerned that the number of people in the tower on the night has been underestimated.

I would continue to urge anyone with further information to come forward.

We've been very clear that we don't mind if those affected were subletting or have immigration issues.

All we care about is getting to the truth.

Rehoming

Turning to the rehoming programme, everyone who lost their home in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk has been made at least 1 offer of good quality, fully furnished temporary accommodation in the local area.

As of 10am this morning, 35 of these have been accepted and 10 families have moved in.

Those numbers are slightly down on the figures that were published recently as some people have changed their minds, as they are perfectly entitled to do.

Where residents have turned down an offer we are finding suitable alternatives to offer them.

Where residents aren't yet ready to engage with the process, they don't want to make a decision right now, or they would rather wait for a permanent home to be offered, we will respect that.

At DCLG questions this week, the quality of the accommodation being offered was raised.

I'd like to repeat the Housing Minister's offer to the opposition front bench to visit some of these homes so they can inspect them for themselves.

I don't believe they've yet taken us up on that offer so far, but it still stands.

In the longer term, we're continuing to seek out and secure suitable permanent accommodation.

The first such homes for Grenfell families will be ready within days, and specialist teams are ready to start matching them to families and start making offers.

RBKC / Recovery Taskforce

At the town hall, we're continuing preparations for the return of control of the recovery effort from Gold Command to Kensington and Chelsea council.

I've spoken at length with the new leader of the council and been very clear that Gold won't hand over the reins until it's clear that the council is ready and able to cope.

We saw last night the very raw anger that some in the community still feel towards the council.

It's entirely understandable – as the Prime Minister herself has said, the initial response from the local authority was simply not good enough.

There's not a lot of trust there, not a lot of confidence.

And that's why, once Kensington and Chelsea council takes over the recovery operation, it will do so under the supervision of the independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce.

It is important to stress that the role of the Taskforce is not to investigate the causes of the fire or to apportion blame – that's for the public inquiry and for the police investigation.

Rather, it is there to provide advice and support and see to it that council does the job that's required of it.

We're in the process of finalising the Taskforce membership, and I hope to make an announcement soon.

I can confirm that the handover from Gold to Kensington and Chelsea will not happen until the Taskforce is up and running.

Other towers / Testing

Away from Kensington, Madam Deputy Speaker, the fire safety testing programme continues.

We now believe that no more than 208 local authority and housing association residential blocks over 18 metres tall have been fitted with aluminium composite material cladding.

189 of these have had cladding samples tested by the Building Research Establishment, they've been tested by proxy or they have already had taken their cladding down.

None of them have passed the limited combustibility test.

Samples from a further 12 towers have been submitted this week and they are now being tested.

The BRE has yet to see samples from 7 towers, all of them managed by housing associations.

A month after the tests began, this is simply unacceptable.

And I expect to see them all submitting samples without any further delay.

On the advice of the Independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, the BRE is now undertaking system testing that will help establish how combinations of different types of ACM panels with different types of insulation behave in a fire.

An Explanatory Note, setting out the process and the timetable for further

advice, will be published very shortly.

It has taken a short time to design and set up the test, but we expect the first results to be available next week.

As soon as results are available we will share them first with local authorities and housing associations who have confirmed that their properties are clad in the same combination of materials that are used in that test.

We will also, of course, share them with the local fire and rescue service.

The results will provide further information that building owners and their professional advisers can use to take decisions about what, if any, remedial action is required.

Although legal responsibility for fire safety enforcement lies with local authorities, I do have the power to direct an authority to consider these test results as part of their duty to keep housing conditions under review.

If necessary, I will not hesitate to use this power, which could lead to enforcement action being taken against a landlord if a fire risk is not dealt with.

I do hope it will not come to that.

Public inquiry

Moving on to the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick is continuing his preparatory work.

I welcome his decision to extend by 2 weeks the consultation period for the terms of reference.

While we're all anxious for the inquiry to get underway, it is important that the remit is appropriate and that everyone affected has had an opportunity to share their views.

Updates over the summer

With the House due to rise later today this is the last statement I'll be making before the summer recess.

But work on the recovery effort and testing regime will obviously continue at pace while Parliament isn't sitting.

And my department will be writing regular letters to all Members to keep them abreast of progress.

Thanks to MPs / conclusion

And finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to pay tribute to the many Members on both sides of the House who have assisted with the emergency response and recovery effort so far.

They've provided insight, support, scrutiny and a voice for your constituents, both in public and behind the scenes.

The weeks, months and even years ahead will be unimaginably difficult for those that have been caught up in the fire and those who have lost family and friends.

There's nothing any of us can do to bring back those who died or erase the trauma of that terrible night.

But I'm sure the whole House shares my determination to take care of those that have been affected by the fire...to make sure the truth comes out and that justice is done, and to see to it that a tragedy like this never ever happens again.

[News story: Unions suspend strike action on Southern Rail](#)

ASLEF and the RMT suspend planned strike action on Southern Rail on 1, 2 and 4 August 2017.

ASLEF and the RMT have suspended planned strike action on Southern Rail on 1, 2 and 4 August and lifted a ban on overtime and rest day working.

This follows nine repeated offers by Transport Ministers to meet with ASLEF and the RMT if they called off strike action, beginning in November 2016. The Transport Secretary wrote to the unions with this offer most recently on Tuesday 18 July.

The Transport Secretary will meet with ASLEF and the RMT shortly to discuss a solution that ensures passengers receive the high quality rail services that they deserve.

Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said:

I remain committed to a strong future for the railways and one where the number of staff is likely to increase. I hope we can discuss ways in which we can maximise the potential of new technology and how it can improve services to customers.

News story: David Davis' closing remarks at the end of the second round of EU exit negotiations in Brussels

Thank you Michel. Thank you for your contribution and indeed your team's constructive talks this week.

On Monday we agreed to get down to serious business. But before turning to the substance I want to reiterate the four core principles that continue to guide the United Kingdom's approach.

First, we continue to engage constructively, as a full and responsible Member State.

Second, we continue to work hard and at pace. We had 98 civil servants here this week.

Third, we negotiate for every nation and region of the United Kingdom. Our goal is to secure a deal that works for all parts of the country.

And finally, we will keep Parliament and the public informed as the negotiations unfold.

Which moves me onto the substance.

Overall, I am encouraged by the progress we have made on understanding each other's position on citizens' rights; the financial settlement; the first meetings of sub-groups on separation issues, and on the issues around Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Citizens' rights

Since the first round of negotiations, the UK has published its approach to citizens' rights.

The talks this week have demonstrated that this was both a fair and serious offer.

I am pleased by the progress we have made.

We have looked at each other's proposals in depth and identified many concrete areas where we agree as well as areas where there will be further discussion, which will be a priority for the next round as Michel has said.

We have also agreed to publishing a joint paper today that sets out the many areas of convergence in our proposals, and the areas we need to prioritise for future discussion in our future rounds.

Michel listed a number of the areas which require that future discussion and

I won't reiterate them, I'll add to them: issues like voters' rights, posted workers and of course as he said the need for shared certainty. We agreed on the need for certainty on the part of citizens both the EU and the UK, we obviously have different views on how we achieve that.

Financial settlement

On financial settlement, we both recognise the importance of sorting out the obligations we have to one another, both legally, and in the spirit of mutual cooperation.

We have had robust but constructive talks this week.

Clearly there is a lot left to talk about, and further work before we can resolve this. Ultimately getting to a solution will require flexibility from both sides.

But as Michel said, we shouldn't expect incremental progress in every round.

Ireland

On Ireland and Northern Ireland, our coordinators – this is a discussion rather than a working group – have had a good discussion.

Both sides remain committed to the Good Friday agreement and again as Michel said, achieving a flexible and imaginative solution to address the unique circumstances around the border, and particularly on the north/south dimension of the agreement.

These include the mechanisms we have discussed to preserve the Common Travel Area and the rights associated with it. Rights laid down of course in a British Act of Parliament as well as in part to the Amsterdam Treaty.

Separation issues

On separation issues, we have made progress on a range of issues, Michel mentioned most of them: Euratom; legal cases pending before the European Court of Justice and administrative procedures before Union institutions; and of course goods on the market.

These discussions have laid important groundwork for progress in the next round.

Conclusion

All in all, the second round of negotiations have given us a lot to be positive about.

And they have also highlighted the need for both sides to demonstrate a dynamic and flexible approach in the way we approach these challenges.

We have conducted this round constructively and at pace, and I hope this is a model we can continue going forward.

To coin a phrase Michel, the clock is ticking.

I came here saying that it was important that we now made progress, identifying the differences so we could deal with them, and finding the similarities so we could reinforce them.

And this week, I think we have done just that.

Thank you.

[Press release: HMRC's Welsh language customer services team to remain in Porthmadog](#)

The HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) team offering tax services for customers in Welsh is to remain in Porthmadog.

HMRC has confirmed that the 17 people currently based at Ty Moelwyn will be co-locating with colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP's) Thedford House site in early 2018.

This move allows HMRC to keep its Welsh language team in Porthmadog and also enables both departments to explore how they might work together in the future to provide Welsh language customer services.

Rachel McLean, Director General of Customer Services, HMRC said:

This move is vital to the success of our plans to continue to provide Welsh language customer services from Porthmadog. It will also allow us to explore how we might develop those services with both DWP and other government departments in the future.

UK Government Minister Guto Bebb said:

I am delighted that we have been able to secure the future for this vitally important UK Government office, which provides an essential service for Welsh speakers.

Several UK Government departments in Wales have worked hard to make this happen and it shows what we can achieve when we work together to reach a joint solution.

This demonstrates the UK Government's commitment to the Welsh

language and to ensuring that we maximise the benefits that come from co-locating Government offices to provide the best possible service for the taxpayer.

Fiona Jones, Work Services Director for Jobcentre Plus Wales, said:

We look forward to welcoming HMRC colleagues into Thedford House from early next year, and sharing our delivery experiences with them. Delivery of Welsh language customer services is a growing part of our jobcentres and service centres across Wales.

Notes for Editors:

1. The Modernisation Programme includes investment in new online services, data analytics, new compliance techniques, new skills and new ways of working, to make it easier for the honest majority of customers to pay their tax, including by improving customer service, and harder for the dishonest minority to cheat the system. The changes have already resulted in over 80 per cent of people filing their self-assessment returns online and given customers new, simple ways to check their payments, make changes or find answers to questions.
2. HMRC's workforce in Wales is currently spread throughout five offices, which range in size from around 2,750 people to fewer than 10.
3. Ty Moelwyn was originally scheduled to close in the 2019-20 financial year.
4. HMRC will be closing five offices in Wales in total including Ty Moelwyn. Ty Nant in Swansea and Ty Glas and Brunel House in Cardiff will close in 2019-20, although there will be no estate changes until the Regional Centre in Cardiff opens. Plas Gororau in Wrexham will remain open until 2020-21.
5. We announced the locations for the regional centres in November 2015.
6. HMRC is phasing in the moves over 10 years to allow staff time to make choices for their future and reduce the number of possible redundancies.
7. The high-level plans for transforming HMRC were first shared with its people in November 2015. Since then, HMRC has held around 2,000 events across the UK, talking to colleagues about how it is changing and involving them in the discussions.

[News story: Securing value for money for students and taxpayers](#)

Universities Minister Jo Johnson has today (20 July 2017) set out plans to provide better value for money from the higher education system for students and taxpayers.

In a [speech](#) to university leaders and representative bodies at the think tank Reform, the Minister outlined proposals for all universities to draw up stronger contracts with their students, which clearly set out what a student can expect from a university education.

Jo Johnson also called on the sector to put an end to the upward spiral in vice chancellor pay. He insisted that universities publicly justify any pay exceeding that of the Prime Minister. He said that the Office for Students – the sector’s new regulator – will be expected to address this issue.

Universities Minister, Jo Johnson said:

When students and taxpayers invest so heavily in our higher education system, value for money should be guaranteed. Yet, I am still hearing students say that their course is poor quality.

This is not good enough, especially when some vice chancellors take home a wage that in some cases exceeds that of the Prime Minister.

So, on top of the government’s reforms through the Teaching Excellence Framework, I am insisting on effective consumer protection for students and calling for an end to spiralling vice chancellor pay.

The minister also launched the next stage of the [Teaching Excellence Framework \(TEF\)](#). A pilot is expected to be launched in the autumn that will assess teaching at an individual subject level. These pilots represent the next phase in the TEF’s development, and will support students to make better informed decisions between courses and institutions.

He also set out that the next round of institutional TEF assessments will incorporate new analysis of graduate outcomes to help students decide where to study based on the careers of previous graduates.

Jo Johnson defended the current system of funding universities sustainably through subsidised, income-dependent loans which mean graduates only pay back what they can afford.