



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Members of the House of Lords

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14th July 2017

My Lords,

GRENFELL TOWER – RESPONSE TO FURTHER QUESTIONS

I would like to thank Noble Lords present at the all Peers session on Grenfell Tower and those that contributed to the debates on Monday 26 June and 3 July.

The Grenfell Tower fire was a terrible disaster on a level not seen in this country since the war. It has caused unimaginable suffering and should never have happened. I share noble Lords concern for those affected and their wish to ensure that they are receiving the support they need to rebuild their lives.

During considered discussion noble Lords raised questions on a range of issues associated with the Grenfell Tower disaster. These questions add to those answered in the letter issued by the Leader on 28 June, following the previous debate on Grenfell Tower. I will attempt to provide answers to the additional questions that have emerged.

Rehousing

Understandably, the issue of rehousing residents was a priority for discussion and Noble Lords asked whether residents would receive benefits on the same terms if they are rehoused in potentially larger accommodation. I can assure you that there will be relaxed benefit rules for anyone affected by the Grenfell Tower fire and staff at the Department for Work and Pensions are handling people's claims with sensitivity, understanding and flexibility. I can confirm that no household will be charged more in rent when they are rehoused permanently than they were previously charged.

I was asked whether the accommodation will be fully furnished and what funding will be available to help residents purchase new furniture. I can confirm that permanent accommodation will be of good quality, fully furnished, big enough for each family and not in a tower block. In addition, every household whose home was destroyed as a result of the fire will receive a guaranteed initial £5,500 payment from the £5m discretionary fund to help meet immediate needs. This money can be used to cover loss of possessions as well as for other needs such as funerals and emergency supplies. These payments will not affect other benefits.

Noble Lords also asked how quickly residents are being rehoused into permanent accommodation. The Government committed that by Wednesday 5 July all residents of Grenfell Tower or Grenfell Walk will have been offered self-contained temporary accommodation in Kensington and Chelsea or a neighbouring borough. On Tuesday 11 July, 159 families had been offered temporary accommodation whilst permanent accommodation, on equal terms, is found. Every family that has been ready to talk to the housing team has been offered a temporary home.

Making permanent accommodation offers to residents whose homes were destroyed in the fire will take longer, but progress has been made. We have already announced a new block of social housing that will provide 68 new homes in Kensington Row. We are urgently working with a number of developers to secure similar properties. Either in Kensington and Chelsea or very close to North Kensington, so families can stay in the same area.

Fire safety checks

There were a variety of questions in both sessions about the fire safety checks. Baroness Donaghy asked what is being done to check the safety of electrical appliances. The Metropolitan Police have confirmed that the Grenfell fire was started by a fridge freezer, however an investigation is ongoing.

I would like to assure you that the Government takes its responsibilities on the safety of electrical products very seriously. In addition to maintaining stringent consumer product regulations to provide confidence and protection to consumers, the Government has invested in the Fire Kills campaign and Electrical Fire Safety Week. These are run in close partnership with fire and rescue authorities in England and promote a range of domestic fire safety messages, including on electrical fire safety. This helps to ensure householders take appropriate action to prevent accidental fires and understand how best they can protect themselves and their families. The Government also supports the Register My Appliance initiative, run by the Association of Manufacturers of Domestic Electrical Appliances. This is designed to improve recall rates and ensure a greater number of faulty products can be traced and either repaired or removed from homes.

Lord Campbell-Savours asked whether the Government and local authorities have considered the appointment of fire monitors for vulnerable blocks to alert residents in the case of fire. The Government has provided a testing process for local authorities, housing associations and private sector landlords free of charge for buildings over 18 metres in height that have Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding. Alongside this the Government wrote to local authorities and Housing Associations on 22 June providing advice on immediate, interim mitigating measures for landlords where their buildings are undergoing tests or where it has been determined that ACM cladding is unlikely to meet the limited combustibility requirements of the current Building Regulations guidance. This includes a range of measures including notifying the fire and rescue service and carrying out fire safety checks to the building. It also suggests the provision of a fire watch by appropriately trained patrolling security officers/wardens.

Lord Jopling suggested that officials at all levels of Government make use of the Emergency Planning College at Easingwold in North Yorkshire. I welcome and agree with this suggestion and can report that the college trains in excess of 7,000 thousand students annually, at its base in North Yorkshire and at venues across the UK and overseas. These students are drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors, across the span from junior emergency service officers and local officials to the upper realms of government. The Resilience and

Emergencies Division in my department has a strong and ongoing relationship with the College and one that I expect to grow as we continue to ensure our preparedness for future emergencies.

Noble Lords also asked about checks to student residential blocks. I can confirm that the Higher Education sector is taking this issue very seriously. Jointly with Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Department for Education has written to the HEFCE-funded Higher Education Institutions and to Alternative Providers of Higher Education, requesting information on fire safety arrangements and any student accommodation buildings that may require further investigation. The Government is also working closely with Universities UK and Guild Higher Education – the sector representative bodies – along with the Association of Directors of Estates.

Noble Lords also asked what work the Government is doing to make sure privately owned buildings are checking their cladding. The Government has asked all landlords of high-rise buildings (including those in the private sector) with ACM cladding to send samples for a screening test at the Building Research Establishment facility, which has been made available to them. Samples from private landlords have now been received and tested.

We have also asked all landlords to follow the advice we issued on 22 June and take immediate interim mitigating actions to ensure resident safety, including checking insulation and other materials that form the façade of their buildings against relevant requirements. This should be done as quickly as possible in order to reassure tenants or identify if remedial measures need to be taken. The Government has also appointed an independent Expert Advisory Panel to advise on any further immediate safety steps that should be taken.

Furthermore, local authorities have strong powers under the Housing Act 2004 to require that building owners, landlords, freeholders and/or managing agents make necessary improvements to a property where it contains potentially serious risks to the health and safety of the occupants. Local Fire and Rescue Authorities are responsible for enforcing compliance with the provisions of Fire Safety Orders, which apply to all non-domestic premises, including the common parts of blocks of flats, and do so on the basis of a locally determined risk based inspection programme.

Schools

Noble Lords asked about the schooling arrangements for children affected by the fire. The Government has guaranteed to re-house people as close as practically possible to where they previously lived so that they can continue to access the same public services including their local school. Where rehousing requires a new school to be identified a place will be found as a priority and will be considered together as part of the rehousing process. The Government will also provide any necessary financial assistance to families who have been rehoused so children and their parents do not incur any extra costs in travelling to their local school.

Mental health

Noble Lords at the all Peers session asked about the provision of on-going mental health support. This provision is incredibly important in helping the community to overcome the terrible experiences they have witnessed. I can confirm that all affected schools have been assigned a 24/7 contact in the Department for Education and, where it is needed, schools are able to access psychology, counselling and mental health services for pupils and staff.

The Department for Education has also been in touch with a London based group of educational psychologists who are supporting the local Education Psychology team. Support offered so far has also included meeting school staff and parents to offer guidance on supporting children and offering specialist support for children with autism or learning difficulties. There have also been NHS mental health staff, nurses, care managers providing direct support to residents at the Westway Centre. NHS London is also providing specialist long-term bereavement support for the families who have lost loved ones.

Fire safety and building regulations

Lord Shipley asked about the significance of “wet” as opposed to “dry” cladding in relation to fire safety. There are a large number of different external insulation systems, with various combinations of insulation material and weatherproofing. The weatherproofing can be a site-applied render system (wet) or a pre-formed panel system (dry). Both render systems and preformed panels can be used to weatherproof all types of insulation. There are numerous types of render material and materials that can be used in preformed panels. Neither wet nor dry cladding is inherently safer in terms of fire performance.

It is important to note that the Building Regulations and accompanying guidance contained in the Approved Documents do not specify what materials to use. They set out performance objectives that apply equally to all forms of construction. The requirements of each situation will mean the fire, structural, insulation, moisture and durability performance will demand different solutions for different buildings.

Noble Lords also asked whether my Department had received a report from the Association of British Insurers in May. I can report that the only relevant correspondence which the Department has been able to find is the response which the ABI sent to the consultation on the Housing White Paper, which was published earlier in the year. The ABI response did refer to issues of fire safety amongst many other points. The Prime Minister has said that we will need to look at wider issues, informed by any recommendations that the independent inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire will make. In the interim, we have set up an expert panel to advise us on any immediate steps that should be taken to ensure fire safety.

Immigration

A question was raised on whether the Home Office will provide a guarantee not to follow up on immigration enquiries on the victims of the fire. The Government recognises that this is hugely important in ensuring that survivors without lawful status are not inhibited from coming forward or receiving help and support. We have said we will not use this tragic incident as a reason to carry out immigration checks on those involved and those providing vital information to identify victims. We will also make sure that all victims, irrespective of their immigration status, will be able to access the services they need, including accommodation and healthcare. The Home Office, on 5 July, announced the arrangements for residents with unresolved immigration status who have lost their homes in the Grenfell Tower fire and meet the eligibility criteria of the targeted policy. These residents will be granted a period of lawful residence in the UK outside the immigration rules for twelve months with full access to relevant support and assistance. Those granted such leave can apply for further leave under other provisions of the Immigration Rules, if they want to stay here after 12 months. This will depend on the individual circumstances of each case, and on what other applications the individuals concerned have submitted.

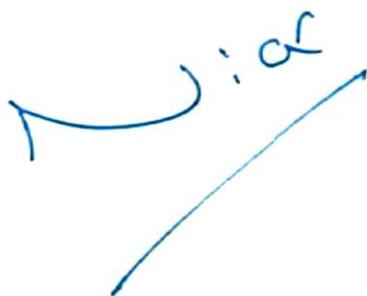
Individuals who wish to do so can speak directly to Home Office staff based in the Westway Centre, close to Grenfell Tower, or call 0300 222 0000 in order to arrange a call back from specialist immigration staff concerning passport, visa and immigration queries.

Public Inquiry

Lord Shutt of Greetland asked whether the Public Inquiry will be run under the full rigour of the Inquiries Act 2005. As was referenced in the letter from the Leader I can confirm that the Inquiry will be conducted under the 2005 Act which will ensure that it leaves no stone unturned in uncovering the causes of this disaster.

I hope that these answers provide noble Lords with reassurance about the Government's ongoing approach to this disaster. As I said at the all Peers meeting, I would be pleased to hold another session at a suitable time in the coming weeks.

I am placing a copy of this letter in the House Library.



LORD BOURNE OF ABERYSTWYTH