

Neil Gibbins Neil Gibbins QFSM FIFireE, Chair of the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety - an open letter to the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Corporate Responsibility

19 July 2017

Dear Margot,

I was appointed to chair the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety in October 2016, shortly after a terrible fire in a block of flats in Shepherds Bush involving a faulty tumble dryer. You set me, and the Working Group, the challenge of coming up with recommendations to improve product safety and recalls to avoid similar incidents occurring in future. At that time, none of us could imagine the tragic events at Grenfell Tower we would see unfold less than a year later. The remit you set for the Working Group, and our recommendations and actions have never been more relevant or important than now.

Our work has built on the work started by Lynn Faulds Wood in her review of product recalls and the subsequent Recall Review Steering Group set up to consider the issues raised in that report. I am grateful for the ongoing support, energy, expertise and passion of the members of the Working Group which has helped us to take this work forward at pace.

The Working Group provided you with interim recommendations in December 2016 and embarked on a programme of work to take a number of these forward. At the beginning of April this year, you received our report which set out our recommendations and outlined the actions taken by the Working Group to make tangible improvements to the current system. Since that report was submitted, the Working Group has continued to make progress on its workstreams, most notably in relation to the development of a code of practice on product recalls and safety. This work is being led by the British Standards Institution (BSI) and is progressing well. We intend to undertake a public consultation on the draft code of practice at the end of September 2017.

I believe that the code of practice will lead to a more pro-active approach to identifying and managing emerging risks, and that the key issue for the Government is to ensure that there is sufficient central technical and scientific capability to respond to product safety issues and crises of national relevance.

We were all shocked and horrified by the terrible events at Grenfell Tower last month. When you and I met the day after the fire, we agreed that the Working Group should have the opportunity to reflect upon our report and consider if there were further issues that should be addressed or priorities reassessed. We agreed that, although the final investigation and public inquiry may take time to conclude, we should consider what further action could be taken in the short and medium term to strengthen the system and give consumers peace of mind about the safety of the products in their homes.

The Working Group met on 22 June 2017, and we welcomed your attendance at that meeting to hear and participate in our discussions. The Working Group agreed that, in view of the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, it was right to reflect upon our report and consider if there were further issues that should be addressed or priorities

reassessed. They also agreed that their original report remained relevant – it has identified the key issues in the current product safety system which need addressing in order to ensure that the UK has an effective system of ensuring the safety of consumer products, now and in the future.

Since then, it has been identified that the fire started in a Hotpoint fridge freezer, but the exact reason why the appliance caught fire is still under investigation. It may be some time before the investigations conclude. Although there may be some further information that comes to light where the Working Group have further views and ideas, our existing recommendations already deal with the systemic issues on product safety.

The work that is being undertaken by the Working Group to promote the registration of appliances, understand consumer responses to safety information and recall communications, and promote more and stronger Primary Authority relationships between Local Authorities and manufacturers are important steps towards a strengthened product safety framework.

In light of the Grenfell Tower fire, you have asked the Working Group to consider a number of further issues. These are:

- whether the Government should go further on a single central register for product recalls and whether companies should be required to notify Government of any recalls and to place their recalls on GOV.UK;
- any further views from the Group, including on whether in revisiting the recommendations there is anything more that Government should action from the Lynn Faulds Wood review;
- options and approaches for encouraging registration of products at point of sale to support traceability of products where a safety issue is identified;
- whether the existing standards for white goods regarding capacitors and fire resistant materials are sufficient, and whether there are international comparators that we should explore, including EU and US standards; and
- the Group's views on the merits of making safety checks on white goods used in tower blocks.

Members of the Working Group are currently feeding me their views and I will provide an update on our thinking, and progress on workstreams underway by the Autumn.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Gibbins