LINES TO TAKE – CAMBERWELL FIRE

Q. Where was the fire?

- Fire at 65, Lakanal House, Havil Street, Camberwell - a 14 storey block of purpose built flats on the afternoon of Friday 3 July.

Q. What are the known facts about the Incident

- London Fire Brigade (LFB) were called at 16.18 hrs.
- Three people were found dead at the scene and, although fire-fighters carried out multiple rescues, a further three people died in hospital.
- LFB report that 15 people were taken to hospital suffering from the effects of smoke inhalation and burns.
- This is a tragic incident. My deep sympathy and support to all involved.
- It is premature to speculate on the reason for the fire. We must await the inquiry by the police and LFEPA, and obviously must look to learn any lessons.

Q. What will be the scope of the police investigations? How long will they take?

- I've no doubt the investigations will be carried out quickly and thoroughly.
- This is a complex fire and we would not want to bring pressure for the investigations to be finalised without all relevant factors being carefully considered.
- The key interest of the police will be establishing whether a crime has been committed (i.e. murder or arson).

Q. What will be the scope of the fire investigation?

- This will be undertaken by the London Fire Brigade and will primarily seek to establish the cause of the fire.

[If pressed: in this instance the investigation is likely to extend to why the fire spread so quickly.]

Q. How long will it take?

- It is too early to speculate as to how long the investigation will take.
- As this is a fire of special interest my department will also be asking the Building Research Establishment (BRE) to investigate issues relating to the fire spread in this building.

Q. Will there be a public inquiry?

- It is important that we do not speculate about the need for a public inquiry. We need to allow the enquiries by the police and the fire authority to do their job. The Coroner's Inquest will also look closely at

the facts surrounding the deaths and I have full confidence will establish all we need to know about this terrible incident.

Q. What are the causes of the fire?

- It would be unwise to speculate. We must await the outcome of the police and fire investigations.
- The fire is subject to investigation and the exact sequence of events is not yet clear.
- At this stage we therefore need to concentrate on making sure that the bereaved families and friends and all those who have had to move out of their home as a result of the fire are given the necessary support at this difficult time.

Q. Why has this happened - what have you done to ensure fire safety in blocks of flats?

- Fire safety in individual domestic properties is generally a matter for the occupier of a premise, but legislation exists to govern fire safety in certain types of residential accommodation, such as Houses in Multiple Occupation, other types of shared housing and also the common areas of blocks of flats.

Q: Shouldn't fire-fighters have evacuated people immediately?

- This is an operational matter for the fire brigade at the scene.
- How and why the fire spread as it did in this instance will be a key area for the fire investigations to consider.

If pressed: Generally, in buildings such as these where access and escape routes are limited, fire-fighters use a 'defend in place' strategy and only evacuate those directly affected or at risk. This is because they expect the building to have been constructed in such a way to prevent the fire spreading to other flats – through effective compartment and fire resisting cells.

Q. What are you doing to help those who have been left homeless by this?

- The department has been in touch with LB Southwark to offer assistance on housing issues, and in particular around the re-housing of families directly affected by the fire.
- The Homes and Communities Agency will also be working closely with Southwark, offering ongoing support over the coming weeks

Q. What advice should we give to tenants in such blocks of flats?

- Tenants will want to ensure that
  - they have a working smoke alarm which is tested regularly;
  - that doors are kept closed wherever possible; and

- every household should have an emergency escape plan.
- Anyone who is concerned can seek advice from their local FRA and can also look at our Firekills website (www.firekills.directgov.co.uk)

Q: Do we know how many buildings of this type there are in the overall social housing stock?

- We don't know how many of these buildings there are around the country and we don't know how many of them there are in the social housing stock.
- It is likely that more of them are in the social housing sector than in private ownership but we have no centrally held information to confirm this.

Q. Where these buildings are in the social sector how can we be sure they are safe?

- There was a particular set of circumstances that led to this fire.
- The investigation needs to look at those circumstances and we need to learn any lessons that arise from that.

If Pressed: We are not aware of any particular safety issues with this design that have arisen in the past

Q. What will you do if it is shown that these buildings are unsafe and social tenants have to be moved out of them?

- We need to wait and learn the lessons that emerge from this fire.
- Should these investigations raise wider concerns we will need to consider the implications of that at that time.

Q: Can you still build blocks of flats with a single stair?

- Yes you can, subject to meeting very specific fire safety provisions in relation to maximum travel distances [7.5m max between entrance doors to flats and the stairs] within the building and ensuring an adequate level of fire separation is provided between the individual flats and the common areas.

Q: Do the Building Regulations ask for smoke detectors and fire sprinklers in blocks of flats?

- Mains operated smoke detectors have formed part of the provisions that make up our Building Regulations since 1991.
- Since 2006, where a block of flats is over 30m in height (typically 10 storeys and above) then fire sprinklers should be fitted within the building.