

10.14 pm

- The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma)

I start by thanking the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for calling for this timely debate. As he said, he is a former firefighter and was responsible for fire safety when he was a Minister, so he speaks from a position of knowledge and experience. This House is rightly taking a very strong interest in the tragic events at Grenfell Tower, and we want to ensure that the lessons are learned for the future. This disaster should never have happened, and we are absolutely determined to ensure that this never, ever happens again in our country.

Last week, I attended a community safety partnership meeting with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), and we were both deeply moved by the bravery and dignity that has been demonstrated by those directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. I pay tribute to all Members here on both sides of the House who have helped and have made a contribution, particularly the new hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for the work that she has been doing locally to support her community. Of course, all of us need to do everything we can to help those who have suffered during this tragedy to rebuild their lives, and that is what the Government are doing. We have put in place measures to help people to get back on their feet, but we absolutely understand that that will take a long time in many cases. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse outlined, it is equally important that the questions that are being asked by those who have been directly affected are answered. We need to understand what went wrong and fix it for the future.

The hon. Gentleman has raised several extremely good points, and I will try to address them as I go through my speech. In the spirit of co-operation, however, we need to work together across the House on this issue, so I would like to meet him and colleagues on the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group. If he has time tomorrow, I would be happy to sit down and have a discussion with him and those colleagues. It is important that we work together, and I want to demonstrate that there is a clear willingness on the part of the Government to ensure that that happens.

We will do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of the causes of this disaster. There will be a full public inquiry, as the Prime Minister has announced, and it will have an independent chair. We want to be clear that the inquiry should leave absolutely no stone unturned to get to the truth. We will question everyone who has evidence to provide. We want to ensure that the survivors and the victims are consulted on the inquiry's terms of reference and that the victims are able to be represented, so the Government will cover the costs of legal representation. That has been an issue in previous public inquiries, which is why we have been clear about coming forward and making that commitment.

- Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)

I appreciate what the Minister is saying about the public inquiry. Can he give any information this evening about when we are likely to have an announcement about the chair or some idea of the timetable, when it is likely to start and over what period it will report?

- Alok Sharma

I completely understand that colleagues want to have that announcement as soon as possible, and the Government are well aware of that. I hope that there will be an announcement soon and that the work will start. When Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made his statement earlier today, there was a discussion about how long an inquiry report would take. Clearly, it will be up to the chair to set out the full terms and to determine how to take things forward, but we would ideally want to see an early interim report.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, and I will come on to talk about the panel that the Secretary of State outlined in his statement earlier today. However, the BRAC actually meets several times a year, and I understand from my officials that the most recent meeting was actually last Thursday. The committee talked about the Grenfell Tower tragedy and how its work could have an input into what the Government and the Department are doing but, of course, as the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government also clearly outlined, the committee's scope is more limited. He has talked about a panel that has a wider remit, and I will outline what that panel will be looking at.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, there was also a discussion about the coroner's recommendations following the fire at Lakanal House in 2009. The Government took action in a number of areas following that fire. In particular, DCLG provided funding to enable the Local Government Association, in partnership with the housing sector and enforcement authorities, to publish new fire safety guidance for purpose-built flat blocks in 2011. That guidance is still current, and hon. Members may well have seen the letter my Department sent to housing associations and local authorities on 18 June, which clearly referenced that guidance. Of course, I urge all housing providers to ensure that they are following that guidance.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to sprinklers, and I will talk specifically about sprinklers in schools. In April 2011, in response to a coroner's report following a fire-related incident in Southampton, the Department wrote to local authorities and other registered housing providers to ask them to actively consider the recommendation to install sprinkler systems in their existing properties, and he is absolutely right that that is the same recommendation that came from the coroner in the case of the Lakanal House fire.

The hon. Gentleman raised issues with the regime for testing white goods, and the report from the working group on product recalls and safety will be published shortly. The group's recommendation for a strengthened product recall information site has been put into effect, and the British Standards Institution has been commissioned to establish a very clear protocol for product recalls. In this particular case, we know the brand of the product that caused the fire at Grenfell, and obviously my colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are already in touch with the manufacturer.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned sprinklers in schools, and the current guidance from the Department for Education strongly recommends sprinklers. The Department for Education was going to consult on language that might have weakened that recommendation, but of course that has been withdrawn. It said, "We are currently in contact with schools and all bodies responsible for safety in schools. We are instructing them to carry out checks to identify any buildings which may require further investigation... It has always been the case that sprinklers must be installed in school buildings if a risk assessment identifies them as necessary." Of course that is determined on a case-by-case basis.

The hon. Gentleman said that the coroner's report on Lakanal House addressed part B of the building regulations.

- Jim Fitzpatrick

My apologies. I should have said that the vice-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon), and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), are both here, so I kindly invite them to our meeting tomorrow, if possible. I did not question the Minister about when BRAC's meetings were, but what he says about the advice on sprinklers in schools is consistent. It is not the guidance that was issued in 2008, but I will not quibble now. I welcome the meeting, where we can clarify the matter with him and his colleagues in the Department for Education. I welcome that there seems to be some movement in the Government's position on that.

- Alok Sharma

I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I am of course happy to have a detailed discussion on all these points with him tomorrow—if that is possible for him.

The coroner's report recommended that the Government look to simplify the guidance on part B of the building regulation. Although we have been working on the guidance, I accept that the work has not been completed. In the light of what has happened at Grenfell, we are going to have to take a very thorough look at the regulatory regime. That is precisely what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his statement to the House earlier. As he noted, there is an ongoing police investigation, which we are all aware of, and, as the hon. Gentleman noted, there will be an independent public inquiry to get to the truth about what happened and who is responsible. What is absolutely clear is that what we witnessed in the Grenfell Tower fire is a catastrophic failure on a scale that no one thought possible in our country at this time, in 2017. I cannot anticipate what the public inquiry will conclude, but I agree with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he said that the failures must be understood and rectified without delay, and the Government are absolutely determined to ensure that that happens.

The Secretary of State has informed the House that he is establishing an independent expert advisory panel, and I hope very soon that more information emerges on that. I can already say that it will advise the Government on any immediate steps that need to be taken on fire safety measures, policies, inspection and regulation arising from the Grenfell Tower fire, and it will look at the wider fire safety regime.

I very much look forward to having a meeting with the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to discuss these matters. As I said at the start of my remarks, this is a time for us to work together, to listen to wide-ranging views and ultimately to ensure that a tragedy such as the Grenfell Tower fire never happens again. We owe that to the victims, to their families and to the country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.27 pm

*House adjourned.*

