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Grenfell Tower

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03 July 2017

Volume 626

🕒 4.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the Government's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and our safety inspections of cladding in other buildings.

Almost three weeks have passed since the catastrophe that hit Grenfell Tower.

Progress has been made to help the survivors and people in the surrounding buildings who were affected. Landlords across the country have been taking measures to make their buildings safe. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed to lead a full public inquiry, and an independent expert panel is now advising my Department on any immediate action on fire safety that is required.

The disaster at Grenfell Tower should never have happened. The police investigation and public inquiry will find out why it did. Right now, the Government's immediate priority is to provide every assistance to those who were affected and to take every precaution to avoid another tragedy in buildings with similar cladding. The Grenfell Tower victims unit is operating from my Department and providing a single point of

access into Government. Staff from across Government continue to offer support at the Westway assistance centre and at a separate family bereavement centre. Almost £2.5 million has been distributed from the £5 million Grenfell Tower residents' discretionary fund. Each affected household is receiving £5,500 to provide immediate assistance, and payments have been made to 112 households so far.

There has been much speculation about who was in Grenfell Tower on the night of the fire, and it is vital that we find out. As I announced yesterday, the Director of Public Prosecutions has made it clear that there will be no prosecution of tenants at Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk who may have been illegally sub-letting their property, so all tenants can be confident about coming forward with information for the authorities. There may have been people living in flats that were illegally sub-let who had no idea about the true status of their tenancy. Their families want to know if they perished in the fire. These are their sons, their daughters, their brothers, and their sisters. They need closure, and that is the least that they deserve. However, that cannot happen unless we have the information we need, so we are urging anyone with that information to come forward and to do so as quickly as they can.

The immediate response to the Grenfell disaster is being co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, led by John Barradell. He is being supported by colleagues drawn from London Councils, the wider local government sector, the voluntary sector, police, health, and fire services, as well as central Government. Their expertise and hard work is making a huge difference, but it is only a temporary measure. It is also vital that we put in place long-term support for the longer-term recovery. It was right that the leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea took the decision to move on. I look forward to working with the new leader of the council, and I will look at every option to ensure that everyone affected by this tragedy has the long-term support they need.

The Prime Minister promised that every family who lost their home because of the fire will be offered a good-quality temporary home within three weeks, and the deadline is this Wednesday. I have been monitoring the progress of rehousing, and we will honour

that commitment. Every home offered will be appropriate and of good quality. What we will not do is compel anyone to accept an offer of temporary accommodation that they do not want. Some families indicated that they wanted to remain as close as possible to their former home but, when they received their offer, took a look at the property and decided that it would be easier to deal with their bereavement if they moved further away. Some families have decided that, for the same reasons, they would prefer to remain in hotels for the time being. Other households have indicated that they would prefer to wait until permanent accommodation becomes available. Every household will receive an offer of temporary accommodation by this Wednesday, but every household will also be given the space to make this transition at their own pace and in a way that helps them recover from this tragedy.

The people affected by the disaster at Grenfell Tower need our assistance and are receiving it, but they also want answers. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed to lead a full public inquiry. He has visited Kensington and has met victims and survivors, as well as members of the local community who have done so much to help. After consulting the community, Sir Martin will then advise on the terms of the inquiry, and we will ensure there is legal support for victims so that they can play their full part.

We must allow that inquiry and the criminal investigation to run their course. Each must have the space to follow the evidence wherever it takes them. We must all be careful not to prejudge or prejudice either of them, but what we can do right now is take sensible precautions to avoid another tragedy. The Building Research Establishment is continuing to test the combustibility of cladding from councils and housing associations, as well as from private landlords. So far, all the samples of cladding tested have failed—that is 181 out of 181. It is obviously disturbing that there is such a large number of buildings with combustible cladding, and the priority now is to make those buildings safe. Where appropriate mitigating measures cannot be implemented quickly, landlords must provide alternative accommodation while the remedial work is carried out, and that is exactly what happened with the four tower blocks in Camden. Our primary concern has been buildings over 18 metres or six storeys in which people stay at night. Hospitals and schools are also being assessed.

We ourselves have asked questions about the testing regime after discovering the 100% failure rate so far. Last week I asked for the test process itself to be independently reviewed. That was done by the Research Institutes of Sweden, which confirmed that they believe the process to be sound. A full explanatory briefing note on the testing process has been made available on gov.uk. As the note explains, every failed test means that the panels are “unlikely to be compliant” with the limited combustibility requirement of the building regulations guidance. That has been confirmed by legal advice and by the advice of the independent expert panel, which was established last week. For use of the panels to be safe, landlords need to be confident that the whole wall system has been tested and shown to be safe. We are not aware of any such system having passed the necessary tests, but I have asked the expert advisory panel to look into it further.

Almost three weeks have passed since the catastrophe that hit Grenfell Tower, and I know I speak for every Member of this House when I say that we are still all in shock. It is not just the terrible scale of the suffering; it is that it happened in 21st-century Britain in London’s richest borough. I will continue to direct the full resources of my Department to assist the Grenfell response team, and I will be working closely with the new leader of Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council to make sure there are plans in place for a longer-term recovery. I will return to the House regularly to update hon. Members on progress.

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🕒 4.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)

I thank the Secretary of State for the prior copy of his statement. He struck an appropriate tone today. These are complex challenges for government, both national and local, but Ministers have been off the pace at every stage since this terrible fire. They have been too slow to grasp the scale of the problems people are facing and too slow to act. For the Grenfell Tower survivors, for the victims’ families and for the local

community in north Kensington, underlying everything is the question of trust: that those in positions of power mean what they say, do what they promise and do not drag their feet before acting to deal with problems. That powerful message must be understood by Ministers, Kensington and Chelsea Council and the chair of the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

The Grenfell Tower residents understood what the Prime Minister meant when she said:

“I have fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby.”

It is three weeks on Wednesday since the fire. How many people are still in hotels? The Secretary of State gave the latest version of the promise today: “a good-quality temporary home within three weeks”. Does that include hotel rooms? How temporary is “temporary”? By what date will all residents affected by the fire be in permanent new homes? While we are trying to get the numbers clear: how many survivors are there from Grenfell Tower? How many have not received the Government’s immediate assistance payments of £5,500?

Let me turn to the wider fears of those living in 4,000 other tower blocks around the country. The Government say that 600 tower blocks with cladding need safety checks, but nearly three weeks on the Secretary of State confirms today that only 181 have been tested so far—and all have failed. Will he accept that these tests are too slow and too narrow? Will he confirm that the Government are testing only one component of the cladding—not the panels, adhesives and insulation; not the cladding as a composite system; and not the installation method or impact on the buildings? All those things can affect fire-safety qualities. Importantly, will he confirm that cladding is not the whole story? We know that from the two coroners’ reports after the previous fires at Shirley Towers and Lakanal House, four years ago. So will he act now—not wait for the public inquiry—to reassure residents in all other tower blocks by starting the overhaul of building regulations; by retrofitting sprinkler systems, starting with the highest-risk blocks; and by making it very clear that the Government will fund, up front, the full costs of any necessary remedial works?

Turning to the public inquiry, which the Secretary of State mentioned, the Prime Minister has rightly set up this inquiry to get to the bottom of what went wrong at Grenfell Tower and help make sure this can never happen again. She said:

“No stone will be left unturned”.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 168.]

Yet Sir Martin Moore-Bick has said:

“I’ve been asked to undertake this inquiry on the basis that it would be pretty well limited to the problems surrounding the start of the fire and its rapid development”.

So I say to the Secretary of State that I recognise the importance of the independence of the inquiry, but will he make it clear to the House today what brief Sir Martin has been given by the Prime Minister for this inquiry? As the Secretary of State said, John Barradell is leading the strategic co-ordination group at present, providing the emergency response, relief and leadership that Kensington and Chelsea Council failed to do after the fire. How long will it be running these council operations? What is the hand-back plan? Who will it hand back to?

There are deeper flaws in this council, beyond the very serious failings in response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and every public statement from the ruling politicians confirms that they are in denial. These are exactly the deeper problems that commissioners and a full corporate governance inspection would help put right. The Government are still off the pace. If this council were a school, it would be in special measures, fresh leadership would be needed and fresh confidence would be built, as it must be built in this council. Actions speak louder than words, and actions count most in helping the Grenfell Tower survivors, and in rebuilding their confidence in the future and the wider public trust that must be there for the residents who live in our tower blocks and make them their homes right across the country.

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Sajid Javid

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He asked several questions, and I shall start with the first, on temporary housing. Our commitment has been clear and it is unchanged from day one: all residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk will be offered temporary accommodation in Kensington and Chelsea or a neighbouring borough within three weeks. I just explained in my statement what that offer means. I want to make sure people are offered high-quality accommodation that is appropriate for their family type and size, but they should not and will not be forced to accept accommodation that they do not want to move into at this point.

I was at the Westway centre again on Saturday, and my hon. Friend the Housing Minister was there on Sunday. I met many of the residents and talked to them, mainly about their needs. I wanted to listen to them, because when officials have come back to me and said they are finding that a lot of people are saying, for example, “I’d rather stay in hotels for now and perhaps then exercise an opportunity to move into some of the permanent accommodation that has already been identified, especially the 68 units at Kensington Row,” that is something we should take into account. It would be absolutely wrong for us to say, “No, you cannot stay in the hotels. You have to move, and then you’re going to have to move again.” We should be led by the residents.

I have also met residents who have said, “I thought I wanted something close to where I lived before,” but when they went to one of the available properties, despite it being of high quality and appropriate in many ways, when they looked out the window they saw the tower, were clearly reminded of things they would rather not be reminded of, and changed their minds. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is not saying that in those circumstances we should force families to accept the accommodation, no matter what. We will be led by the families and their needs. Our commitment is clear: come Wednesday, every single family and every household from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk that has so far come forward to us will have been offered high-quality temporary accommodation.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether temporary accommodation includes hotels. Hotels are emergency accommodation; temporary accommodation—I went to see some examples myself in a neighbouring borough on Saturday—is high-quality accommodation. It may be houses or flats—whatever the residents choose. There is also permanent social housing, which it will take more time to identify, especially if the family desires that it is in the borough. As I have said, it is well known that we have already identified 68 units, and we are very close to adding a number of other units to that availability. That will be permanent housing that we will offer to the families, and they will be able to decide whether it is appropriate for them.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the testing process; it can move only as fast as the samples come in. Since I made my previous statement, there has been a sharp pick-up in the number of samples coming in from local authorities and housing associations. We are turning those around within hours of their coming in, with the results going immediately to the landlord. The test itself is on a component—the core—of each of the cladding panels. A sample of the core is taken, then categorised for its limited combustibility as either category 3, 2 or 1, with categories 3 and 2 being deemed not to meet the building regulation guidance.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether the whole system is being tested. As I said, the core of the panel is being tested. It is possible to conduct whole-system tests. That is not the test that is currently being conducted by the BRE, but the expert panel is meeting again today to advise how things can be done appropriately so that we are convinced that a whole-system test actually works and leads to a positive result. So far though, as I said in my statement, we have yet to see any evidence showing that any builder has passed the whole-system test.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about funding. We have made it clear that whatever measures need to be taken—any remedial measures to make buildings safe—local authorities and housing associations should get on with them. If local authorities or housing associations need help with funding, we are ready to discuss that with them and we will work with them.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly reminded the House that the public inquiry is independent. We have to be careful what we say about it in the House or elsewhere, but we should remember that Sir Martin started immediately, meeting victims, volunteers and others, as he should. He will set out the terms of the inquiry. He is not there yet—he should take the right amount of time that is necessary and make sure that the inquiry is broad and to the satisfaction of the victims, their families and friends, and that they feel that the terms of reference are appropriate.

Lastly, the right hon. Gentleman asked about Kensington and Chelsea. Clearly, the Grenfell response team—what has been referred to as the gold team led by John Barradell—is being led appropriately with tremendous resource, both from the local government and voluntary sectors and from central Government. At some point, the process of recovery for the longer term will transfer to the council. We are not at that point yet. When we are, we need to make sure that the council is properly resourced with expertise as well as money and any other help that it needs. We will make sure that when that happens it is properly resourced.

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Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is working with devolved Governments to ensure that every tower block around the country is going through the same fire safety tests?

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Sajid Javid

Yes, I can confirm that to my hon. Friend. So far, the Welsh Government have identified 13 tower blocks with aluminium composite material, and they are all being tested.

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Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)

I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House to make a statement on the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and I appreciate the chance to have advance sight of the statement, which was very useful. I also welcome the announcement about the 112 households that have received payments. I am not certain whether he has said this already, but I would appreciate knowing how many households still need to receive payment and the timescales for those payments—how long are they likely to take?

Along with many Members in the House, I have been approached by residents in my constituency who live in multi-storey blocks. I commend the work that local authorities have done to take action to test buildings and to reassure tenants who live in those buildings. I used to live in a local authority multi-storey, and I well understand the access issues that concern people. I appreciate the moves that have been made by a number of organisations working together to provide reassurance.

I restate the position of the Scottish National party that the public inquiry should be as wide-ranging as possible. At every stage, the views of the Grenfell Tower survivors should be taken into account. I would also ask a couple of things. I would like reassurance that residents are being helped as far as possible to replace documentation that they lost in the fire, and about residents whose families want to take part in the inquiry and who live abroad. What financial help is available for them to ensure that they can come and take an active part in the inquiry?

Lastly, I would welcome confirmation that there will be no prosecution of the tenants. It is really important that those tenants, and anyone who has been living there, come forward, and I would welcome the Government's views about that.

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Sajid Javid

I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. First, on payments so far from the discretionary fund, there is £5 million available from that fund; £2.44 million has been paid out so far. Of the grants, 249 £500 cash payments have been made, amounting to

£124,500, and there have been 112 payments of the £5,000 grant. I should also remind people listening to the statement that that has no impact on benefits or any other compensation that individuals might receive.

I agree absolutely with the hon. Lady's comments about the public inquiry. It should be as wide-ranging as possible, and should absolutely have the input of victims, their families and friends. Those victims must get the legal support that they need to make proper and full representations.

On lost documentation, I can confirm that since soon after the tragedy, in the Westway centre but also in the victim unit support in my Department in Westminster, almost every Government Department necessary has been represented. In fact, I saw a fantastic example on Saturday, when I met a team from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency from Swansea. They turned up at the Westway centre within a couple of days of the disaster, and they brought with them driving licences that they had printed out. Residents turned up saying, "I need a driving licence", fully expecting to make an application, and the DVLA team handed it to them in the envelope once an identity check had been done. That is the extent of the efforts many Government Departments have gone to, and that is what we expect as we continue to help these people—the victims—with their recovery.

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Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

My right hon. Friend has described the tests taking place in housing association and local authority housing, schools and hospitals. What conversations has he had with the insurance industry regarding totally private tower blocks? Leeds has seen much regeneration and there are lots of tall tower buildings with cladding. It strikes me that insurance companies have a vested interest in ensuring that such blocks are dealt with before new regulations come into place.

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Sajid Javid

My hon. Friend is right to point that out. The insurance industry has been taking a great interest in the work that is happening, especially in the testing. The Chancellor had a meeting with the insurance industry just last week.

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Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)

The Secretary of State will be aware that the statement from the new independent chair that the scope of the inquiry might be limited to the start of the fire and how it spread has caused some alarm among survivors. Will he say a little bit more about that? Will he also confirm that all survivors will get proper legal aid so that they can have proper, independent solicitors and barristers representing their interests?

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Sajid Javid

Yes, I can confirm that. I was there again on Saturday, soon after Sir Martin's first visit, and a number of survivors and their families made the same point to me. It is worth reiterating and making clear that although the judge will rightly ultimately determine the scope of the inquiry, we all expect it to be as broad and wide-ranging as possible. We absolutely want to ensure that all victims, survivors, families and friends feel that they are properly represented and get the proper financial support.

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Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)

My right hon. Friend has sadly informed the House that, so far, 100% of all 181 samples taken from buildings have failed the combustion tests. I do not wish to prejudice the public inquiry or any future criminal action, but will he tell the House whether the cladding originates from one source or whether it is from multiple sources, which would hint at a more systemic failure across the industry?

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Sajid Javid

I can tell my hon. Friend that there are multiple sources.

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Several hon. Members rose—

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Mr Speaker

Order. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) is a most estimable fellow, but I think he is probably still enjoying his honeymoon, which we hope that he celebrated with great joy. But I gently point out to him that he beetled into the Chamber 17 minutes after the statement started and that, therefore, it is a trifle saucy to expect to be called on this occasion. We will store him up for another occasion on which he can give the House the benefit of his wisdom.

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Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)

A week ago, the Secretary of State told us that the Government were capable of processing 100 tests a day. We now know that there is a backlog of 419 tower blocks that have not yet been tested. Can he tell us about that backlog? How many samples are currently in the laboratory, how many have failed to be provided and what is he doing to ensure that they are all supplied?

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Sajid Javid

There is no backlog. We can only process the tests as soon as the samples come in. When they do come in, they are processed within hours and the landlord is informed along with the local fire and rescue service. I can update the House on numbers.

Before we received the information back from the local authorities and housing associations, the original estimate was that they could own up to 600 similarly clad buildings. We now think that figure is around 530.

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Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)

I commend the Secretary of State for the speed of cladding testing to which he just referred. When interim recommendations are made, what processes are in place to ensure that landlords actually comply and carry them out?

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Sajid Javid

In the immediate term, we have made sure that the landlord is informed immediately when a piece of cladding fails the test. The local fire and rescue service will carry out the fire safety check, and we expect all those recommendations to be followed. The involvement of the local fire and rescue services, which will report back to my Department, means that we are able to monitor progress.

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Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)

I do not think that the Secretary of State made reference to the review of building regulations and to the fire guidance contained in Approved Document B, which officers of the all-party group on fire safety rescue had the opportunity to raise with the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government—we were grateful for that opportunity. The review was recommended by the coroner's inquiry from Lakanal House; it is 11 years since the last review. Does the independent panel of experts have the power or authority to recommend a recall of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee working party on Approved Document B so that this work can begin now, rather than waiting till the end of the public inquiry?

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Sajid Javid

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about building regulations and the guidance on them. It is already clear to us all that there will need to be changes, and that we need to look carefully at the causes and at the fact that so many buildings are failing the guidance test. The expert panel has a wide remit, which is broadly to recommend to the Government immediately any action it thinks we should take that will improve public safety. For the longer term, we will set out in due course how we intend to tackle the much wider review I think will be necessary.

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Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)

Some media outlets have suggested that Grenfell survivors have been forced to move to cities in the north of England. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that nobody who chooses to not move out of London will be deemed intentionally homeless?

Share

Sajid Javid

I, too, have heard these rumours, yet no one has come forward with any evidence of any such thing taking place—of someone being moved outside London. I can also give my hon. Friend a reassurance on the intentionally homeless point; in fact, I wrote to every resident last Thursday to make that point very clear to them.

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Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD)

The safety of domestic appliances is a vital element of fire safety in tower blocks—and, indeed, in all homes. This horrendous fire started with a fault in a fridge, so will the Government revisit the decision of March last year to dismiss or delay many of the recommendations of the Lynn Faulds Wood review into product recall, which I

commissioned in 2014? In particular, will the Secretary of State recognise that funding for the enforcement of safety regulations through trading standards is inadequate and must be urgently addressed?

Share

Sajid Javid

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at this issue very seriously. He is a member of the taskforce that has been discussing this and many other issues. He is speaking to many manufacturers about what can be done to make sure that, when products are recalled, that happens much more quickly and much more safely.

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Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)

I am sorry to say this, but I find the sophistry of the Secretary of State today quite sickening. The reason why people are refusing offers of accommodation is that they are not suitable, sometimes by reason of people's age or disability, and not because these are fussy people. The units of social housing being offered are existing social housing, so what happens to the people who would have gone into them? We are going to have a net reduction in the amount of social housing. It is an open secret in west London that the administration in Kensington and Chelsea could not run a bath. That is why the residents of north Ken have had such a raw deal for so long. So when will the Secretary of State put country before party and send in the commissioners?

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Sajid Javid

The hon. Gentleman is a local London MP, and he has an opportunity now to put party politics aside and just do the right thing for his constituents. His constituents are watching him.

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Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con)

On Friday afternoon, I met the chief executive and the leader of Corby Borough Council, who assured me that the council has complied with all the requests the Department has made, and I shall ask the same questions of East Northamptonshire Council this Friday. However, is there anything more that individual Members can do to support Ministers and the Government, working across party lines and with local authorities, in the review process ahead?

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Sajid Javid

One role that many individual Members, including my hon. Friend, have been playing well is making sure that their constituents are well informed about what the testing process is and what the results actually mean. That was one of the reasons why we published the explanatory note last Friday, and many Members have used it to inform their constituents.

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Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)

Let us come back to the issue of the commissioners whom the Mayor of London, among others, has asked to be put into Kensington and Chelsea. Of course they need not be put in to manage the whole council, but just its social housing responsibilities. As a localist, I believe that commissioners should be put in only in extremis—in cases such as Rotherham or Tower Hamlets—but surely this is an extreme example of a failure of governance. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to this request and what factors has he taken into account? If he rejects it, does that mean that he has full confidence in Kensington and Chelsea's ability to manage its social housing stock?

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Sajid Javid

The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights that when control of the recovery effort transfers to Kensington and Chelsea for the longer term, we need to make sure that the right resources are there, including the right expertise and good leadership, but that is not about to happen. Before it happens, the Government will rightly consider all options that will bring that about.

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Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)

The Secretary of State talks about having a broad and wide-ranging public inquiry, yet Sir Martin describes his remit as very narrow. Will the Secretary of State explain this conflict? How he will clarify the situation, because this process has to get us the answers in the end?

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Sajid Javid

The hon. Lady will know that in an independent inquiry, and rightly so, it is important that the judge ultimately sets the terms of reference. This is just the beginning of the process. I urge her and all hon. Members to give the judge time to speak to victims and their supporters, the families, the volunteers and others, and then to come to the final judgment on how wide the terms of reference should be.

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Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)

This terrible disaster obviously raises questions about the effectiveness of local emergency planning. What steps are being taken here and elsewhere to ensure that other local authorities have good emergency responses should disasters befall them?

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Sajid Javid

One of the lessons that has already come from this tragedy is about trying to make sure, across the country, that we take a fresh look at planning for civil emergencies. That work has already begun, led by the Cabinet Office.

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Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)

Based on the intelligence of survivors, it appears that a number of the flats were severely overcrowded. We have to assume that those flats were being sub-let illegally and inhabited by people with unstable immigration status, and possibly even those who had been trafficked, as that has been identified as a problem in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea. What are Ministers doing to ensure that private landlords, legal or otherwise, are properly declaring vulnerable people who were in the building on the night of the fire, and not potentially profiteering from any properties or finances being offered to survivors?

Share

Sajid Javid

The hon. Lady will know that one of the steps that we have taken to recognise this picture, which absolutely may well have been happening where there was illegal sub-letting, was yesterday's announcement by the Director of Public Prosecutions that we want everyone with any piece of information to come forward. That was why the guarantee that they will not be prosecuted was offered, and I think that that will help and make a big difference.

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Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)

Over the past few weeks, I have been visiting tower blocks across my constituency with fire officers and housing officers. Residents remain very, very concerned. Frankly, they do not understand why the Government and successive Ministers appear to have ignored the recommendations of the coroner's report on sprinklers following the

Lakanal House fire. I would suggest that Ministers who are shaking their heads try visiting my constituents, standing on the 15th floor, and explaining in person to those residents why there are no sprinklers.

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Sajid Javid

It is good that the hon. Lady has been visiting tower blocks in Bristol and I hope that she has been able to reassure some of her constituents. It is good to have MPs' involvement. However, she is wrong about the recommendations on sprinklers in the coroner's report on Lakanal House because they were implemented fully.

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Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

Given what the Grenfell Tower fire has exposed about the combustibility of external cladding in the UK, can the Secretary of State confirm that appropriate tests are being conducted at non-high-rise as well as high-rise buildings?

Share

Sajid Javid

Our priority has been buildings that are taller than 18 metres—typically more than six storeys—and residential buildings, as that is where one would expect the highest risk, because naturally people would be there overnight. That is the starting point and the priority. We expect that after we have dealt with the priority cases, we can make the testing facility available for all other types of buildings.

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Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab)

I am sure that the Secretary of State knows that many other public buildings, including hospitals, use tower blocks for accommodation and that they might have vulnerable cladding on them. Will he confirm how many hospitals have been tested so far and

how many have failed those tests?

Share

Sajid Javid

As I said in my statement, I can confirm that hospitals, schools and other buildings in the public sector are being looked at. That work is being led, through the Government Property Unit, by the Cabinet Office. The process of testing is ongoing. Even before the cladding can be tested, we have made sure that local fire and rescue services have been informed and that any necessary mitigating measures have been taken.

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Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)

The Secretary of State said that testing of the core of cladding had resulted in 181 failures and that that meant local authorities had breached building control regulations. Does that mean regulations at the time the cladding was put up, or regulations as they stand today?

Share

Sajid Javid

The last time there was any significant change in building regulations guidance was in 2006 and much of the cladding was put up in the early 2000s. There has been no significant change in building regulations or building regulations guidance pertaining to fire safety for a number of years. I said in my statement that the samples had failed a limited combustibility test, and that test has been around for a number of years.

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Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

I want to take the Secretary of State back to the issue of hospitals, because my local hospital is a tower block with cladding that was put on in the past four years. The Hull royal infirmary management team has been very reluctant to tell the public what

additional checks have been undertaken, but after being pressed several times by the local BBC, it has now admitted that the cladding has been sent for testing. Is it not about time that we had a statement from the Secretary of State for Health so that we can be clear about all our hospitals and other buildings with cladding, and so that the public can know what is happening?

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Sajid Javid

I assure the hon. Lady that this is being taken very seriously. Where ACM or suspected ACM cladding has been found on any hospital, regardless of whether or not it is a tall building, it has been submitted for testing. Even before the results of those tests are back, the local health trusts have taken action to put in place mitigating measures. For example, many of them have put in place full-time fire wardens, 24 hours a day, to make sure that they provide maximum public safety.

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Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op)

The lessons of Hillsborough are that survivors must be listened to at all times and that inquiries must be transparent and comprehensive. What assurances can the Secretary of State give in relation to Grenfell Tower?

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Sajid Javid

I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. Those are very important lessons to learn. I am confident that the judge, Sir Martin, will address them as he approaches his inquiry. I think that the first public sign of that will be when he sets his terms of interest.

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Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)

Tenants in high-rise blocks in my constituency are often disabled or elderly, and in some cases they have poor or no English. Will the Government start to work with local authorities and housing providers to develop effective strategies to protect those most vulnerable tenants in the event of a fire or other disaster?

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Sajid Javid

There are already many rules and regulations in place to do just that. As we learn all the lessons from this terrible tragedy, it is important that we ensure that we do everything we can to protect the most vulnerable.

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Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab)

I understand the focus of the Secretary of State and his Department on cladding, but may I ask him about the insulation? Some reports say that the insulation caught fire and combusted three times quicker than the cladding. Industry experts say that we should consider a system of non-combustible insulation, which is available on the market. What is the Secretary of State doing to investigate the safety of insulation, including when buildings are uncladded and the insulation is exposed to the elements?

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Sajid Javid

The police report on the Grenfell Tower tragedy rightly referred to the insulation. After that, our guidance to local authorities and housing associations was immediately publicly updated to say that there should be checks on insulation, too.

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