

Most Grenfell survivors remain homeless a month after inferno

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Most of the survivors of the inferno at Grenfell Tower remain homeless, almost one month after at least 80 died because of the criminal policies of successive Labour and Conservative governments, which put profit before safety.

The issue of providing emergency rehousing for just 158 families, in one of the richest cities in the world—population 8.9 million—has revealed the callous indifference to the suffering of the victims of the fire. Prime Minister Theresa May pledged that within three weeks all the homeless families would be at least temporarily rehoused.

As well as those made homeless by the inferno, hundreds of households who lived in tower blocks with combustible cladding like Grenfell's have been temporarily evacuated and been strewn all over the capital in temporary accommodation.

At the 11th hour an emergency government taskforce, the Grenfell Response Team (GTR), claimed that 139 of the Grenfell 158 families had been offered accommodation. However, 19 of the families are not in a position to consider an offer as they were tending to seriously ill relatives recovering in hospital from fire injuries. As the three-week deadline came and went, only 14 families had moved into temporary accommodation.

Families have been made offers of unsuitable accommodation, with some offers for properties out of the borough. Other offers were for homes with an insufficient number of bedrooms. Survivors also reported that, despite escaping death in a tower block, they had been callously offered accommodation in other tower blocks. As with Grenfell, none of these have basic fire safety systems in place including two stairwells, a central fire alarm, water sprinklers, fire doors, fire extinguishers on every floor and non-flammable cladding on the exterior walls.

Housing campaigner Pilgrim Tucker told the *Press Association*, "People are being texted saying here is your offer, it is rent free for a year and then it is £400 a

week—that is triple what they were paying before."

A two-bed offer—located in a beautiful five storey terraced house in the heart of Kensington and Chelsea—had to be turned down by one family, as it was both temporary and unaffordable. Rent has been suspended for a year for survivors but thereafter it would be £1,103 a month on the property.

On June 20, May announced that the government would provide 68 permanent homes for some of the surviving Grenfell residents in the Kensington Row development on Warwick Road—a mile and a half from Grenfell Tower. The homes, designated as "social housing" were bought from the developers at a cost of around £10 million, not by Kensington and Chelsea Council but by the City of London Corporation.

The proposal was made to assuage the anger of families who felt abandoned by the authorities, and to avoid demands to requisition empty "ghost" flats owned by the rich in Kensington and Chelsea—numbering 1,400.

Kensington Row is worth £2 billion to its developers who describe it as "a world of opulence and privilege", with apartments ranging in cost from £1.6 million rising to £3.5 million, or £13 million for a penthouse suite.

The right-wing press had a field day with the *Telegraph* headlining a report, "Sixty-eight flats in £2bn luxury Kensington block to be given to Grenfell Tower families." It stated that the complex "boasts a private cinema and swimming pool," and accompanied its piece with five pictures of stunning interiors.

Kensington Row does in fact boast a 24-hour concierge service, leisure suite, private cinema, landscaped gardens and gym.

However, such luxuries will not be enjoyed by the ex-Grenfell residents. A source from the Berkley group, which is developing the site, informed the *Independent* that "the social housing apartments will be less high-spec and that fixtures and fittings will also be more basic...

modern but not luxury.”

The Berkley group had earmarked a percentage of its new development for social housing—part of the negotiated levy between the local council and developer to secure planning permission under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

Such social housing that is built into lucrative developments has justifiably earned the derogatory nickname of “poor doors.” It is generally segregated from the homes of rich neighbours by separate entrances—normally next to the refuse area—and residents are barred from using gardens and other social amenities. The site map for Kensington Row shows that its “poor door” properties face the busy, noisy and polluted Warwick Road.

The social housing properties will not be ready to move into until August at the earliest. This is despite the fact that the government is subsidising Berkley to the tune of £2-3 million to hurry along the build. This money is being handed over to a FTSE 250 company which announced revenues of £2.7 billion last year and recorded a 34 percent rise in pre-tax profits to £392.7 million in the six months to the end of October.

Kensington and Chelsea is the most socially polarised section of London, with the poorest people living alongside the very richest. The class hostility of the most affluent sections of society to the working class residents of Grenfell and North Kensington was evidenced in the callous and self-centred response of those at Kensington Row to any homeless survivors being allowed to live in the development.

One resident, who did not want to be identified, told the *Guardian*: “I’m very sad that people have lost their homes, but there are a lot of people who have bought flats and will now see the values drop.” Maria, who owns a flat in the block said, “It’s so unfair. We paid a lot of money to live here, and we worked hard for it. Now these people are going to come along, and they won’t even be paying the service charge.”

In a wealthy borough like Kensington and Chelsea, even high-priority families have to wait five years to be housed. London needs 50,000 new homes every year, but last year only 24,230 were under construction.

Cuts to local government spending has seen social house building grind to a halt since the banking crash of 2008. For property developers, however, the crash ushered in low interest rates and quantitative easing, which have been a boon for profits.

Councils, with Labour-run authorities leading the

charge, have worked closely with developers in “regenerating social hot spots.” This is more accurately described as social cleansing. The councils have demolished large swathes of council housing stock to make way for plush dwellings and swanky high-rise apartments for the rich.

The Heygate tower block estate in Elephant and Castle South London is a case in point, demolished to make way for the new £1.2 billion Elephant Park complex, being built by Australian developer Lend Lease. One-bed apartments in Elephant Park start at £550,000, while the richest with more cash to spare can opt for three-bed properties going for £1,145,000.

To get planning permission all Lend Lease had to do was seal a gentleman’s agreement with Labour Party-run Southwark council to build 342 units for social housing out of its total of 2,500. Because of the “negotiable” loophole afforded by Section 106, Lend Lease is now only providing 74 units for social housing. Some 1,214 homes housing working class residents were demolished to make way for the new development.

Between 2009 and 2015 neither Haringey, Hackney or Lambeth, all Labour-run London councils, achieved their 50 percent targets for “affordable” house builds—agreed in return for granting planning permission—instead achieving just 17, 14 and 25 percent respectively.

Even as the government was forced to grudgingly hand over some Kensington Row flats to Grenfell survivors, social cleansing is continuing apace in the area.

The Warwick Road Leaseholders Association are fighting the social cleansing being carried out by Kensington and Chelsea council on two parts of their estate. Residents fear that the council will eventually demolish working class housing at Broadwood Terrace (24 units) and Chesterton Square (92 units). The leaseholders fear that new conditions that apply after “regeneration” will mean they can no longer to afford to remain in their homes.



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