

Angry Grenfell survivors and residents berate London police and council officials

Robert Stevens
20 July 2017

For the second time in a week, anger erupted at a meeting called by Kensington and Chelsea Council and London's Metropolitan Police.

A meeting Tuesday was held almost five weeks to the day of the June 14 Grenfell fire, with around 150 people gathered at the Notting Hill Methodist church in North Kensington.

The meeting was called by the "Grenfell Response Team," established by the government and the local council following the fire.

Noticeable by her absence was council leader Elizabeth Campbell, who was denounced by residents last week over the role of the council in creating a death trap of Grenfell Tower and its inhumane treatment of the survivors and local residents in the aftermath.

Speaking on behalf of the Conservative-run council was Barry Quirk, the interim chief executive. There were no representatives from the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—the arms-length organisation that ran Grenfell Tower on behalf of the council.

Representing the Metropolitan Police was Detective Inspector Simon Fox, who is responsible for the recovery of bodies at the scene. Around a dozen uniformed police officers were dotted around the room creating an intimidating atmosphere.

The attempt by the authorities to try to placate anger by putting some fresh faces onto the platform did not work. Local resident Jacqui Haynes said, "Because of that, they can also get away by saying 'Oh that wasn't us, we weren't there' or 'We are looking into what we do now'. What they've done is take away the people who are responsible so they don't have to answer, and they just put in people who can't answer, because they weren't there.

Many shouted "liars" as the panel sought to justify

their inaction and failure to bring anyone to account for the deaths of at least 80 people. Others shouted that the cabinet of Kensington and Chelsea Council and the police leading the criminal investigation should resign.

The hostility directed at the platform was centred on condemnations of them as representatives of the ruling elite, who only cared about the interests of the rich.

A survivor, Mahad, said that residents of council housing estates in north Kensington, where Grenfell Tower is located, were not "poor or uneducated... We are rich, rich in dignity." Pointing at the platform he said, "You are dishonouring all of us, traumatising a whole community... You have been put in a position of trust and you have let the people down."

Opposing the long-term goal of the council to socially cleanse the area of working class residents, he said, "We will look after our children and our future. There's no way... that you who work for the rich folks are going to push us out of our homes and our community."

Another woman demanded to know why Campbell was not at the meeting, stating, "I want to know where the leader of the council is... These bloody people suffer all their lives. They work for you lot to get your bloody wages... Why isn't she here telling us what's happened?"

Seventeen year old Rihanna described how her eight-year-old nephew was greatly distressed at losing his teacher in the fire: "Growing up in this community, I loved it. But this whole tragedy has made me see that we have no support from you... It's hard to watch people fall, jump, lose their families."

Another resident described the Grenfell inferno as "This disgusting thing that has happened to our children and our families. The TMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation] is nowhere

to be seen... This isn't right. It's the TMO's fault and the TMO has to sit in the chair in front of all these people and answer the questions. They don't care about those lives. The government's going on holiday this week. Yeah, 'everything's finished.' No it won't finish!"

Residents vented their anger at the fact that only a fraction of the £20 million raised by charities and fundraisers for the victims of the Grenfell fire had been distributed. A BBC report revealed that just £800,000 has been handed to those affected. The Red Cross donated £4.8 million to the London Emergency Trust, who are tasked with distributing the money. However, they have handed over only £158,000 so far to just 16 of the people affected.

Residents spoke out against the callous indifference of the government and local authority to the survivors, who five weeks on have not been rehoused, despite a personal pledge by Prime Minister Theresa May. One audience member said to applause, "When are you going to house them? We know there are people who are booked into hotels until September 1. When are you going to give them housing?"

From the first hours after the Grenfell fire, central and local government did nothing to assist devastated survivors who had lost family members and everything they owned. The local working class community were left to fend for themselves, with other residents nearby forced to step in to provide basic supplies and shelter for the victims. How wide the gulf is between the powers-that-be and residents was demonstrated when an audience member asked every person from the community who had volunteered to help after the fire to stand up. He said, speaking about the council, this is "every single person who does your job," as around a third of the room stood up.

The catalogue of crimes committed by the political elite and corporations that resulted in the Grenfell inferno, and which fuels the resentment of residents towards them, continues to grow by the day.

On the day of the meeting, the government revealed that 243 buildings in 57 local authority areas that have cladding similar to that on Grenfell had failed combustibility tests. This represents a 100 percent failure rate. Of these, 235 are high-rise residential towers, a combined school/residential building, another school and six buildings at five National Health Service

trusts.

The day after the meeting it emerged that the cladding and insulation that Grenfell was encased in generated the same amount of heat as would burning 51 tonnes of pinewood. According to research carried out on the cladding's plastic core by the University of Leeds, it would have burned "as quickly as petrol." Planning documents seen by the university revealed that 18 tonnes of insulation foam and eight tonnes of cladding panels were attached to the tower.

The uncoordinated and ad hoc removal of dangerous cladding from tower blocks is creating even greater dangers. In many cases, external cladding has been removed from high rises by local authorities only to leave highly combustible insulation exposed. In the city of Salford, combustible insulation has been left exposed for weeks on blocks that house more than 1,000 people.

A fire safety expert, Arnold Tarling, told the *Guardian* that Pendleton Together Housing—the housing association who run the blocks on behalf of Labour-run Salford Council—had "exposed insulation on the exterior of a building." This "is not safe because of the risk of the fire spreading over the surface. It doesn't comply with building regulations... They have guaranteed there is definitely a fire risk."



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