Grenfell fire survivors speak out over poor treatment

Our reporters
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Grenfell Tower survivor Christos Fairbairn described his shabby treatment by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council:

"I was put in a hotel for the first two weeks, then they came to me with an offer of a place that was behind the Houses of Parliament. It's in a nice place, a nice area, but I've gone into the house and it's small, there was a leak so the walls were wet. It wasn't liveable and they knew that."

He continued, "My thought is that they are trying to palm us off for 12 months, let everything die down. Then when legislation changes and rules are changed, then they're going to palm us off for good."

Asked whether fellow residents had a similar experience, Christos explained, "Because [many of the residents] are not British or English, the council think they can offer them stupid things because they don't have the understanding. A lot of people are just taking places, not knowing that they don't have to take it. … For me personally, we need to stick together and we need to fight against the council for our rights."

Munira has not been offered any housing that is acceptable to her by the council. She managed to escape from Grenfell Tower with her husband, two children, father-in-law and sister-in-law. She said, "There are six of us. We were put in a Premier Inn hotel and we are still there. It is outside the borough. They gave us two rooms. My husband has a room with my disabled father-in-law and looks after him. And I have another room with my sister-in-law and two kids in there.

"They offered us three properties and they know my father-in-law is disabled and has medical problems. One of the places was outside the borough. My advocate says we have a right to look for properties online and rent privately, so I went online and looked for properties and I found some. I told them, 'I am from Grenfell Tower.' And they replied, 'We cannot deal with you directly. You have to go through Kensington and Chelsea Council. They are dealing with you.'

"I then got told by the housing allocator at the council, 'If you go private, you will lose your rights as tenants of Kensington and Chelsea and the landlord can kick you out any time.'

"My father-in-law would need a stair-lift to go up and down stairs in any house, but they said, 'We can't do that. It's too expensive.' Yet again they are talking about saving money.

"Two days ago I heard that one of my neighbours at Grenfell accepted an offer to get a private place. I don't understand why we can't. We got offered a three-bedroom place, but there is no storage space there at all. My husband is getting depressed because the housing allocator keeps calling him saying, 'Why haven't you accepted the flat yet?' We were told by our advocate we have 21 days to make up our mind but the allocator keeps pushing us and saying, 'We want to know why you won't accept.' We can't even drill in the bathroom to put a bar on so he [father-in-law] can sit down and stand up.

"The council said when you accept the place it is 12 months' rent free, but they have offered what we are not happy with. They have burnt our house down. We had two bedrooms, but we were happy. I met the housing officer and he said, 'When you accept a place the rent will be the same as what you had at Grenfell.' My husband said, 'But what will happen after the 12 months? Will it still be the same then?' They had no reply to that. Also, the lady who was showing us around admitted, 'After one year we don't know what is going to happen with you.'"

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Munira continued, “Whatever has happened here has brought us closer and we are united. If we are not happy with your offer we are not going to take it. Do what you want to do. They are acting like they are doing us a favour. They are thinking, ‘Their house got burnt down and we are offering a three-bed house.’ We are being treated like we are beggars. But we will fight this and stand together.”

Stephen, who is asthmatic, lived just 70 yards away from Grenfell Tower. He has suffered ongoing health problems since the fire, which produced vast quantities of deadly hydrogen cyanide from the flammable cladding in which it was encased, as well as other toxic fumes. At a recent public meeting called by the Grenfell Response Team, he demanded of council leader Elizabeth Campbell that he be rehoused.

Speaking to the WSWS, Stephen, who is visibly shaken at recent events said, “We have had eight years of this. First they got rid of the car park [that would have allowed proper access to the building by fire engines when the fire broke out and was previously a fire assembly point for residents]. Then they built the school there, then they clad the tower and then there was the fire. I really thought when the fire started that it would soon be over and that the fire brigade would put it out.”

Stephen spoke about the callous attitude to Grenfell Tower residents of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO). The block that Stephen lived in is also run by KCTMO. “Someone from the TMO came around to my flat and they didn’t want to know. They spent about 10 minutes there. They said, ‘Why didn’t I make myself voluntarily homeless in order to get another place.’ I can’t believe they said that. I was homeless before and finally managed to get a place to live.”

Stephen said he had now been offered hotel accommodation, which he has accepted , but is only now starting to “process” the fire and its aftermath , which is proving to be traumatic. Some of the things he saw would be with him all his life. Stephen told the WSWS he saw the new head of the KCTMO, Elaine Elkington, had made a statement on taking over the role on Tuesday.

Elkington said, “ I’ m looking forward to working with our resident-led board and with staff to move the organisation forward at a business-critical time.”

While addressing the lucrative business opportunities that are the main priority of the KCTMO, Elkington did not make a single reference to the June 4 inferno in which at least 80 people perished in a terrible death. Stephen said, “I can’t believe that she didn’t mention the fire. These people don’t care.”

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