

Former Grenfell Tower residents left without permanent accommodation

By Thomas Scripps
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Five weeks after the Grenfell Tower inferno killed at least 80 people and made hundreds homeless, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) announced a rehousing policy for survivors.

The plan was put together by the emergency team air-dropped into the RBKC by the Conservative government to salvage the official administration's inept and callous handling of the catastrophe. This included dumping survivors in the Westway Sport and Fitness Centre, where they had to sleep on the floor; placing them in hotels across the capital without contact with the council, clothes, food or financial assistance; and pressuring households to accept unsuitable rehousing offers.

Faced with growing hostility among local residents, the new management's primary concern is to quiet opposition and bring matters back under the control of the authorities in what amounts to a giant public relations campaign and political cover-up.

Addressing former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk, the council lists a series of commitments regarding the funds and future housing options to be made available.

According to the document, former residents will be given the highest possible priority for permanent social housing (that is, a lifetime secure tenancy in a council property or lifetime assured tenancy in a housing association) and will be rehoused within the next 12 months. The Council states it will not force residents to accept an offer of social housing and will not penalise them for refusing.

Offered properties will be of equal to or larger size than the homes lost in the fire; the rent on these houses—charged after a 12-month amnesty on rent and utility bills—will be set no higher than the rent paid in Grenfell. The policy applies to Council introductory or

secure tenants, resident leaseholders, subtenants or lodgers of the above and tenants of non-resident leaseholders.

Replacing those homes destroyed in a disaster of their own making is the least the immensely wealthy RBKC can do, but residents should remain wary of this offer. As ever, the devil is in the detail.

The policy contains no commitment to rehousing residents locally, close to their jobs and support networks. While households will be allowed the right to refuse unsuitable properties, there is no guarantee that sufficient local or more generally suitable housing will be made available and offered. Currently, only 45 households have accepted accommodation offers, with only 12 properly rehoused. London continues to suffer a chronic housing shortage. Multi-million-pound developers then work to ensure that as little of that short supply is wasted on the working class. Last year, RBKC agreed deals worth almost £50 million to enable developers to avoid building “affordable homes” in the borough.

With the source of new housing uncertain, the FAQ document to former residents makes the following key statement:

“We hope that you will be offered a property that is acceptable to you within twelve months, but we will make more offers for *as long as it is reasonable and practical to do so* (emphasis added).” This leaves the whole “commitment” subject to withdrawal at the “reasonable and practical” whim of the Council.

Before residents find any suitable permanent housing, the policy states the intention to house them in temporary accommodation, as distinct from emergency accommodation like hotels. Offers of temporary accommodation will likewise be made “as long as it is reasonable and practical to do so.”

What rights households will have in these properties is unclear. Significantly, the 12 months' worth of paid rent and utilities begins once residents move into temporary accommodation and not into their new permanent homes. This puts a clock on residents to accept offers soon so as to make financial arrangements. Many will end up waiting in poor emergency accommodation to avoid this situation.

The rehousing policy confirms the meagre funding to be allocated by the government to those affected: £5,000 plus £500 for each household member over 16 as a means of restarting a family—most of whom were already in a fragile economic position and are now dispossessed, traumatised and uprooted.

The £10,000 “fresh start” payment to households mentioned in the FAQ is drawn from the Kensington and Chelsea Foundation and administered by the Rugby Portobello Trust, two charities independent of the government and council. Overall, the three main charities involved in Grenfell—the K&C Foundation, British Red Cross and London Community Foundation (working with the *Evening Standard* Dispossessed Fund)—have put forward over £11 million in support, compared to the national government's £5 million.

RBKC and government officials are aware of the immense social discontent among the British working class for which Grenfell has become a catalyst. In the case of rehousing, their ultimate aim, as with the public inquiry organised by Prime Minister Theresa May, is to placate working class opposition with meaningless promises in the hope of eventually returning to business as usual.

Assuming the Grenfell survivors do make it to homes they are happy with, they will be confronted once again with the criminal practices of deregulation, privatisation and social cleansing which produced Grenfell. Conservative and Labour councils across London have spent the past decades neglecting working class communities and throwing them out of the capital to make way for luxury apartments and neighbourhoods fit for the ruling and upper middle class. There are at least 214 “regeneration” schemes underway in London that will result in a net loss of 7,326 social rented homes.

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