

Grenfell fire survivors forced onto general housing waiting list

By Alice Summers
25 April 2019

A family of four who survived the devastating Grenfell Tower blaze in June 2017 have been told by Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council that they will be moved onto a general council housing waiting list as the programme to rehouse survivors “has now finished.”

Mahad Egal and Jamie Murray, who have two young children aged three and five, escaped with their lives from the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower during the harrowing fire nearly two years ago. Earlier this month, the family received a legal letter from the Conservative-run RBKC informing them they would be forced out of their current temporary accommodation, which they had been living in for around 18 months, as the council would no longer pay for it.

Although the family wanted to stay in their current temporary home, RBKC told them that the property was “no longer suitable” and their contract would not be renewed. While the council eventually yielded to widespread public anger over the decision and said that the family could stay in their temporary accommodation, the family are now on the council’s general waiting list to be allocated a permanent home.

RBKC stated in their letter to the couple’s solicitors that “taking into account your clients’ specific requirements, there are no current permanent rehousing options available for the council to offer at this stage.”

The letter adds that any future options for a permanent home for the family would be “either council or Housing Association homes,” made through the waiting list. According to the council, it is “not possible at this stage to provide a timescale” for when permanent accommodation might be found for the family.

RBKC’s letter declared arrogantly that the “Acquisition Programme” set up to buy permanent homes for survivors “has now finished.”

Earlier this year, the council offered Egal and Murray

entirely unsuitable permanent accommodation in a home connected to a building using aluminium decorative casing around its windows. The aluminium casing—which was reminiscent of the highly flammable aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding which was a leading factor allowing the rapid spread of the Grenfell fire—was visible from the living room window of the accommodation. This caused further distress to a family already traumatised by the loss of their home, their friends and almost their lives in the Grenfell fire.

The council claimed that the cladding material was not flammable, declaring it “one of the safest forms of rain-screening building material available in the industry.”

This was rejected by the couple, who said they were “given similar reassurances when we lived in Grenfell Tower.”

The council’s Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation and corporations it contracted encased the entirety of Grenfell Tower in deadly flammable cladding and insulation in its 2016 “refurbishment” of the block.

Despite the empty assurances from the council that the property was safe, the aluminium casing caused the family vomit-inducing anxiety and a worsening of PTSD symptoms after their experiences of the fire. The experience forced them to move back to their temporary accommodation after just three weeks. Ms. Murray said that at the beginning of April she also suffered a miscarriage.

Other families were also made initial offers of unsuitable accommodation, with some offers for properties outside the borough or with an insufficient number of bedrooms. Some survivors reported in the weeks and months immediately after the inferno that, despite escaping death in the 24-storey tower block, they were callously offered accommodation in other tower

blocks.

Speaking to the BBC's *Victoria Derbyshire* programme, Egal said that the RBKC was "relinquishing its duty" towards them. "It's shameful," he continued. "There's a lack of understanding, lack of communication and lack of humanity."

Nearly two years on from the devastating inferno, which killed 72 people and left hundreds more homeless and deeply traumatised, many households such as that of Egal and Murray remain without permanent accommodation and without the stability required to begin getting their lives back on track.

According to the North Kensington Law Centre, as of April 1, out of the 202 households made homeless from Grenfell Tower and adjacent Grenfell Walk, five are still in emergency accommodation, such as hotels, and 14 are in temporary homes. Of the 129 families evacuated from the wider area, one remains in emergency accommodation and 47 are still in temporary homes.

Last June, the law centre published a report concluding that the council had worsened the trauma of Grenfell survivors by failing to rehouse them in a timely manner. Pledges made had been broken and "the manner in which residents have been rehoused and the associated delays have added to their suffering," said Alex Diner, a policy officer for the law centre.

With the announcement from the council that the Acquisition Programme has ended, homeless families are now faced with a wait of months or, more likely, years to be settled into a permanent home.

According to RBKC's website, there were 3,330 households on its waiting list in December last year. In the whole of 2018, only 433 properties became available, of which a mere 141 had the two bedrooms that a household such as that of Egal and Murray require.

Survivors such as this family are now being forced into the appalling position of competing for limited social housing with other local residents who may have been waiting long periods for a home.

Speaking to the BBC, Egal said that there is "nothing else I can do now but wait... [But] I wouldn't want to go ahead of a family [on the list] that have been waiting for years for a home."

Despite it being one of the wealthiest boroughs in London, working class families, even those deemed as high-priority, often must wait up to five years to be housed in Kensington and Chelsea. London needs 50,000 new homes every year, but in 2016 only 24,230 were under construction.

Cuts to local government spending have seen social house-building grind to a halt since the 2008 global financial crash. For property developers, however, the crash ushered in low interest rates and access to easy finance through quantitative easing, which have been a boon for profits.

Despite initial assurances by Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May that all Grenfell survivors would be rehoused within three weeks of the fire, and the subsequent government and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council deadline of having all the displaced residents rehoused by the first anniversary of the fire, nearly two years later these promises have proved to be lies.

There is plenty of available and empty housing in the Kensington area, which could and should have been requisitioned in the immediate aftermath of the fire to rehouse the survivors and those evacuated. Within weeks of the fire, it was established that 1,652 properties were listed as unoccupied by Kensington and Chelsea, with many of those owned by oligarchs and multi-millionaires. Thirty-seven percent of these had been unoccupied for two years or more. Moreover, last October it was reported that the council owned 621 properties that had been empty and unfurnished for more than two years.

The SEP and Grenfell Fire Forum have insisted those guilty of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be arrested and charged.

* Justice for Grenfell means no cover-up and no inquiry whitewash!

* Arrest the political and corporate criminals responsible!

* Stop scapegoating the firefighters!

* Quality public housing is a social right!

* For an emergency multibillion-pound programme of public works to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

For further details, visit: [facebook.com/Grenfellforum](https://www.facebook.com/Grenfellforum)

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>