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Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Department for Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
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13.07.2017

Dear Secretary of State

Re: FIRE SAFETY IN TOWER BLOCKS

The London Borough of Brent held its Council meeting on 10th July 2017. The main focus for discussion was Fire Safety in Tower Blocks, an issue which we take very seriously indeed.

The Council's own stock is not affected by ACM cladding though those of Registered Providers in the Borough are. A calm and very responsible approach has been adopted by ourselves and our partners in Housing Associations and the Fire Service. All of the Housing Association properties impacted are new builds and they have informed us that they have significant fire safety precautions such as sprinklers and smoke detection and extraction equipment installed, and so do not need to be decanted. The Registered Providers are committed to removing unsafe cladding.

However, though the council's own high rise stock is not impacted by ACM and the London Fire Brigade have confirmed that all of our fire safety arrangements in high rise blocks are compliant with legislative standards, it is older and does not have sprinklers or smoke alarms routinely fitted. In the light of recent events, the Council has agreed to undertake further fire safety works in our high rise stock over the course of the next year and has estimated the cost to be in the region of £10m. This will bring us to a standard of best practice as opposed to compliance with legal standards and is in addition to the £10m that has been invested in fire safety over the past 4 years, demonstrating how we have prioritised fire safety to date.

The funding of these improvements needs careful consideration. The Council will reach its Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap for capital purposes in 2018/19. You will already be aware that your department's policy of reducing social housing rents by 1% per year until 2020 has put councils' HRAs under considerable strain - the cost of this policy change in Brent is in aggregate £23.3m to 2020. The impact of your department's policy on high value voids will also increase that pressure. The Council does not believe that social housing tenants should have to pay for these improvements to the stock through a de-prioritisation of both planned and reactive repair and maintenance works. For example £10m equates to 40 new homes or the replacement of 4000 boilers. As such, the Council resolved

to request the Government to provide the direct financial support to meet the costs incurred. This letter acts as our official request.

Looking forward and in the spirit of bringing to the fore issues aligned to this matter we raise that of permitted development. The Council is very concerned about the level of permitted development in the Borough. Whilst this was obviously brought about with the intention of increasing housing supply it does so with no recourse to the full and proper planning process. We will be concerned that people are living in converted office blocks for which design and safety standards are nowhere near as high as properties that have been through the full planning process. Prior approval will not consider levels of affordability nor indeed space standards and this is compromising the regeneration and safety of our communities. This has all the hallmarks of a future tragedy in the making if the proper governance, like that for all other planning applications, is not put in place. We strongly recommend that government revoke permitted development rights.

The Council also undertakes significant levels of enforcement against rogue private sector landlords. Indeed our work has been recognised as best practice and previous CLG Ministers have been present for raids that we have undertaken. It is of serious concern that the levels of overcrowding and lack of safety and, in some instances, homes that are not fit for human habitation are not more heavily regulated. The council believes that selective licensing is the best way to identify all privately rented sector properties in the Borough, making it easier to engage with the owners and to regulate the sector, including ensuring that all fire safety standards are met. Again we would ask Government to seriously consider reverting back to allowing councils that meet the criteria for the introduction of selective licensing to designate an area without confirmation from the Secretary of State. We shall be submitting an application for selective licensing next month and would ask that these wider considerations are fully taken into account when you determine the application.

And finally, of the (now) 8 buildings in Brent that have failed cladding, the majority have been nowhere near Brent's Building Control service. We are aware that one large Registered Provider only ever uses the same Building Control service nationally. This creates close relationships and has broken the impartiality and objectiveness of a regulatory service that is mandated within a Borough and in our view has compromised safety. We urge you to consider tightening regulation around Building Control to ensure that more transparent impartiality and objectivity, and so higher standards of safety, are returned.

As a Borough, the development of new housing and affordable housing remains our main priority. We are ambitious in our plans. In the past 4 years the number of new homes in the borough has increased by 6097. You mentioned in your speech to the LGA conference last week that you would like to meet and discuss plans with ambitious councils. We would be delighted to meet with you and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Muhammed Butt
Leader Brent Council



Carolyn Downs
Chief Executive