

London Assembly (Mayor's Question Time) Meeting – 22 June 2017

Transcript of Tributes to Victims of Grenfell Tower and Finsbury Park Attacks

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Can I start by asking the Mayor to say some words about the Grenfell Tower fire?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Thank you, Chair. All of us have been truly devastated by the horrific scenes at Grenfell Tower in Kensington on 14 June. My heart goes out to the family and friends of the victims and everyone affected by this fire. Tragically the police believe at least 79 people have died in the fire and many others are still being treated in hospitals across London. This has left a very tiny community in North Kensington absolutely devastated.

I want to thank our brave firefighters and emergency services, including National Health Service (NHS) staff and the police who continue to work around the clock in the aftermath of this tragedy. This has been, and still is, a painstaking operation. They have shown immense courage and professionalism in extremely harrowing circumstances. I have personally offered my thanks and gratitude to the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, Dany Cotton [QFSM], firefighters and officers from the ambulance service and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) at the scene. I can only admire and applaud their dedication, and pass on to them the gratitude of London.

However, I have also witnessed first-hand the justifiable frustration and anger of the local community. I have spent a lot of time listening to local affected residents. They are understandably distraught, frustrated and angry. I promised that I would fight for them to get the answers and support they deserve. Frankly, the immediate response from the local authority was not good enough. Residents were not proactively contacted. There was insufficient support on the ground. It took too long to get them the resources they need, whether a temporary home or financial assistance. I have been attending the Government's taskforce in response to the tragedy, standing up for local community needs. I have received assurances from the Government that the support is starting to improve. The first emergency payments have been made to residents of the tower, and the first housing offers have been made so residents can stay in a proper local home when permanent homes are secured by the Government. However, the response still needs to be better, faster and communicated more effectively to the local community. I have deployed GLA staff to London Councils, which is now co-ordinating matters, and also Team London to the recovery operation to support these efforts. I am also pushing the Government to speed up the checking of other tower blocks across the country. I have provided officer support from City Hall to speed this up because no one should go to sleep at night worrying about whether this could happen to them.

I am pleased the Government has committed to holding a full independent public inquiry into the fire at Grenfell Tower. In line with concerns about safety of other blocks that have been

similarly refurbished, I believe this inquiry needs to produce an interim report this summer. Residents need to be reassured that the inquiry will get all the answers they deserve. They should have their legal costs paid for and any individual or organisation found to be negligent must be prosecuted. As the Mayor of London I will continue to fight alongside them to ensure they get the support and answers they deserve as quickly as possible.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Can I invite Assembly Member Devenish, the Assembly Member for the local constituency, to speak?

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you, Assembly Member Arnold, and thank you, Mr Mayor. I can say I agree with virtually every word the Mayor has just said. It is an honour to speak on behalf of my constituents and on behalf of the Conservative Group here this morning.

The last eight days have been enormously difficult for North Kensington. All our thoughts are, of course, with the families and friends who lost loved ones and their homes. People are angry and those affected have an absolute right to be angry. However, our primary focus has to remain with those individuals who have been most affected; the Grenfell Tower families themselves, their neighbours and, of course, our outstanding emergency services. The psychological wellbeing of all those impacted by the fire over the long term must not be forgotten. Long-term cross-agency care will be essential.

We are still in the very early stages of what the London Fire Brigade has reminded us is an unprecedented fire. A huge number of questions must all be answered. Such answers cannot be unreasonably delayed. Continuous communication must be provided as it is the essence of all public services. Our public services are still too often sometimes inward looking. However, there is a very serious context here. Our police service has rightly launched a criminal investigation, something we must all remember. Inevitably, in the age of 24-hour news media, there has been an almost unprecedented amount of speculation, some of it fair comment but some of it borderline poor taste. To quote a London Fire Brigade note that we were kindly sent,

"We do not yet know what caused the fire. We do not know where it started and we do not know why it spread in the way that it did. Investigations have started but it is too soon to say any more."

I would be grateful if some in the media would include these words when reporting.

Politicians, both national and local, have to be held accountable but the way a noisy minority has tried to hijack an ongoing vital operation for its own sake is shameful. While the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has rightly been criticised, I hope the public inquiry the Prime Minister announced last Friday will include chapter and verse on how boroughs across London, as a whole, have come together to support my community. As reported, the wider community has been fantastic but London borough officers and councillors have been working around the clock alongside our emergency services and Whitehall civil servants. Local North Kensington children still went to school with the appropriate reassurance. Across the country housing departments have risen to the challenge to reassure the public and check housing

stock. As a local councillor myself I am very proud of the work that has been done by understated public servants who show their worth at times of crisis and every other day.

Chair Arnold, I would like to finish with a couple of points for reflection, please. Last week it was announced that Police Constable Keith Palmer was posthumously awarded the George Medal following the Westminster Palace terrorist attack. Yet again I am in awe at the bravery of all those who serve us.

Finally, a bit of context in these uncertain times. A retired Member of Parliament [MP] said to me, "When the media tries to compare the actions of any politician anywhere in the world with the actions of Her Majesty the Queen you know the politician is on a hiding to nothing". Mr Mayor, colleagues, God bless her Majesty, Prince William, our emergency services and the people of North Kensington.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much, Assembly Member Devenish. Thank you for drawing Members' attention to the legal status.

Members have in front of them a copy of the advice that the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority's (LFEPA) legal services has produced for their members. I thought it would be useful for all the Members to have it in front of you. You will also have it electronically.

Can I now call upon Assembly Member Twycross, Chair of LFEPA?

Fiona Twycross AM (Chair, London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority): Thank you, Chair. I would like to add on behalf of all members of LFEPA my deepest sympathy and condolences for all those who have lost their lives, their loved ones and their homes as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire. Our thoughts at this time are with them, their friends, family and neighbours and with all those in the community in and around Grenfell Tower.

This is a national tragedy, not just a London tragedy. Through the investigations, inquests and inquiries of coming months and years the community will, and must, get all the answers it needs and the changes it is understandably demanding. The Mayor has highlighted the need both for a full inquiry and for answers and, most importantly, action as soon as possible. This Assembly will play its role in delivering for Londoners so that "never again" genuinely this time means "never again".

As Chair of the Fire Authority I would like to focus on the remarkable response that has already been mentioned of all the emergency services, but especially that of the London Fire Brigade. I would like to pay tribute to the leadership of Dany Cotton [QFSM], Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, and her senior team who had the courage to exercise their operational discretion in accordance with national operational guidelines and ask firefighters to depart from standard working procedures; a decision one of her fellow chief fire officers described to me early this week as a brave decision but the right one. Dany is a remarkable leader of remarkable people. The Commissioner's decision allowed London's firefighters on the most dreadful of days and in the most dreadful of circumstances to save lives that would otherwise have been lost.

The death toll is horrifically high but without that brave decision, and the huge bravery of the firefighters who went into Grenfell Tower, the numbers of dead would have been considerably higher. They, and we, should be proud of what they did, of the work they carried out and the passion with which they tried to save lives and, indeed, saved lives. Despite the conditions, their exhaustion and the danger to their own lives our firefighters went into the tower again and again. There were countless acts of individual and collective bravery on the most difficult of days. They witnessed things and experienced things that were beyond imagination and beyond what anyone could and should expect.

I would like to pay tribute to all fire brigade staff - control centre staff in particular - but to everyone in the organisation who played a part and so many people did; to the Urban Search and Rescue team and firefighters still on the scene in the recovery stage; to all those supporting colleagues over the past ten days and over the next weeks and years; to the London Resilience Team, the Salvation Army and the Rapid Relief Team; to members of the public who brought our firefighters food and water, and a special mention must go to the lady that brought the now famous biryani. Thanks as well to those from other brigades who supported the rescue and recovery, notably Kent and Surrey, and to other neighbouring brigades whose mutual aid agreement supported the London Fire Brigade in tackling the unprecedented fire while still maintaining a service to protect London and Londoners.

I have not, and will not have, the opportunity to thank all those concerned but I would like to put on record my thanks and all of our thanks today. I have been moved and humbled by what I have heard and seen for myself of their work. I have often said I could never do the job of a firefighter. [Assembly Member] Tony Devenish mentioned the word “awe”; I am also more in awe than ever of what they do.

I would not normally include thanks on my account but exceptionally I would like to thank my own team here at City Hall, the Mayor’s Office and colleagues, particularly [Assembly Member] Len Duvall, for their support, both professional and personal. This tragedy has affected all of us, but above all we must remember those it involved directly. These events will mark their lives forever.

Dany Cotton rightly focused in the media on the fact that firefighters are both heroes and human. Above all else she focused on the need to consider the welfare of staff. I would like particularly to thank the Mayor for his support in raising this concern at the highest level of government, it is really appreciated. We, London and the country owe the London Fire Brigade, all our firefighters and our emergency services a debt of gratitude for their work but we also owe them a duty of care. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Can I call upon Assembly Member Berry?

Sian Berry AM: Thank you, Chair. I am speaking for the Green Group here. For both of us waking up to the Grenfell Tower disaster was completely heart breaking. All our thoughts are with what people must have gone through and with those injured and made homeless.

I want to say today something about the emergency response. The community has been absolutely amazing. The amount of donations piling up there when I went early on and the number of local volunteers coming forward was huge. It was an instant response from the community. As soon as the fire happened their first instinct, as is so often the case with Londoners, was to rally around and support each other.

The emergency services we cannot be more grateful to. They played their part so bravely. The official relief response for the community, I think we all agree, has been nothing like it should have been. Local councillors, and several of us Assembly Members, are still receiving questions and pleas from the local area for more support, particularly for more communication with community groups who are continuing to provide pastoral support and relief and are not yet included in the network of official support. I know the Mayor's Office is involved now in the new central command. I am really glad to hear the comments he made just now and I know that more staff are coming in by the day. I do hope this will be sorted out quickly now. This community has suffered so much and they continue to be traumatised over a wide area. They really deserve it. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Whittle.

Peter Whittle AM: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. I am sure many of us have been along to Grenfell Tower. I went this week. It was in the middle of a boiling hot day with a faultless blue sky. Then, as you are approaching, you come across this massive black edifice which almost rises up and is mocked by the blue sky. It is extraordinarily surreal. It does not look quite real but it is deadly real. It looks like a funeral pyre and that is exactly what it is.

My fellow Assembly Members have said how brilliant the emergency services have been. However, Assembly Berry just pointed out as well the community response. I went and looked at the various messages left. What is surprising is that a community can be so devastated and yet show such amazing spirit. These might seem small things but actually they go home and they do write, they write on placards, they write letters and they go and put flowers together. That, to me, is a real triumph of the human spirit.

There are still things though that need to be done. We are the Assembly and we can ask questions. We need to ask questions and to get questions answered properly. That is true. However, while I was down there I went into a pub called the Pig & Whistle. I do not know whether you know it but it is on the west of the tower. I said, "I am from the London Assembly, how can we help?" The barmaid there, Denise, said, "Look at that". Right by the door, and in fact taking up about 25% of the pub, was masses and masses of things that people had left. These were not just the clothes and things they had got from the shelves or second-hand stuff; they had gone out and bought stuff. There were packets from Primark and things like this. It was building up and was massive. She said there is no one to distribute it. That is not because people do not want it distributed but people are stretched so much. Just to take that one example, if any of us would like to maybe go down and help and try to clear some of this out and distribute then I have the number and everything here. That would be a very, very good

thing to do because it is absolutely the very essence of human kindness which is, at the moment, just sitting there and needs to be delivered.

I will just add, once and for all, on behalf of David [Kurten AM], myself and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) group, this is just the most appalling thing. I say to all the people here that if you have not been there do go and just pay your respects to the site. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Pidgeon.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM: Thank you very much. My thoughts are with all those affected by this horrific fire. Many of us woke up last week to this unthinkable disaster in our city unfolding on our television screens.

I would like to express my thanks to all the emergency services, including the London Air Ambulance who played a key role. They were all involved in this incident and showed such huge bravery. Also the humanity and community shown by so many ordinary Londoners and neighbours volunteering, helping out with donations and giving their time and support. This tragedy has had an impact not just across the capital but across the country. It stunned everyone. I visited on Sunday and felt the sense of frustration and despair on the streets; raw emotions posted on walls and the missing signs everywhere you went for children, for pensioners and for couples alongside this burnt out shell of a tower, people's homes gone.

I would actually like to put on record my thanks to Ealing Council, its staff and leader who I met at the local emergency centre alongside civil servants, all trying their best to help those affected by the fire, and also, of course, local churches, other community groups and my colleague in Kensington, Councillor Linda Wade, who has been providing information and support to those who have been rehoused in Earl's Court, the area she represents.

Now is not the time to finger point but it is very clear lessons must be learnt. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Mr Mayor, can I ask you to say a few words regarding the Finsbury Park attack?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Thank you, Chair. It has been an extremely difficult few months for our city and for all Londoners. The horrific terrorist attack in Finsbury Park follows the Grenfell Tower fire, the recent attacks on Westminster Bridge and London Bridge as well as the senseless attack in Manchester. My thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims and everyone affected by the latest terrible attack. Sadly one person died at the scene, nine people have been taken to hospital with injuries and two others treated for injuries at the scene.

Once again the police and the emergency services responded quickly and with the utmost professionalism. This was a deliberate attack on innocent Londoners, many of whom were returning from their evening Taraweeh Ramadan prayers. We do not yet know the full

motivation behind it but terrorism is terrorism, no matter the target and regardless of the poisonous ideology behind it.

There has been a worrying rise in hate crime, including Islamophobic incidents following the attack at London Bridge. In the seven days before London Bridge there were 36 Islamophobic incidents. In the seven days after this rose to 108, an increase of 200%. Racist hate crime incidents increased from 311 to 378 incidents, an increase of 21%. These are the incidents reported. Clearly it is possible some are not. I want to assure Londoners that the police are taking a zero tolerance attitude towards hate crime. My message to the victims of hate crime is please report it. Do not think it is too trivial. Do not think the police will not take it seriously, they will. The MPS has deployed extra police to keep all Londoners safe, particularly those observing Ramadan. It will be taking additional measures to protect mosques and stepping up its presence in other areas.

Like the terrible attacks in Westminster, London Bridge and in Manchester the attack in Finsbury Park is an attack on all of us and our shared values of tolerance, freedom and respect. We must crack down on extremism of all types.

Can I just end by saying this, London has been through an incredibly difficult few weeks but I know Londoners will remain strong and united. I know that we will come through this. We will stay strong and we will never be divided.

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): Thank you, Mr Mayor. Assembly Member Arnold as a constituency Member.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM: Thank you, Deputy. Can I start by thanking the Mayor for his immediate and continuing direct support to the residents of Finsbury Park? What stands out for me whilst I was there with him was his attendance at prayers at the Muslim Welfare Centre mosque and also his attendance at the vigil lead by members of the longstanding Finsbury Park Interfaith Forum. Thank you on behalf of the residents of Finsbury Park.

Members, I have had the privilege of representing the people of Finsbury Park for over 25 years, first as a local councillor and then on this Assembly. It marks the connecting point of three London boroughs; Camden, Islington and Haringey. It is an area that welcomes everyone and, as a result, it is as diverse as it gets; whether we look at ethnicity, class, religion, culture or age. At one time it was a forgotten area. It was severely deprived and was susceptible to radical views. Members, it was so susceptible - and you will know because records show - that Finsbury Park Mosque was taken over by who we now call a known terrorist, Abu Hamza [former imam]. It was worshippers from that mosque who said, "We will not tolerate this because Islam is a peaceful faith". Beyond the bridge, some 400 yards away, they found a shop with a garage and with space behind it. Working with the community, working with councillors, working with myself and others they were able to navigate the planning system. They were able to come together and now have a wonderful centre. That is the spirit that, if you like, fuels this area. We will not stand for nonsense. We will not be divided. Over the years it has changed dramatically, regeneration has helped, but the key success has been the strengthening of community

endeavour, collaboration across boundaries and, most importantly of all, a respect for all. The attack on our community this week will not succeed.

There are people who seek to divide us, as we heard from the Mayor, to sow seeds of hate and create a cycle of violence. However, this is a place truly where an attack on one is an attack on all. This attack only strengthens our bonds of community. There are people who see the world solely in terms of religion but we are part of a wider civic society in which all our differences and similarities must be acknowledged. That must go to strengthen our sense of community. In Finsbury Park we accept people of all religions and of none.

There are also people who seek to make us suspicious, uncertain and afraid. I am not afraid. You are not afraid. The residents of Finsbury Park will never be afraid.

Remember - and I will tell this to anyone who thinks they can come into our community and divide us - the community were the first responders. The community were there caring for the injured waiting for the ambulance. It was a young man who found the bravery when it was necessary to secure the perpetrator. It was the community, and the local imam, who said, "We will keep him safe for when the police come so that he can face justice". That is all I can say because, of course, all that is now in the criminal system.

Our hearts go out to all those affected by these dreadful events. Like every other speaker this morning I want to add my thanks to our police services, to our ambulance and hospital staff. Their rapid response has saved lives. Their endeavours, using their professional skills, will be helping people who will need care and surgery. I did burns nursing. It is one of the most demanding services there is. The patients are some of the most resilient and brave people you could ever find. I see my colleague, Dr Sahota [AM], nodding. Our thoughts will be with them as many of them go on the journey of recovery.

I finish by once again thanking the Finsbury Park community for its response, not just on the day but in the days since and for all the days to come. I say it again, we will remain united. Thank you.

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): Thank you, Chair. Assembly Member Bacon.

Gareth Bacon AM: Thank you, Deputy Chair. It seems a very long time ago since we gathered here for an emergency meeting following the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack. In my remarks at that meeting I commented that I am never prouder of the people of my country and of my city than when I witness how we react to adversity. That meeting was only three months ago but there has been so much adversity since that day it feels like far longer.

In times of adversity there will always be those who seek to take advantage from it. Sadly, very depressingly, there have been examples of that on full display very recently. Rage and finger pointing can be entirely understandable but they can also lead to division, violence and destruction. It takes a great deal of strength to resist the temptation to indulgence in vengeance, whether righteous or otherwise. In this we have recently seen in Finsbury Park examples of humanity at its very worst but also at its very best. I will take the worst first. I am

well aware of the name of the racist idiot who committed the atrocity in Finsbury Park but I have no intention of honouring him by naming him here. There is no honour, no justification and no courage required to aim a van at a crowd of unsuspecting pedestrians and mow them down. No higher power is served by striking at the unwary and the defenceless. There is no legitimation for an action of this kind. It is simple cold-blooded murder. Perpetrators of such actions do not deserve remembrance.

However, the actions of this murderous coward also revealed a shining example of humanity at its very best. I am referring particularly to the actions of Imam Mohammed Mahmoud who, after the survivors of this attack had caught the perpetrator, intervened to protect him, as the Chair has just said, so he could be handed over to the police and that due process of law could be followed. Many people might feel that Imam Mahmoud and those with him would have had every justification for taking an entirely different course of action under those circumstances, and who among us could really have blamed them if they had. I certainly could not. However, in the heat of the moment they chose to resist that temptation and to put their faith in the rule of law. When asked afterwards why he acted as he did the imam is quoted as saying,

“This demonisation of the Muslim community at the hands of people with ulterior motives has succeeded to some extent by influencing the vulnerable and the impressionable. We just hope that in times of tragedy people come together and unite. The fabric of this society is not torn but we have to continue to keep the fabric of this society intact and to come together.”

I think those are words to live by. I can think of no better sentiment with which to finish my remarks. We are right to condemn this attack, like the attacks that have gone before it. The actions and words of Imam Mohammed Mahmoud offer great hope for the future and he, and those sentiments, deserve to be remembered. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Assembly Member Russell.

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you, Assembly Member Arnold. On Monday night I joined members from all over Highbury and Finsbury Park standing with Finsbury Park Mosque and Muslim Welfare House to show our solidarity and our support for all those involved in the despicable terrorist attack on Sunday night. Like many people there I was woken by sirens and helicopters, desperately saddened to hear of the death and injuries caused in this attack on our community, and proud of the way people prevented the attacker from doing further harm and of the imam for ensuring he was safely handed to the police.

I would like to put on record my thanks to the emergency services, to the police, to Islington Council staff, and my fellow Islington councillors who worked so brilliantly to manage the aftermath of the attack.

The informal gathering on Monday outside the mosque included representatives of many faith communities and those of no faith. The diversity described earlier, very brilliantly by Assembly Member Arnold, of people who were standing there in solidarity is testimony to the incredible work of Mohammed Kozbar [Chairman, Finsbury Park Mosque] who has done so

much to build bridges, not walls, and to ensure that Finsbury Park Mosque and Muslim Welfare house are truly part of our community in Islington. I am proud to live in that borough.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Kurten.

David Kurten AM: Thank you, Madam Chairman. It has been a horrible three months for London with the Westminster Bridge attack and the London Bridge attack that went on into Borough Market, and now we have this hideous attack in Finsbury Park as well. Like all of you it is a horrible and shocking thing to see people who live in London being the victim of such an awful attack and such an awful crime.

In the mind of the person who did this he probably justified it, but there is no justification for an act that is quite simply an attempted mass murder. We have to pay tribute to Imam Mahmoud for saving his life, as Assembly Member Bacon said, and handing him over to the police.

Of course, we all feel for the people who were attacked, the injuries they have now, the suffering of their families and freedoms. We wish them well. They are in our thoughts and in our prayers.

Also I would like to add, of course, our tribute to the emergency services, the ambulance men and women, the police men and women who were there to help, to deal with the situation, to make sure it did not get any worse than it was, and to try to clear up and provide comfort to all those who were hurt and injured. We do not want any more of these attacks in our city. There is never any justification. Whatever you believe, whatever differences of belief you have, we have to remember that all these people are human beings. We are all equal. We all have equal value and equal worth. We must always remember that. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Pidgeon.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM: Thank you very much. Another attack of terrorism on the streets of London, this time on our Muslim community. My thoughts are with those involved, their families and friends. I wish to, like others, thank the emergency services for their swift action, and the action of the local imam from Muslim Welfare House and local people who helped apprehend the van driver so quickly. We owe them a very special thank you for their dedication, professionalism and bravery.

I would also like to thank the Mayor for his swift and sensitive responses to this, and to all of these incidents over recent weeks, representing our city and our values.

The attack at Finsbury Park, just as the attack at London Bridge or the concert hall in Manchester, was an attack on our way of life. It was an attack on our open, tolerant and united city. We will not let them win.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you.