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LONDON ASSEMBLY LABOUR



Andrew Dismore AM

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Dear Mr Jenrick,

Date: 22 December 2020

I write regarding the Waking Watch Relief Fund recently announced by the government. Whilst I welcome funding for alarm systems, potentially lifting some of the financial burden that waking watches currently place on leaseholders, I am concerned that this is not enough to release leaseholders from the cost of waking watches and the anxiety and stress which accompanies this. Albeit a step in the right direction, the Fund has left many unanswered questions, which I want to raise with you.

In London the mean cost to each leaseholder for a waking watch is £499 a month, with each building in London paying on average a total of £20,443 a month.¹ Leaseholders have shared with the London Assembly's Fire, Resilience and Emergency Planning (FREP) Committee the desperation that they feel due to these waking watch costs, including the fear that these costs will push them to bankruptcy. Installing new alarm systems could release them from some of these ongoing costs, but it will not restore the thousands of pounds already spent on waking watches or the future costs until an alarm system is installed. Even with an alarm system, some buildings will also still require a waking watch. It will take time for funding to be secured and alarms to be fitted and so the Fund does not address the immediate needs of leaseholders- for their buildings to be safe to live in, for remediation work to take place on buildings of all sizes, and for temporary measures like waking watch to be funded..

Moreover, it is clear that the funding provided will not be enough to provide alarm systems for all of those buildings that currently have waking watches in place. In March this year the number of buildings in London with a waking watch in place was 286, but by October the number had risen to 457.² This month the London Fire Commissioner (LFC) Andy Roe told the London Assembly's Budget and Performance Committee that there are now over 700 waking watches in London.³ As the numbers have risen steadily throughout the year, so they are likely to rise further as more buildings with dangerous cladding are identified.

¹ Gov.uk, '[Building safety programme: waking watch costs](#)' [Date accessed 21.12.20]

² BBC.co.uk, '[Dangerous Cladding: 'Fire Patrols at our flat cost us £500,000'](#)' [Date accessed 21.12.2020]

³ London Assembly, '[Budget and Performance Committee 10th December 2020](#)' [Date accessed 21.12.2020]

Ritu Saha, a founding member of the UK Cladding Action Group, gave evidence recently to the London Assembly's FREP Committee. She told the Committee that she and other leaseholders had paid £120,000 for the installation of a simultaneous evacuation fire alarm system, however they still need to maintain a waking watch even after its installation.⁴ This evidence suggests that your announcement, though welcome, is giving many leaseholders false hope as they may not be able to stand down their expensive waking watches even with an alarm system.

£30 million split between the 700 buildings with waking watches in London works out at an average £47, 800 per building for an alarm system to be fitted. This is considerably less than the £120, 000 paid by Ms Saha's building's residents for their alarm. £30 million looks unlikely to be enough to address the need for alarm systems in London, let alone across England.

Assuming that the costs of £120,000 for Ms Saha's building are a representative average, the new funds will only enable 250 buildings to have alarm systems installed. This represents just 36% of the buildings in London in need of help, let alone the rest of the country.

Ms Saha's evidence that a waking watch was still deemed necessary at her building, even with an alarm installed is disturbing. It is possible that this funding in some cases will lead some leaseholders to believe that they will no longer need to pay for waking watches when this may not be the case.

Finally, whilst I note that the LFC has welcomed the announcement of the Waking Watch Relief Fund, as do I, I also share his concerns that we do not yet know the scale of what has happened in London's built environment.⁵ Whilst this funding may help some leaseholders in the short term, it does not get us closer to making London's buildings safe.

Action must be taken to resolve the spiralling waking watch costs which leaseholders are facing now. A six month wait for an alarm system will cost London leaseholders on average nearly £3000- money which many are already struggling to find and can ill afford to pay. There must be recognition that pushing these costs onto leaseholders is unfair and is impacting upon their wellbeing at a time when they are already coping with so much.

As such I would appreciate it if you could answer the following questions:

- How will the Waking Watch Relief Fund address the debts which leaseholders have already incurred due to the high costs of waking watches in London?

⁴ London Assembly, '[London Assembly FREP Committee 13th October 2020, Appendix 1](#)' [Date accessed 21.12.2020]

⁵ London Fire Brigade, '[London Fire Brigade Response to Waking Watch Fund](#)' [Date accessed 21.12.2020]

- How will the Waking Watch Relief Fund reduce the fire risk that dangerous cladding poses to leaseholders?
- How many buildings are anticipated to have new common alarm systems installed through the Waking Watch Relief Fund?
- Will more money for the Waking Watch Relief Fund be available if the number of buildings in need of a common alarm system exceeds current expectations?
- What are the criteria for funding?
- How many common alarms do you anticipate being funded and installed by the end of 2021?
- How will this impact upon the workload of the London Fire Brigade?

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andrew Dismore". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Andrew Dismore AM

Labour London Assembly Member for Barnet and Camden