

The [London](#) fire brigade (LFB) commissioner warned ministers about fire risks to high-rise buildings months before the Grenfell Tower disaster, and said residents were being placed at “significant risk” of fires spreading between flats.

Dany Cotton wrote to the then housing minister, Gavin Barwell, reporting that the LFB was finding problems at the rate of one building a month and warned there could be more, the public inquiry into the disaster heard on Thursday.

Breaches of compartmentation were a significant issue in the 14 June 2017 disaster, which claimed 72 lives. They have also emerged as a common fault in scores of other high-rise apartment blocks caught up in the [post-Grenfell building safety crisis](#).

In April 2017 Cotton told Barwell and Brandon Lewis, then the policing and fire minister, of “mounting evidence of issues of concern within residential buildings and, in particular, blocks of flats [about compartmentation and the impact on policies telling people to stay put].”

She said residents were being placed at “significant risk of fire spread” and requested a meeting “to make London a safer place to live”.

Barwell is expected to give evidence to the inquiry in its next phase.

Cotton [retired early](#) in 2019 after the LFB was [strongly criticised](#) by the inquiry chairman, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, for its handling of the fire. He said the LFB was guilty of an “institutional failure” to inform firefighters about the risks of cladding fires before the disaster. On the night of the fire there was a “failure of command”.

Giving evidence to the inquiry for a second time on Thursday, Cotton said she had not taken any action to train her firefighters so they could be ready to abandon stay-put policies on high-rise buildings if fire was spreading rapidly between flats.

The inquiry has already found that the LFB’s failure to switch from Grenfell’s stay-put policy to ordering an evacuation more quickly cost lives.

Cotton said she had been exceptionally busy, not least responding to terror attacks in London in early 2017.

The inquiry also saw 2016 internal LFB reports warning that the problem of compartmentation failures could mean that policies of telling residents to stay put in the event of a fire had “scant factual basis”.

Cotton, who was made commissioner in January 2017, told Richard Millett QC, counsel to the inquiry: “It’s become clear that the fire safety department at the London fire brigade was not as well-connected to the rest of the organisation as it could or should have been.”

Millett asked: “Why did the LFB not send a clear message to crews telling them of the LFB’s growing concern, at the latest by 2016, that the stay-put evacuation strategy may be undermined or inappropriate in any number of buildings in front of them, and that they may be required to evacuate residents?”

“I don’t know the answer to that,” replied Cotton.

Cotton caused anger among the Grenfell bereaved when in evidence to the inquiry in 2018 she said fire was as foreseeable as “a space shuttle landing on the Shard”.

Asked again about whether she still believed the disaster was unforeseeable, she said: “My view is that we had a lot of organisational knowledge. But I still think that even now the knowledge held by the London and UK fire service would not have anticipated such a catastrophic failure of a building with so many breaches.”

However, she said: “There was information that we could have shared that could have been translated into training for members of LFB that may well have assisted them.”

The inquiry continues.

Source: [Grenfell inquiry: fire chief warned ministers of high-rise faults before fire](#)