

In Tynwald
21st March 2023
Item 3
50th Anniversary of the Summerland Fire

Statement to be made by the Chief Minister

Mr President, in August this year, fifty years will have passed since fire engulfed the Summerland complex on Douglas Promenade, resulting in the tragic loss of fifty lives.

Half a century since what was then the worst peacetime loss of life since the Second World War.

The disaster is a profoundly sad chapter in the Island's history for those who remember it - and those who have learned about it since.

It is right that the landmark 50th anniversary of the tragedy is properly commemorated and I today set out how Government plans to do that.

The world has changed immeasurably in the past fifty years – more than half of our current population were not born at the time of the tragedy.

Yet events on the night of 2 August 1973 continue to resonate in the lives of many - whether they be survivors, relatives or descendants of those who died or suffered, residents or visitors.

Those who carried out vital duties on the night or witnessed the fire also carry painful memories – which in turn have affected their lives and families.

The ripples spread wide - each of us will have a unique human response to the tragedy and to this year's anniversary.

So with this in mind Honourable Members, I can confirm that our commemoration plans are focused on people;

On coming together to pay respects to all who have been affected;

And on providing younger generations with a meaningful perspective, creating valuable connections with the past.

At the centre of our commemoration will be a **National Service of Remembrance** on Sunday 30 July at St George's Church in Douglas.

Open to all, this will be an opportunity for the community to pay a respectful tribute to those who died, survived or responded to the fire.

We will invite representatives of the emergency and health services, local authorities and other organisations with connections to Summerland. Members of the public will be very welcome to attend too.

Acts of remembrance bring people from all walks of life together to share memories, to learn about an event and of the loss suffered by others, and to grieve.

I believe such an occasion is befitting of this anniversary. On a practical level, the service we are planning will provide a focal point for the community. And I hope it will symbolise a nation's enduring regret.

On this landmark anniversary we will **formally thank our emergency services and hospital staff** for their response to the Summerland fire and its aftermath.

Presentations will publically recognise the contribution and suffering in the line of duty of those who served conscientiously and selflessly in an unprecedented, difficult and dangerous situation.

You may see this recognition as overdue. It was reported at the time that exhausted police officers who'd worked night and day during and after the fire received a bottle of whisky from their supervisor.

The whisky wasn't intended as derisory. It was a gesture of genuine appreciation. Things are different today – fifty years on, this government will offer a wider recognition, not just for the actions of individuals on the day, but to the emergency and health services as a whole.

I am pleased to announce that I will lead a **formal presentation** to senior representatives from each of the emergency services and Noble's Hospital on the eve of the anniversary.

In addition to these formal events, a new **Oral History**, a spoken word project, will capture and present memories of the Summerland disaster.

Culture Vannin has recorded a series of interviews with people who escaped the fire, who lost friends or relatives, and who responded as members of the emergency services.

For some of those taking part, this is the first time they have told their stories publically in this way.

These personal memories will form a unique historical record, literally giving voice to those with first-hand experiences of the disaster.

Culture Vannin will make this new collection of moving, human stories available online to all in perpetuity.

I thank those survivors and the bereaved for being willing to share their experiences, to enhance our understanding of the Summerland tragedy and ensure our empathy for those affected does not dim.

Another project in the pipeline is an **online exhibition** by Manx National Heritage entitled 'Remembering Summerland'.

This Google Arts & Culture online exhibition will focus on the spoken word, photos and film and include archive material from our existing collections, oral testimonies collected by Culture Vannin and filmed interviews.

This promises to be a fascinating curation, and it will be launched in the week of the anniversary.

The oral history and online exhibition will both highlight a tragic event. But they are thoughtful and positive ways to commemorate that event, and for the public here and around the world to find out more about it. These imaginative events are designed to draw people in and keep our focus on the human element of the Summerland tragedy.

As to the anniversary itself on 2nd of August, a service of remembrance will be hosted by Douglas Borough Council at the Kaye Memorial Garden.

This annual event has provided a supportive and comforting occasion for many of those affected, in an inspired public space.

I will be attending with Ministers, and I thank Douglas Borough Council for their kind invitation.

A private event is planned at the Summerland site itself, and we will be in contact with the organisers to advise them of our plans.

Mr President, I said at the start of this statement that our commemoration will focus on people. It is not about place.

I understand and share the frustration of many in our community that the Summerland site has not yet been transformed appropriately.

While the site appears to offer much scope for development, and many ideas have been tabled over the years, it presents real challenges.

This is not the time or place to discuss development opportunities and options, but Members can be assured these challenges are being directly addressed as part of this Government's commitment to improving brownfield sites in the capital.

More information about the events and projects outlined today will be shared soon.

A full programme with timings and dates for our commemorations, exhibitions and events will be announced nearer the time.

I have been clear from the start that the 50th anniversary should be a defining moment, when we look the Summerland disaster in the face, and engage meaningfully.

We have an opportunity and a duty to educate future generations.

The enduring online projects as much as individual memories made at remembrance events will raise awareness and understanding of the Summerland fire and its sad legacy – and this has to be welcomed.

Mr President, we must not, and will not, forget Summerland.