

**In Tynwald**  
**18<sup>th</sup> July 2023**  
**Item 5**

**Summerland 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary - Statement by the Chief Minister**

Thank you Mr President.

In little over a week the Isle of Man will be remembering its worst peacetime tragedy and loss of life.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> August we will remember the 50 people who lost their lives as fire ravaged the Summerland complex, hosting thousands of visitors looking forward to an evening of family entertainment.

Also Mr President, in the forefront of our minds will be those who survived the tragedy and those who were bereaved; both groups left carrying a lifetime's burden of hurt and suffering.

I have heard, first-hand, how those affected endure ongoing physical and mental pain caused by the events of that night. I am aware that feelings of loss and anger caused by what happened half a century ago often do not fade or diminish as the years pass. The images of the inferno are not something one can easily forget. They are part of our national consciousness. They are deeply ingrained in our culture, our community, and it is vital that we acknowledge and remember that.

On the evening of 2 August 1973, the Island rushed to help those caught up in the Summerland fire. There are many tales of bravery, long hours and tireless efforts to help people caught in the chaos. We know too, of the impact that responding to the

incident had on those in the emergency services, and afterwards. It continued in later years, and still does.

Responders from the emergency and health services witnessed dreadful scenes and human suffering the like of which most of us will never see in a lifetime. Members of the public, bystanders, holiday-makers – anyone who happened to be in the area – witnessed an unfolding tragedy.

Mr President, many of us across the Island and in this Honourable Court will have memories of what they were doing that August evening when they first heard about the fire. The question that immediately comes to mind for our Island is how could a fire sweep so quickly through a building resulting in the loss of so many lives?

The answer came from the Commission of Inquiry into the fire that identified the two most important causes: a “delayed, unorganised and difficult evacuation” from the building; and faults in its design and construction, in particular the use of materials that could not prevent the spread of the fire.

It is clear Mr President that there were inadequacies, failings and lapses identified by the Commission, and that had matters been addressed differently, some of the loss of life at Summerland may have been prevented.

The causes and contributing factors are individually serious. Collectively they resulted in a tragedy.

I am sorry. Sorry for the pain and suffering felt by everyone affected by the fire and sorry for the failings that could have prevented such a tragedy.

Earlier this year I visited the Kaye Memorial Garden, our Island's memorial to the Summerland disaster. Whilst there, I reflected on the awful loss felt by so many families and the Island's enduring regret for what happened. I vowed then that this Government would be the one that would look directly at the horror caused by the fire and acknowledge the failings and inadequacies that contributed to the loss of so many lives that night. Words will not bring your loved ones back – or relieve the associated pain and heartache – but collectively we share your sorrow.

Indeed emotions around the tragedy will be shared by others across the Island and this anniversary provides a focus for our community to stand alongside those affected. We want to reflect on what happened, to recognize and acknowledge a lasting sense of loss and regret.

A National Service of Remembrance will take place on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> July to enable us to do so. We have invited survivors, relatives of victims, those bereaved by the tragedy and members of our emergency and health services past and present. I am pleased that many are planning to attend, and it is my sincere hope that the act of coming together for a common cause will be a comfort and provide the opportunity to forge more positive memories.

The service is open to all, and I hope many members of the Manx public will attend. However much or little you know about Summerland; the unique circumstances of the commemoration service will make it a poignant and special occasion. It is an opportunity for all of us to pay a respectful tribute to those who died, survived, or responded to the fire. A book of remembrance has been commissioned for the occasion in which people are invited to record their memories and tributes. This will be in St George's church at the service and kept there safely, as a legacy of our anniversary commemorations.

I look forward to welcoming people who may never have visited the Island before but whose tragic family connection means they will find comfort in attending. Many others, I'm sure, will follow the service live online and on the radio.

Islanders drawn into the tragedy by their jobs and unwavering sense of duty will be formally recognised at a separate ceremony the following day. Presentations will be made to our emergency services and health and care professionals for their response to the Summerland fire and its aftermath.

To conclude Mr President, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Summerland fire is the right moment for this Government to offer an apology for the suffering caused by the wrongs of the past.

While the anniversary will be a focus later this month, the Summerland story, its aftermath and legacy will continue for years to come. So, it is my genuine hope that this apology helps to restore trust and build more positive relationships for the future.