

NEW ZEALAND (/NEWS/NATIONAL) / ...

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Loafers Lodge fire: 'I think we are all responsible - not just the owners' - Social worker

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Loafers Lodge in Wellington after a fire tore through the building last month. Photo: RNZ / Hamish Cardwell

Hundreds of people gathered in Wellington's Cathedral of St Paul on Thursday in a service of remembrance for the victims of the Loafers Lodge fire.

Fire engines parked up at the base of the steps of the cathedral as families, survivors, emergency services, council and community members came together to pay respects and acknowledge the blaze's impact.

Five people died and nearly 100 others were made homeless when fire tore through the multi-storey budget accommodation block last month (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/490189/loafers-lodge-fire-man-arrested-and-charged-with-arson>).

A 48-year-old man will appear in the High Court next week charged with five counts of murder and two counts of arson.

Fire and Emergency district commander Nick Pyatt said the fire represented a worst-case scenario for his staff. He said the crews that worked the fire showed immense bravery in the toughest of situations, and their actions saved many lives.

Tom White, a social worker who had worked in the Newtown community for more than 20 years, worked with people who lived in the building and said the fire trucks parked outside the cathedral moved him to tears.

"I feel really upset about it, about the loss of life, but also that we live in a society where places like that are acceptable and no sprinklers is legal. I think we are all responsible - not just the owners of Loafers Lodge."



Hundreds of people gathered at the service. Photo: RNZ/Bill Hickman

Newtown Festival organiser Martin Hanley said the fire was not even under control when people began to call him and ask what they could do to help. He said a Loafers Lodge resident who lost everything was part of the team that worked behind the scenes of the festival in March.

"It's really important to be able to show that we care and we're grieving the loss in our community. We feel a little strange that it's not in Newtown, but there's so many people that had to come. We don't have a venue this size."

Hanley said he hoped a concert of local artists would help to continue the flow of support to the people who had lost their homes.

Kate Francis lived near the building, and said she wanted to be at the service because she felt for the circumstances of the people who lived there.

"I've been homeless and I really feel for homeless people. I know that a lot of those people were not there out of choice, but because they had to be. I hope that it brings about some positive change."

Rhona Carson, president of the Newtown Residents' Association, said the strong turnout at the service showed the degree of the fire's effect on the city.

"To begin with, we were thinking of it as a Newtown event - but it's a city event or even a country event. I think it's very important that people have the opportunity to come together and to grieve together and to move forward perhaps."

P Carson said she hopes the spotlight shone on the conditions faced by vulnerable people in her community would help to galvanise action to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.