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"Firefighters were faced with an extremely fierce fire that was well established in the first floor and the roof of the building, which has since collapsed," said Hertfordshire county council.

"Sadly, we can confirm that two people died in the fire and we would like

to offer our sympathies to their families."

Residents were taken to a nearby hotel, and six people were treated for smoke inhalation.

One resident said: "We could see it from the bedroom window. It went up quite quickly."

@joshtboswell

**Firefighters assess the damage following the blaze**

## Toxic fire-resistant sofas linked to surge in thyroid cancer

**Jonathan Leake and Gareth Simkins**

Scientists have warned that chemicals used to fireproof millions of British sofas could be linked to a surge in deadly thyroid cancer.

A conference next month will hear evidence that flame retardants such as decaBDE – decabromodiphenyl ether – used in most domestic sofas and mattresses, can cause cancer in adults and cognitive deficits in children.

It comes after government ministers were repeatedly warned by the civil servant in charge of furniture fire safety policy that the chemicals could be "deadly".

Terry Edge quit the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) last year after his proposals to restrict them were not implemented despite briefing civil servants and ministers since 2013.

"The evidence is clear that flame retardants in our sofas are killing people," said Edge. "They are causing thousands of cancers and other illnesses, with children particularly vulnerable."

Next month's symposium on flame retardants in York will be told of evidence linking the chemicals with thyroid cancer, rates of which have risen 74% in a decade, according to Cancer Research UK.

"The chemicals are released as household dust and enter our bodies on our food and hands, with the highest levels in children," said Heather Stapleton of Duke University in North Carolina, who is a speaker at the symposium.

"Our study looked at people with thyroid cancer and at healthy controls. We found the group with cancer had significantly higher exposure to decaBDE."

The scientists found that exposure in pregnancy or

before the age of four was linked to cognitive deficits.

This month a meeting of signatories to the Stockholm convention, a UN treaty to restrict pollutants, is set to ban most uses of decaBDE, with existing products deemed hazardous waste.

The UK is a signatory and supports the ban.

"If our science committee's recommendations are agreed then at the end of their life, products containing decaBDE become hazardous waste and cannot be recycled," said Kei Ohno Woodall, of the convention secretariat.

Asked about sofas and mattresses, she said: "They must be burnt in a high-temperature incinerator or buried in a waterproof landfill engineered to stop the contents leaching out."

# 74%

**Increase in thyroid cancer cases over the past decade**

The BEIS said it was unable to comment on ministerial briefings. "We are developing new regulations to keep pace with changes to manufacture and consumer tastes," it said.

Jonathan Hindle of the British Furniture Confederation, said concerns about decaBDE meant it was being phased out. "We are aware of the potential waste disposal issue . . . and will work with the authorities."

The British Plastics Federation, whose members include retardant makers, said the ruling would create waste problems owing to the presence of decaBDE "in a lot of furniture in the UK".

@jonathan\_leake