

Hundreds of thousands in UK face same fire risk as Grenfell Tower victims

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Residents of tower blocks throughout the UK are living in potential death traps just like the Grenfell Tower block in west London where scores if not hundreds perished on June 14. Initial testing of external cladding on 60 apartment blocks located in 25 local authorities resulted in them all being found to be combustible and failing fire safety tests.

The 60 tested so far were among 600 of the UK's 4,000 tower blocks with cladding found to be "similar" to that installed on the Grenfell Tower. The cladding was a central factor in the spread of a small fire in one apartment into a conflagration that engulfed the entire 24-storey structure in minutes.

While at least 79 people are confirmed dead in the blaze, Labour MP Dianne Abbott, who represents a constituency in nearby Hackney, said she believed "hundreds of people" were killed in the fire.

Both the cladding and the insulation it enclosed at Grenfell have been tested by experts and "failed all safety tests." According to latest reports, the insulation material could prove to be even more flammable than the cladding—which was already known to be highly combustible.

Given that at least 600 people lived in the Grenfell block, this number extrapolated nationally means that hundreds of thousands of peoples' lives are endangered by the homes in which they live.

Everything is being done to conceal the criminality of the policies and actions of successive governments and local councils, Conservative and Labour, and their big business partners, that resulted in the horrifying loss of life.

Last Friday a local resident, Sarah Colbourne, who lives near Grenfell, told the media she does not accept the official fatality figure. She said, "We know over 20 people who aren't answering their phones, who aren't responding to my emails. They're not missing, they're

dead.

"Children haven't turned up to school, or to activity groups my husband runs. They're not 'missing', they're dead. They're telling us it's 79. We're not stupid... it's in the hundreds. But they don't want to release that number and we all know why and we're sick and tired of what they've done. It's 2017 in one of the richest boroughs in London and this happens."

On a national scale, the dangers in which working class residents have been placed is also being covered up.

Although 25 local authorities have been confirmed as having dangerously-clad tower blocks under their control, just 14 have been named. Seven of these are in London—Camden, Hounslow, Barnet, Brent, Islington, Lambeth and Wandsworth.

Authorities outside London named are Doncaster, Manchester, Portsmouth, Norwich, Stockton on Tees, Sunderland and Plymouth. It is not known how many have been tested of the 600 blocks cited.

Despite the danger facing residents, no co-ordinated central government response is being organised, with local authorities allowed to proceed as they wish. In Brent, no failed-test cladding is to be removed. Although the safety test results of cladding on nine tower blocks in the city of Salford have not yet been disclosed, the council said it will remove the aluminium composite material (ACM) in the cladding because it is similar to Grenfell's. In Plymouth, the council said it will not evacuate residents despite the danger.

The use of such cladding is widespread beyond social housing. Many National Health Service buildings are also clad and all 200 NHS trusts are carrying out an urgent review.

There has been no insistence on systematic testing in the private sector. Premier Inn, which operates 750 hotels nationally, including high rise blocks, announced Friday it is "extremely concerned" about cladding used on its

hotels in Maidenhead, Brentford and Tottenham. Premier League football team Brighton and Hove Albion FC have said their stadium and training ground could be clad in the same material as Grenfell Tower, putting tens of thousands of lives at risk. Student accommodation at Newcastle University is under emergency review.

Nearly two weeks after the Grenfell fire, survivors are still being treated callously. Last Friday, 30 families staying in 20 rooms at the Holiday Inn Kensington Forum were evicted at short notice, only receiving a letter telling them to contact the council's accommodation team via a phone number.

In the borough of Camden, 4,000 residents were evacuated from four tower blocks on the Chalcots Estate on Friday evening, with barely any notice. The decision was taken by the Labour-run council after blocks were found, not only to have cladding similar to Grenfell, but also with insulation surrounding gas piping and missing fire doors and fire doors made from the wrong material.

The council dumped many from the Chalcot Estate—including disabled people, the elderly and women with newborns—at a local leisure centre and library complex where they were forced to sleep on air beds. Others were sent to stay temporarily in hotels.

The following morning angry residents confronted Labour council leader Georgia Gould about their treatment and demanded to know why they had been allowed to live in dangerous conditions in the first place. The work to remove the cladding is expected to take up to six weeks.

The Metropolitan Police investigation into the Grenfell fire announced Friday that the blaze started in a fridge-freezer and confirmed that the building's cladding and insulation failed safety tests.

The fact that the fridge model that caught fire and started the blaze has been subject to extensive complaints of unreliability made headlines in newspapers, including the *Daily Mail*, which last week tried to scapegoat the man whose apartment was the source of the fire. While design faults warrant investigation, this is being used to divert from the fact that a fire in a single apartment should never have been able to engulf a high-rise building so rapidly and so completely.

Those who decided to install flammable materials and enabled those materials to be installed, above all the Conservative government that ripped up safety regulations and its Labour predecessor that turned its own blind eye to previous related disasters, are the guilty parties. Still, no one has been arrested.

The police said the criminal investigation they have begun *could* lead to charges of manslaughter. Yet not only has no one been charged, but the *Guardian* also revealed that not a single person has even been questioned by an investigation manned by 250 people!

This is under conditions in which it has been revealed that among those who escaped the Grenfell fire, three of 12 patients at King's College Hospital were treated with Cyanokit, the hydrogen cyanide antidote. This was because the cladding contained material that emitted the highly toxic substance when ablaze—a fact confirmed by its manufacturer Celotex.

According to one estimate, the amount of cladding meant that there was enough smoke containing cyanide to have filled all 120 flats in the building and to have killed every person. Professor Richard Hull, Professor of Chemistry and Fire Science at the University of Central Lancashire, said the material used to refurbish Grenfell Tower between 2014-2016 “made a major contribution to the rapid spread of the fire and the toxicity of its smoke.”

“The combination of the cladding, air gap and the polyisocyanurate (PIR) foam acts like a chimney,” Hull said, “spreading the fire across the outside of the building by igniting the cladding and foam.”

There are no regulations on the toxicity of building materials, which are subjected to fire in the UK and much of Europe, even though it is “widely known that the inhalation of toxic gas within smoke accounts for most deaths and injuries within fire,” he said. “Many people in the tower will have had their windows open due to the hot weather last Tuesday night, so it is likely that a significant number of victims will have collapsed soon after exposure to the smoke.”



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