

UK government refuses funds for unsafe tower blocks post-Grenfell

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Thousands of people nationally are living in buildings that are unsafe, in both the public and private sector, due to the criminal inaction of local and central government.

Following the Grenfell Tower fire, it was revealed that in England alone at least 228 high-rise buildings, over 18 metres in height, were potential death traps. They all have the same or similar aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding that was a central factor in a small kitchen blaze in a fourth floor flat that engulfed the entire 24-storey building.

This is only the tip of the iceberg, with an estimated 30,000 buildings—of all types and sizes—throughout the UK possibly having similar cladding.

After the fire, the Conservative government was forced to instruct councils and housing associations to compile lists of buildings that were deemed unsafe. The government claimed that money would be forthcoming for cash-strapped councils—whose budgets have been slashed, in some cases by 50 percent over the last decade—to complete remedial work.

This was a lie. Councils are faced with bills that run into the tens of millions of pounds to remove and replace flammable cladding. In addition, no money has been made available to help fund the installation of sprinkler systems, despite fire brigades insisting they are essential to prevent the spread of fires in tower blocks.

Even a tower block adjacent to Grenfell Tower has been revealed as unsafe. An investigation by the LBC Radio station, in which Chartered Surveyor and fire safety expert Arnold Tarling inspected the building, found “insecure rubbish chutes running all the way up the building; fire escapes with doors so heavy and stiff, they were inaccessible to disabled people; and fire doors that are flammable.”

According to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 31 local authorities have demanded funding from the government for carrying out remedial work. A *Guardian* article reported that the DCLG is in talks with just six authorities while “others had been invited to provide further information about how the work they wished to undertake was essential.”

In the city of Salford, north west England, the Labour-run council has borrowed £25 million to fund the removal of flammable cladding from nine tower blocks that tests found had “no flame retardant properties.” The council has contacted the government regarding providing funding for the work without success.

Thousands of high-rise blocks in the UK do not have sprinkler systems installed, as fitting them has only been legally required since 2007, and only then in new-build high-rises over 30 metres tall, in England. The legislation did not apply to older blocks. It is estimated that just 2 percent of tower blocks in England have sprinkler systems.

Following Grenfell, fire brigades nationally have insisted that retroactively fitting sprinklers systems in all high-rises was necessary to prevent future catastrophes. Last month, Paul Atkins, a fire safety expert who will present testimony at the Grenfell Inquiry, told the BBC, “If they’d [the Grenfell residents] had a sprinkler system the fire would have been deluged before it got to the cladding. ... To date no-one has ever died in a fire with a sprinkler system in the household, so the proof’s in the pudding. You’ve got a 99 percent chance of surviving.”

According to Atkins, installing a sprinkler system in Grenfell Tower would have cost between £500,000 and £700,000.

According to the *Guardian*, at least four councils—Westminster, Croydon and Wandsworth in

London and Nottingham in the east Midlands—have been refused central government money to fund sprinkler systems. Nottingham council proposed to install sprinklers in 13 towers at a cost of £6.2 million. Demonstrating the criminal disregard of the ruling elite for the safety of thousands of social housing residents, they were told bluntly by Housing Minister Alok Sharma that money would not be forthcoming as “The fire safety measures you outline are additional rather than essential.”

Post-Grenfell, the government instructed local authorities and housing associations to carry out surveys on the safety of buildings under their control, but private sector owners of high-rises were not compelled to do so. Private owners of developments less than 18 metres tall are exempt from any responsibility.

In June, the DCLG said it was merely “offering private owners of residential buildings [in England only] an opportunity to test cladding on blocks over 18 meters high ...” A letter sent to private owners stated, “If you wish to take up this offer, then you will need to submit samples for testing” and “Cut out two samples of at least 250x250mm in size from each location sampled.” Such samples were then to be sent to a testing centre in a jiffy bag!

All political parties are implicated.

Scotland is run by a Scottish National Party (SNP) administration, and for decades before that by Labour Party local authorities.

Last month, it emerged that combustible cladding had been installed on many private high-rise blocks in the city of Glasgow, with residents living there not informed.

At first 57 blocks were identified as unsafe, before this figure was reduced to 19 without explanation. It was only at the end of September that residents in the 19 blocks were even informed that they were living in buildings with combustible cladding.

SNP-run Glasgow City Council has refused to publicly identify either the original 57 blocks or the 19. However, last week the *Evening Times* reported that three of the privately-owned blocks are located at Glasgow Harbour. Two of the towers contain 273sqm of cladding and another smaller block, 37sqm.

In 2005, following the 1999 Irvine Tower fire, regulations were passed by the Scottish government,

then under Labour control determining that all materials used for “external cladding and associated cavities” were required to be non-combustible and the entire system should inhibit the spread of fire. However, this condition was not imposed on tower blocks built and clad prior to that date—meaning that the safety of many tenants and property owners in social housing and privately-owned blocks remain threatened.

In Slough, the council has been forced to take over the freehold of privately-owned Nova House—at an unknown cost to the public purse—after it failed two safety tests. The block houses 200 residents and has combustible ACM cladding. It is estimated that the cost of making the building safe is £1 million with the council stating that the previous private owner, Ground Rents Estates 5 Limited, did not have “the capacity to do what is needed ...”

Since September 27, a fire engine has been permanently stationed—at the council’s expense—in the car park next to the block.

As with Grenfell Tower, it appears that cost cutting was involved in the cladding process, as the original cladding intended for the building that would have passed safety checks was not used.

Nearly four months since the Grenfell Tower fire, and a month since the government inquiry into the inferno began, not a single person has been charged let alone arrested for a crime in which scores perished.

The Metropolitan Police have not said a word about its “criminal investigation” since September 19 when it said officers would continue working in the tower into the New Year and only open another police operation into Grenfell when that was finished.

Hundreds of survivors of the fire remain in temporary accommodation, with just 10 households out of 203 permanently rehoused.



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