

Post-Grenfell: More than £400 million needed to make London residential buildings safe

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Making tower blocks safe for thousands of people in the wake of the Grenfell Tower inferno will cost £405 million in London, according to a report published by the Local Government Chronicle (LGC).

The report, based on a survey of London's councils, estimates the cost of remedial work such as installing sprinklers and removing flammable cladding. Only £53 million of this is to be spent over the next two years.

The £405 million is a highly conservative estimate, given that London has 32 boroughs and just 21 of those answered the survey. The real total in London is likely to be around £1 billion.

A briefing to Members of Parliament obtained by the LGC shows that, in just six boroughs, the estimated cost of installing sprinklers across 265 blocks was £113 million. This is an average cost per block of around £426,000.

However, this varies considerably with the cost of each block depending on the age and its condition from "£188,000 to £615,000 at individual borough level." It notes, "One borough provided a sprinkler installation estimate of £2m for communal areas, but suggested that this could rise to £4.7-5.6 million if sprinklers were also installed in individual properties."

The Conservative government, after promising funding would be available to councils for remedial work, has washed its hands of any responsibility in the few months since the Grenfell fire.

The callous disregard of the ruling elite was displayed by government Communities Secretary Sajid Javid, who recently announced the government would not provide any funding to councils carrying out fire safety improvement works to tower blocks.

Thousands of buildings nationally are fire hazards, with many, in the private and public sector, having the same or similar flammable cladding to Grenfell, which allowed a small fire in one flat to spread and engulf the entire

24-story building.

Instead, the government is forcing local authorities to finance remedial works through "flexibilities" to increase the borrowing cap of their housing revenue accounts or using money from their general funds. If councils cannot find the money, the urgent work will not be done.

Brent Council and Croydon Council, both in London, started a £10 million fire safety programme, including retrofitting sprinklers. Both wrote to the government for financial assistance, but were told by Javid they would not be given any as the blocks met current fire safety regulations!

Even after Grenfell the government's austerity agenda, in which council spending budgets have been slashed to the bone, has not changed. Javid instructed councils to liaise with their local fire service to determine what "essential" works are needed.

In addition to the amount to be spent on sprinklers, the London councils' briefing said remedial work to cladding systems on 38 blocks across 12 boroughs was expected to cost £53 million. "This implies an aggregate cost per block of £1.4 million and, at an individual borough level, the implied cost per block ranges from £385,000 to £3.3 million," the document said. "A further £90 million has been earmarked for upgrading fire doors, electrics and emergency lighting, among other remedial works."

The lack of such basic safety standards for thousands of people who live in unsafe death traps is a national scandal. It reveals the extent to which regulations have been destroyed over the last three decades in an orgy of deregulation, cost-cutting and profiteering.

Tenants, including the poorest, will be forced to pick up the bill for putting basic safety precautions in place. To pay for such improvements, the government has announced a return to the policy of increasing social rents by the Consumer Price Index+1 percent from 2020.

Extrapolating the *Local Government Chronicle's*

figures for the rest of the UK, the cost of ensuring the safety of millions of people who live in unsafe and dilapidated housing conditions runs into the tens of billions of pounds. Yet not a single coordinated measure has been carried out by the government to protect the population from another catastrophe on the scale of Grenfell.

Local authorities are making decisions on an ad hoc basis.

South Tyneside Council in northeast England has confirmed they will be installing sprinkler systems. Pressure from residents following Grenfell led to the council agreeing to spend an estimated £1.4 million. However, there is no consistency across the borough with Gentoo—a housing association that took over Sunderland City Council's housing stock and owns and manages more than 29,000 homes—saying they will fit them, but only as part of future upgrades and not as an immediate roll-out.

Newcastle City Council and Gateshead Council have signalled they will retro-fit sprinklers, but have yet to make any firm commitments.

Information continues to surface about the enormous risk to public safety posed by buildings suspected of containing cladding made of flammable aluminum composite material (ACM).

Dozens of Scottish buildings, 38 in total, are undergoing inspections amid fears of their containing flammable material, including in their insulation. All the buildings concerned are owned by economic development agency Scottish Enterprise and Lomond Shores in Balloch, Conference House in Edinburgh, Fife Energy Park, and the Alba Innovation Centre in Livingston. Buildings in East Kilbride, Stirling, Livingston, Larbert and Gourrock are also under survey.

ACM was also found to have been used at hospitals in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Numerous large scale fires have taken place nationwide since Grenfell, with the latest endangering the lives of hundreds of students in Manchester. Students were forced to flee a 17-storey accommodation block in the city centre after a fire broke out in a ground floor storeroom Monday evening. Videos posted on social media showed students fleeing the building in terror. 25 firefighters with an aerial platform were required to deal with the blaze.

The building can accommodate 729 students. A number of students said they had not heard fire alarms sound. One told the BBC, "The parkway accommodation is in three blocks in a triangle. The fire was in our block, but no

students I spoke to heard a fire alarm. However, the alarms seemed to have gone off in the other blocks, which is a bit odd."

Another student told the *Manchester Evening News*, "As I got to the bottom of the building there was thick smoke. I got to the front door, the side of the storage area is next to it. You had to run out past it and turn left."

Luke McAvoy explained, "We were on the 12th floor in the kitchen, and one of our flatmates came in saying loads of people are at their windows over the road. They started waving at us but we had no idea what was going on. There was no alarm and I couldn't smell the smoke either, but when we got to the stairs it was really smoky."

Hundreds of similar blocks designed for student accommodation are located in every town and city in the UK.

Attend meeting of Grenfell Fire Forum in London on Saturday October 21

The Grenfell Fire Forum is holding the second in a series of regular meetings on the Grenfell fire on October 21 at the Maxilla Hall Social Club, North Kensington, London.

The first meeting of the Forum, established by the Socialist Equality Party, was held on September 30 and discussed the opening of the Grenfell Tower Fire inquiry and the way forward in opposing the government's cover-up and establishing the truth about the fire and those responsible.

The SEP has warned that the inquiry is a fraud—aimed at covering up for those responsible for the economic, social and political decisions that led to at least 80 deaths.

We will dissect the inquiry and expose its lies and evasions. This work of political exposure is an essential part of mobilising workers and youth independently of the political establishment to secure genuine justice for all those affected. All are welcome to this democratic discussion forum.

Grenfell Fire Forum

Saturday October 21, 12 noon
Maxilla Hall Social Club
2 Maxilla Walk, North Kensington
London, W10 6SW



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact