

Metropolitan Police try to block Freedom of Information requests over Grenfell Tower

Simon Whelan

11 November 2017

London Metropolitan Police have advised the Kensington and Chelsea Council (KCC) to prevent the release of correspondence that could provide damaging information on the failure to prevent a serious fire at Grenfell Tower.

Police officers are monitoring and vetting Freedom of Information requests regarding what the council knew of fire risks to Grenfell Tower, and when, after serious warnings made by the Fire Brigade Union (FBU).

The *Independent* reported in late October that the Met has requested access to study and deny all FoI requests received by the KCC. On April 6, the FBU wrote to all the local London authorities warning them that cladding fixed externally at Shepherds Court Flats in Hammersmith, West London had contributed to a serious fire that occurred just two months before the June 14 Grenfell inferno claimed over 80 lives.

Dan Daly, assistant commissioner of the FBU, warned all local authorities to check that the cladding used on homes under their jurisdiction was up to relevant fire safety standards.

The KCC claim that Daly's letter was initially mailed to the council's director of housing and was only later forwarded onto the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO). The KCC is dealing with all FoI requests concerning KCTMO, its property management company that was stripped of its responsibility after Grenfell.

A spokesperson for KCTMO told the *Independent*, "All Freedom of Information queries regarding Grenfell Tower related matters are being handled by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). We have not consulted the Metropolitan Police directly on Grenfell matters, as this is being handled by the RBKC."

The FBU also warned the London councils to "take

account of other fire safety measures already in place in the building as well as potential mitigation measures to ensure that any potential fire spread does not pose a risk to health and safety."

Such a warning was prescient, as not only was the cladding on Grenfell highly flammable, but other fire safety issues had been fatally compromised including construction work near the tower that restricted access by fire engines to the blaze on that fateful June night.

The KCC has stonewalled repeated requests for information on why the warnings made by the FBU were ignored. The latest response by the KCC to FoI requests stated that they had been advised by the police not to release any information, as it would interfere with the criminal investigation being conducted -- a criminal investigation that has, months after the Grenfell Tower fire, led to the arrest of no one, nor even conducted an interview under caution.

Legal representatives working on behalf of Grenfell residents have insisted that the word of the police or the local authority alone is wholly insufficient to prevent the release of relevant documents into the public realm. Speaking to the *Independent*, Alex Peebles of Duncan Lewis said, "The information cannot be withheld just because there may be risks associated with its disclosure. The council and the police must be prepared to give detailed reasons that explain why disclosure would or would be likely to cause prejudice to others."

On behalf of Grenfell4Justice, Moyra Samuels said, "For the community, nothing surprises us regarding the behaviour of the council... Of course we demand that they are truthful and transparent but we don't expect them to be."

The KCC said that they had forwarded a total of seven FoI requests to the Met regarding the Grenfell fire. Subsequently, four requests have been denied, two

are currently in process and another has been granted.

The rejection notice sent by the KCC to the *Independent* states, “At this point in time, it is our belief that the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosure.”

The council claimed the police “expressed a view that would or be more likely to prejudice the prevention or detection of crime or the apprehension of or prosecution of individuals.”

The Met deny a cover-up, saying that their advice does not constitute an order to withhold information and that “The release of material remains the decision of the organisation who holds it.”

On behalf of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, Maurice Frankel explained, “It makes no sense to defer answering Freedom of Information requests until any prosecutions that may be brought are over.”

The attempts to stifle public knowledge by the police and local authorities takes place as a BBC investigation revealed in late October that no less than 52 London tower blocks are covered in polyethylene cladding similar to that which acted as a fire accelerant at Grenfell.

The BBC says the same inflammable materials are present on 24 council residential tower blocks, 23 housing association properties and five privately owned high-rise residential towers. Exactly half of the 88 buildings tested in London failed the recent fire safety tests. However, the BBC noted that the true figure was likely to be much higher because numerous local authorities refused to respond to the BBC's request for information.

Nationally, almost 300 buildings have failed government flammability tests, but it is unknown how many of these contained polyethylene or were composed of other inadequate materials. Referring to polyethylene cladding, Arnold Tarling, a fire safety expert and chartered surveyor, told the BBC, “It’s like cladding your home in solid petrol. When it becomes liquid it melts, burns and sets fire to polyethylene at higher levels.”

Tarling noted, “We learned in the Great Fire of London it’s not a good idea to clad buildings in flammable material.” But, as the BBC noted, polyethylene was utilised “because it’s cheap and

durable ... Although it can be treated to make it less flammable, the added cost means this is often not done.”

The BBC investigation reveals that the use of polyethylene is rising. Figures obtained exclusively by the BBC investigation from the research company The Freedomia Group reveal how in the ten years since 2008, the amount of polyethylene used in British construction has risen from 140 metric tonnes to a projected 190 metric tonnes in 2018.

Since the Grenfell inferno, dozens of planning applications involving this material have been made in London on various small storey buildings. Tarling responded to this incredible news by stating, plainly and truthfully, that polyethylene was unsafe for buildings of any height and any number of storeys.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact