

Profiteering by insulation industry central to Grenfell Tower fire in London

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An investigation by *Sky News* highlights the role of profiteering by corporations in the Grenfell fire.

Conducted over four months, the report reveals a culture of intimidation, bullying and lies within the plastics industry. Not only were the rules manipulated to have more plastic fitted to buildings, but people were also silenced who would speak out against criminal practices.

Senior figures in the fire safety sector had warned well in advance that a disaster of the type seen at Grenfell was likely to happen. Moreover, many advisers had been telling successive Labour and Conservative governments about the dangers and that the building regulations were not fit for purpose.

Sky News found that no one would go on camera because they were told that “speaking out about [the plastic insulation industry] was impossible” and that people involved had had “threats to sue.”

Rockwool, which produces “non-combustible mineral-based alternative to plastic insulation,” was sued for “malicious falsehood” because they made the claim that their product did not burn and that plastic does.

In 2013, an insurance firm investigated the safety of plastic insulation. It found that the panels burned more fiercely in real life than in official tests. As the result of posting the footage on YouTube, they were threatened with legal action and had to conceal the brand of insulation.

Just a week after the Grenfell fire, the insulation industry was making sure it was business as usual. *Sky* revealed that “six European plastic industry lobby groups” had complained in a letter about a paper that highlighted the dangers of toxic smoke from burning plastic. It said, “We request that the article is withdrawn. ... The consequences [...] are enormous and could well lead to significant consequential losses.”

The main lobby group for the plastics industry changed its name in the wake of Grenfell. They went from being

the “British Rigid Urethane Foam Manufacturers’ Association [BRUFMA]” to the Insulation Manufacturers Association [IMA]. The group cited “events of the year” as the reason for the change.

Sky found evidence that the BRUFMA/IMA had driven government policy on building regulations. It reported that the body has “high level involvement in the drafting and regular revision of British and European standards [and] the Building Regulations.” It “even boasts that as a member you have the “opportunity to influence Government bodies and NGOs” and “direct input into relevant British Standards committees.”

How this took place was seen in 2011 when the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) invited industry members to create a committee around the “Green Deal.” This was an initiative to push more insulation into homes to meet climate change targets. Of the 10 firms and construction industry groups on that committee, “four were members of BRUFMA. One of them was Celotex, the firm whose plastic insulation would be fitted to the outside of Grenfell Tower four years later.”

Celotex was embedded in government policy, with its technical director, Rob Warren, a leading committee member. He boasted that he was “working inside government” to “shape this critical policy enabling the insulation industry to maximize the benefits.”

By 2015, Warren was even more brazen with the trade magazine *Urethanes Technology International*, reporting he had said “regulatory change was the ‘greatest driver’ of plastic insulation sales.”

Without new regulations, Warren was reported as saying, “You cannot give insulation away and the public are not really interested.” As a result of the new legislation that the insulation corporations were instrumental in formulating, the market value of the plastic insulation products doubled between 2012 and

2016.

This coincided with fire safety being virtually ignored. *Sky News* spoke to Simon Hay who also sat on the DECC committee and who recalled that fire [was not] “mentioned in any of the meetings.”

Instead the “government’s 2012 Green Deal launch report ‘Opportunities for Industry,’ contains 126 mentions of ‘cost’ and 119 of ‘saving,’ but nothing about fire safety.”

Fire safety expert Niall Rowan from the Passive Fire Protection Association told *Sky*: “Due to the green agenda we’ve had a push to insulate buildings and the easiest and cheapest way to insulate was using these combustible materials [...] our eye was off the ball.”

One government department was peddling combustible plastic products, even as another was being warned of the massive risks in the use of plastic insulation in residential homes.

In 1999, a group of flats caught fire in Ayrshire, Scotland, killing one and injuring others. A government inquiry found that the building regulations were “totally inadequate.” In 2009, the Lakanal House fire in London saw six people killed due to the use of combustible plastic insulation, but resulted in no change to regulations.

After being refused access by the DCLG to “54 submissions they received in a 2010 consultation into how the fire safety rules needed to change,” *Sky News* used the Freedom of Information Act to try to “read them [but] our application was refused on the grounds that releasing them was ‘not in the public interest.’”

They managed to gain access to one from the Fire Protection Association (FPA). “Urgent research is required,” it warned the government, into whether building regulations were “fit for purpose.” The submission continued, “building regulations enforcement is not effective” with inspectors turning up “less frequently if at all.” Ministers “should act.”

The plastic industry utilised deregulation to amass large profits. In 1984, under the Thatcher Conservative government, the Construction Industry Council (CIC) was formed to allow the privatisation of Building Control. There are now over 150 companies that provide the service, speeding up the completion of building works to save money for the firms involved.

Under the Blair Labour government, the Regulatory Reform Order 2005 scrapped fire certificates for buildings—leaving landlords responsible for ensuring fire risk assessments are carried out.

Technical expert Ian Abley said that the 2005 legislation

“was a significant weakening of fire safety protection. ... A system of self-certification by building owners is weaker than a system of certification by a fire officer, somebody whose interest is directly to make sure his men and women fire officers don’t die in fighting fires.”

Abley continued, “There are holes in the regulatory reform order that don’t necessarily include the outside of a block of flats—which is Grenfell.”

Despite myriad warnings, there have been no changes in fire safety in the last 12 years. The government has continued to seek advice from the industry that has profited from the reckless use of flammable material on buildings.

The fire tests to prove the validity of plastic cladding are monopolised by one company: the Building Research Establishment (BRE). *Sky News* revealed that “in 2005, to manage the risk from plastic insulation and cladding [BRE] creat[ed] a fire test called BS 8414.” With millions of pounds spent on these tests and with vast profits at stake, “BRE told the Government that the building regulations could cope.”

In April 2016—just 14 months before Grenfell—playing down the risks of adding combustible cladding to high-rise buildings, the BRE said that “with the exception of one or two unfortunate cases, there is currently no evidence from BRE Global’s fire investigations for DCLG to suggest that current building regulation recommendations, to limit vertical fire spread up the exterior of high rise buildings, are failing in their purpose.”

Simon Hay, an architect who sat on the DECC committee in 2011, said, “I’m afraid there will be buildings that are unsafe, and that must be a worry for people who are falling asleep in them.”



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