

UK government refuses to pay for essential safety improvements six months after Grenfell fire

Margot Miller
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It is nearly seven months since the deadly fire at Grenfell Tower in London, yet nothing has been done, on a national scale, to rectify the safety breaches that made this avoidable tragedy inevitable.

Despite the loss of 71 lives, and the fact that tens of thousands of people across the UK live in potential death traps, the government has not committed a single penny to assist local authorities in replacing exterior flammable cladding, or installing sprinkler systems retroactively—a measure guaranteed to douse any fire before it can spread.

The same or similar cladding that enabled the Grenfell fire to take a hold in such a devastating fashion has been found encasing 228 tower blocks, as well as thousands of public buildings.

To quell public grief that turned to anger, the government invited cash-strapped local councils to apply for financial help to carry out the essential work to make homes safe.

Eight days after the fire, as the scale of the national crisis became clear, Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May said, “We cannot and will not ask people to live in unsafe homes.” In similar vein, she continued: “We need to ensure that the resources are there in every sense for the remedial work that is necessary. We are looking at a variety of ways in which we can ensure that this is indeed the case.”

Days later came the same hollow promises from Community Secretary Sajid Javid, who told Members of Parliament, “If they[the councils]are not able to pay[for remedial work], we will... put a financial support package in place.”

While 36 councils have applied for help with funding, housing minister Alok Sharma recently conceded that

no money has been handed over to date. The feeble excuse is offered that officials are awaiting requests for further information from nine of them concerning the nature of the essential work and are still working on requests from two councils.

In September, Sharma told Nottingham City Council that a £6 million request to pay for life-saving sprinklers was “additional rather than essential.”

The contempt and indifference for the lives of working class people is in line with the toothless government inquiry into the Grenfell fire, which has no powers to recommend any prosecutions, and will not report even its findings until the autumn.

According to the Local Government Association, councils have begun replacing combustible cladding on just 45 tower blocks out of 181 deemed combustible.

The Department for Communities and Local Government now indicate a government retraction on its commitment to provide financial help for any safety measures.

A spokesman said, “Building owners are responsible for ensuring properties are safe for residents and we expect them to pay for work.” Residential tower blocks are either owned by local councils, by not for profit housing associations or they are privately owned.

Twenty-nine tower blocks that have failed the national flammability safety tests on cladding, introduced in the aftermath of Grenfell, are in the predominantly working class city of Salford—population approximately 250,000. This is the largest concentration of homes at risk of fire to be found in the UK.

Labour-controlled Salford council runs nine tower blocks through Pendleton Together, and has promised

remedial work. Decladding has stopped on the 20 other failed blocks in Salford, run by social housing providers, Salix and City West.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently distributed the article Six months since the Grenfell tower fire, to tower block residents and shoppers on Salford precinct.

We spoke to hospital worker Beckie, 22, who has lived at Spruce Court for three years, and is extremely worried as her block failed the flammability tests.

She shared her exasperation with reporters. “My little plastic Christmas wreath outside my flat went missing,” she said. “The fire wardens [employed by the council after the Grenfell fire] took it because they said it was a fire hazard! What about the cladding?”

“Since the Grenfell fire they removed cladding up to the third floor, then stopped and pulled the scaffolding down. I love the flat, but all it takes is a chip pan. Loads of young people living there are worried.

“Don’t tell me they weren’t aware of the danger when all those people died in London.

“And they’re talking about putting the rent up £1.20 a week—I think it’s to do with the cladding.”

Beckie was out shopping with her mother, whose home in Broughton, Salford was badly damaged two years ago in floods. She told the WSWS there was no help forthcoming from the council then either, even though “the water came up to your waist,” and it was the local community that came to the family’s aid.

Jon, 72, a resident of Spruce Court for 19 years, has been campaigning for the removal of the dangerous cladding on it since the inferno at Grenfell.

He told the WSWS that “within weeks of the Grenfell Tower fire, Paul Dennett, leader of Salford Labour council put out a statement saying they had got a £25 million loan at £3 million a year in interest. Who’s going to be paying that interest but the people of Salford? They’ll put up the council tax and rents. A few years ago Manchester council defied the rent cap and put the rents up above the rate of inflation. Salford will do the same.”

In relation to the government inquiry into the Grenfell fire, Jon said, “Someone needs to be brought to book. Somebody needs to go to prison. Cost cutting caused the deaths of those people and they’re all closing ranks. They’re under the thumb of the government, the rich for the rich and it’s the poor who suffer.

“A quarter of the people who came out of the

[Grenfell] tower block have still not been rehoused. This is not going to go away.

“When this first started I got up a petition demanding a meeting of all landlords and tenants in Manchester, in the Northwest. When I asked why hasn’t this happened, they just said it takes months. They’re not going to do it because people will be badgering them, asking questions.”

As a vocal campaigner, Jon said he felt under pressure from the authorities to keep quiet. “I haven’t got any proof, but the council are telling charities who depend on council grants, if you kick up a fuss [about the cladding] you won’t get any funding.”

However, “I’m going to keep on going on the TV and speaking out to the media, even though the council might kick me out of my flat for breach of my tenancy contract.”

Jon said he would look at the Grenfell Forum Facebook page set up by the WSWS, so he could link up the struggles of Salford residents demanding the removal of flammable cladding with that of the Grenfell survivors and supporters.

Attend the next meeting of the Grenfell Fire Forum

Saturday January 13, 2pm

Maxilla Hall Social Club

2 Maxilla Walk, North Kensington

London, W10 6SW (*nearest tube: Latimer Road*)

For further details visit:

<https://www.facebook.com/GrenfellForum>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact