

UK: Report by building research firm reveals scale of criminality that led to Grenfell fire

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An interim report by building research body BRE Global is a devastating indictment of the callous indifference to the safety of residents that led to the deaths of at least 72 people in last June's Grenfell Tower inferno.

The 210-page report, leaked to the *Evening Standard*, is dated January 31 and was commissioned as part of the Metropolitan Police investigation into the fire. BRE Global is the certification arm of the Building Research Establishment (BRE). It was established out of the 1997 privatisation of the national building laboratory.

More than 10 months after the fire, not a single person has been charged or even arrested for the deaths or the devastation caused to the many survivors and bereaved. The police claim that no such prosecutions can take place until their now-10-month-old "criminal investigation" finishes—which could take years.

These claims should be rejected with contempt. Alongside the public inquiry headed by Sir Martin Moore Bick, the police investigation is part of a concerted cover-up in order that the real criminals responsible for social murder evade justice. Moore-Bick's inquiry, which has no powers to prosecute anyone, has still not called a single witness or heard a word of evidence. Its initial report is not set to be published until the end of the year.

The fact is that just the information contained in the BRE Report alone is ample evidence to allow for immediate arrests and charging to proceed. It shows that the deaths were entirely due to a criminal neglect for the safety of the Grenfell residents by the local council, its management organisation and the various corporate entities involved.

The report describes how the 2014-2016 "refurbishment" of Grenfell Tower transformed it from a relatively safe building into a death trap.

The Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) carried out the £10 million refurbishment. KCTMO is the arms-length organisation set up by the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council to run its social housing stock.

Kensington and Chelsea, in west London, has some of the

most expensive residential properties in the world. The council's main purpose in carrying out the refurbishment was to apply a cladding to the building and to cover its concrete façade, to make the view more acceptable to any of its rich residents casting an eye in that direction.

The June 14 fire started in Flat 16 on the fourth floor with the malfunction of a fridge-freezer. Flames from the flat spread through an open window and—due to the highly flammable cladding put on the building—quickly destroyed the entire 24-storey, 70-metre-high building.

The *Evening Standard* comments, "The first conclusion of the report is that the fire would not have spread beyond Flat 16...and *would not have claimed even a single life if the original facade of the building had not been re-clad*" (emphasis added).

The BRE emphasises the relative structural integrity of the original building erected in the early 1970s. It notes, "Grenfell Tower as originally built, appears to have been designed on the premise of providing very high levels of passive fire protection.

"The original facade of Grenfell Tower, comprising exposed concrete and, given its age, likely timber or metal frame windows, would not have provided a medium for fire spread up the external surface. In BRE's opinion...there would have been little opportunity for a fire in a flat of Grenfell Tower to spread to any neighbouring flats."

The BRE explains that such was the ferocity of the blaze that it could have led to a partial or full collapse of the building. That it did not was due to the inherent fire resistance, "not the less stringent modern standards," notes the *Standard*, engineered into the original building.

Grenfell Tower was deprived of even the most basic safety systems, with the BRE noting the lack of a sprinkler system and that the single staircase was narrower than regulations allow.

The BRE's analysis of the aluminium frame holding the cladding in place showed it had a plastic, flammable core, which was instrumental in the spread of the fire.

The BRE found five areas where existing building

regulations were significantly breached. When cladding insulation is applied to a concrete building, there is a gap between the cladding and the concrete so there is no build of condensation. This chimney effect, while helping overcome condensation build up, can help in spreading flames in the event of a fire.

To prevent this cavity, barriers are installed. These are designed to expand in the event of a fire and close off the gap. But in the case of Grenfell, the barriers installed were designed to close off a 25-mm gap when the gap was 50 mm. This meant they failed and the fire took hold. In addition, some of the barriers were incorrectly installed, being upside down or back to front.

Another major contributor to the deaths were the window frames installed as part of the refurb. These were also not wide enough to fill the space between the columns, leaving a gap of several centimetres at each side. The gap was plugged with various filling materials, none of which provided the necessary 30-minute resistance in the event of fire. BRE found that the insulation foam used was combustible, thus aiding the rapid spread of the fire up and across the building.

This meant when the fire took hold, smoke was quickly able to penetrate the gap entering flats, producing “a direct route for fire spread around the window frame into the cavity of the facade...and from the facade back into flats.”

In the case of Flat 16, the window refurb only provided “fuel” instead of a barrier, as “The construction of the window did not provide any substantial barrier to fire taking hold on the facade outside.”

The BRE addressed the automatic door-closing mechanisms on the front door of each flat. Closers fitted to these doors should have automatically closed the door as residents fled the fire. BRE found almost half the door-closing mechanisms were either missing or faulty, breaching building regulations.

As a result, when residents fled their flats on the night of the fire, a significant number of doors were inadvertently left open. “Where this occurred, the fire in each flat appears to have emitted large quantities of smoke and later fire directly into the immediate lobby, and these have gone on to affect the lifts and single stairwell.” The *Standard* comments that this “would have affected residents’ life chances as they sought to escape down the single stairwell.”

The BRE looked at issues relating to the firefighters’ response. Landscaping and the lack of space around the base of the tower block—about which the Grenfell Action Group had warned the TMO of what the “catastrophic” consequences would be—meant that only one fire engine could park adjacent to the tower. In addition, the riser allowing access to get water to the top floors was a dry riser making it difficult for one fire engine alone to pump water to

the height needed to reach the upper floors. The BRE report notes the tower should have been fitted with a wet riser—with water present along the length of it making it easier to pump water to the top floors.

The *Evening Standard* showed the leaked report to a specialist architect who said, “The question is could this fire have been avoided? This damning report is saying it absolutely could have been and the refurb was to blame.”

He added, “These findings could result in people going to prison. But the report has left open the vital questions as to whether the design of the installation was at fault, whether the works were approved and/or inspected, or whether it was a combination of all of these. The buck stops with the owner of the building Kensington and Chelsea council, and its management organisation, which should have ultimate duty of care. Some people will not be sleeping well at night once this report is made public. You read it and think: heads are going to roll.”

A spokesman for Grenfell United, which speaks for survivors of the fire, told the *Standard*: “It was clear to us the refurbishment was shoddy and second rate. We raised concerns time and again. We were not just ignored but bullied to keep quiet. That a refurbishment could make our homes dangerous and unsafe shows that the contractors put profit before lives. It’s an industry that is broken.

“It’s also an industry that has been allowed to get away with this behaviour. Six people died in a fire at Lakanal House in 2009 and the Government failed to act and make changes to regulations that would have stopped a fire like that happening again. Tonight we know people are going to sleep in homes with dangerous cladding on them.”

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (UK), will be holding the next of its regular meetings on Saturday, April 21, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend. Details below:

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting Saturday April 21, 4 p.m.
Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk
London, W10 6SW
(nearest tube: Latimer Road)
For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact