

UK government warned of dangers of flammable cladding three years before Grenfell fire

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As recently as 2014, the UK government was warned of the risks of using combustible aluminum composite material (ACM) cladding on buildings and did nothing to stop its use or warn the population.

The details emerged just as the Grenfell fire inquiry broke for its summer recess. It was because Grenfell Tower was surrounded by highly flammable cladding that a small fire on the fourth floor rapidly became an inferno that consumed the entire block on June 14 last year, claiming 72 lives.

Inside Housing, the weekly trade publication, revealed minutes of a meeting of the fire group of the Center for Window and Cladding Technology (CWCT) on July 2, 2014. *Inside Housing* was able to access the minutes through a Freedom of Information request.

The meeting, held two years before Grenfell tower was covered in flammable ACM, was called after the CWCT received inquiries about the fire safety and performance of facades (cladding) due to the fact that there had been “a number of issues recently.” It was attended by officials from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

On the combustibility of insulation, the minutes state, “Limited combustibility insulation should be used above 18 metres when following the prescriptive requirements of Approved Document B (ADB) Clause 12.7 but other materials, principally foil faced phenolic foam are often used in rainscreen walls.”

This was not the case at Grenfell, with its cladding being compared to “solid petrol” by some experts.

The minutes show the building regulations to be deliberately ambiguous, providing grey areas where building control officers have allowed the use of combustible material that does not comply to the standards in ADB clause 12.7.

Regarding the use of ACM, the CWCT findings showed that, “This material generally achieves a reaction to fire classification of class 0 or class B s1 d0.” In the minutes, CWCT recommends that there are safer and less

combustible options available. “There are versions available with a mineral core which can achieve A2 s1 d0. There are also similar materials available with other metals such as copper used for the facing.”

The minutes give a stark warning of the dangers associated with the use of ACM: “There have been major fires in buildings in various parts of the world including the Middle East and France where ACM materials have been used for the cladding with the ACM responsible for external fire spread.”

It is stated that “clause 12.7 of ADB is intended to prohibit the use of polyethylene cored ACM in buildings over 18m as they are not classed as limited combustibility. ...

“In a building with a storey 18m or more above ground level any insulation product, filler material (not including gaskets, sealants and similar) etc. used in the external wall construction should be of limited combustibility.”

While it was made clear to the Department for Communities and Local Government that cladding was directly responsible for the spread of external fires in tower blocks, the government was doing nothing with this information.

These official guidelines were ignored by the government, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—that carried out Grenfell’s “refurbishment” on behalf of the council.

The minutes also point to the dangers in the use of cladding that has not been properly fitted and buildings that have not been designed to take the new forms of cladding:

“Cavities/openings may be formed in a fire due to melting or deformation of materials. The cavities/openings may lead to unexpected routes for fire spread. In ADB [Approved Document B] the requirement for insulation of limited combustibility applies to all insulation so includes insulation within a rainscreen cavity or within a curtain wall spandrel panel.”

This adds to the evidence pointing to the vast criminality committed at Grenfell by the political and corporate elite, who are doing everything possible to conceal their crimes.

In the Grenfell Inquiry's last session, Michael Mansfield QC, representing some Grenfell families, interrupted inquiry chair, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, to insist there was a "sense of urgency" to act and help families still living in tower blocks with similar cladding. He said, "There is no need to wait another nine months to make recommendations that could—and possibly should—be made now."

The same call was made in June by Pete Weatherby, QC, who demanded "a moratorium on the use of any insulation or rainscreen products that are below A1 (non-combustible) standard, at least until [the inquiry chair's] final report."

In response, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) claimed, "We are acting quickly" and are "consulting on banning the use of combustible materials on high-rise residential buildings. We are also restructuring building regulations fire safety guidance to ensure it is clear."

The truth is that the government is "consulting" on the banning of ACM only in order to ensure that any such measure, if legislated at all, will result in the least impact on the profits of big business. A full ban is opposed by Sir Ken Knight, the chair of the government's independent fire safety panel, who wrote to the MHCLG on July 2 calling only for a limited ban on combustible materials used on buildings.

Virtually nothing has been done to make thousands of people safe in their homes 14 months after the Grenfell fire.

In total, 470 public and private buildings in the UK are known to have Grenfell-type cladding. A year after the Grenfell fire, the government's own building safety programme had identified 297 private high-rise blocks with ACM cladding. However, only 21 had begun the process to remove cladding and only four buildings have had their cladding completely removed. It is estimated by other sources that there are many more buildings clad in ACM, which are not being listed by their owners, who fear a collapse in the value of their property.

Recently residents at the New Capital Quay block in Greenwich, London had to prepare a class action suit against developers and insurers over building safety to force the company to agree to remove the cladding from their homes.

Those guilty of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be arrested and charged, including former London Mayor Boris Johnson, Prime Minister Theresa May and her predecessors, David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair.

Those instrumental in the decision to add the cladding to Grenfell must also be arrested and charged, including former RBKC council leader Nicholas Paget-Brown; his then-

deputy, Rock Feilding-Mellen; former housing director Laura Johnson; former head of the KCTMO, Robert Black; the CEO of Rydon, Robert Bond; the managing director of Harley Facades, Ray Bailey; the CEO of Arconic, which manufactured the cladding panels used; and the chief executive officers of Celotex, which manufactured the flammable insulation.

• Justice for Grenfell means no cover-up and no inquiry whitewash!

• Arrest the political and corporate criminals responsible!

• Stop the scapegoating of firefighters!

• Quality public housing is a social right!

• For an emergency multibillion-pound programme of public works to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be discussing these issues at its next meeting on Saturday, September 1, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday, September 1, 4 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

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

For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum



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