Hundreds of residential tower blocks around UK still clad in flammable material

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Tens of thousands of UK residents are still living in high rise buildings covered with flammable cladding, 18 months after the horrific inferno that consumed Grenfell Tower, killing 72.

The deadly consequences of wrapping buildings in thermo-plastic materials was confirmed by experts recently at the government inquiry into the Grenfell fire. The cladding and its inept installation were identified as the main contributory factors in the fire spreading from a small fire in one flat to the whole building in half an hour.

It took almost a year after the Grenfell fire for Prime Minister Theresa May to announce that the government would provide a paltry £400 million to remove cladding composed of aluminium composite material (ACM) from publicly owned buildings, to be replaced with a safe alternative. ACM is in fact only one kind of cladding with incendiary properties.

"Councils and housing associations must remove dangerous cladding quickly," May said in parliament as a means to diffuse public anger over the issue.

That no action has been taken by the government to enforce this is proved by the latest monthly Building Safety Programme report. The Building Safety Programme was set up following the fire "with the aim of ensuring that residents of high-rise residential buildings are safe, and feel safe from the risk of fire, now and in the future."

But its October 25 report, published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, shows hardly any progress in removing the cladding. It identified that there are still "457 high-rise (over 18 metres) residential buildings and publicly-owned buildings in England [which have] Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding systems unlikely to meet current Building Regulations guidance."

Of these, "157 are social sector residential buildings, managed by local authorities or housing associations; 291 are private sector buildings, of which 201 are private residential, 28 are hotels, and 62 are student accommodation. 9 are publicly-owned buildings, comprising hospitals and schools."

Not all buildings with cladding have even been tested yet: "There are approximately 30 private sector residential buildings where the cladding status is still to be confirmed—this has fallen from approximately 170 buildings in June."

The report lists the work to date: "22 of the 157 social sector buildings (14%) have finished remediation… and a further 98 buildings (62%) have started the process of remediation… Of the 291 private sector buildings 17 have finished remediation…; 21 have started remediation; remediation plans are in place for 92 buildings but remediation works haven't started on these buildings yet; there are 40 buildings where building owners intend to remediate and plans are being developed; and remediation plans remain unclear for 121 buildings."

Therefore, out of a total 457 buildings identified, work has been completed on just 43 (less than a tenth).

On October 17, six months after the cladding fund was announced, the government finally began to release the first tranches to Local Authorities to begin the remedial work on public buildings.

Work began on some high-rise blocks in the city of Salford, which has 29 flats encased with dangerous cladding—the highest concentration in the UK—daily threatening the safety and lives of residents.

Cladding has been removed from some of the nine local authority owned blocks—up to the fourth floor, and completely from Plane Court. Even before winter sets in, residents at Plane are complaining of freezing conditions in the flats, because the cladding has not been replaced and the outer walls provide no insulation.

One resident told the *Salford Star*, a local campaigning and investigative journal, "It's really cold, absolutely freezing; it's like being in the North Pole. We're sat with heaters on, blankets and onesies and it's still cold... They've [the local council] not done anything, apart from ask us to be patient."

Another said, "We've got the heating on but it doesn't

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make a difference. We've got the hot water on but it's warm water; and when you run a bath you've got to boil the kettle and pour it into the bath."

A couple said they have resorted to sleeping under "silver thermal blankets from one of the homeless organisations. That is how me and my partner sleep... in tin foil," adding, "Pendleton Together are a joke."

Pendleton Together Operating Limited (PTOL) is the private company that manages the flats on behalf of the Labour Party-run Salford City Council.

Funding the remedial work has proved a Kafkaesque nightmare. Labour Party-run Salford City Council originally borrowed £25 million to finance the work, which the government blocked. Pendleton Together does not qualify for the government cladding fund because it is a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contractor, which pays dividends to shareholders.

The Deputy City Mayor, Labour councillor John Merry, announced the "contractor, PTOL, have the means to pay for a detailed fire safety programme to keep homes safe and warm."

What he failed to explain is that SCC is tied into a PFI agreement with PTOL until 2042 and each month must make a payment "Sufficient to pay bond debt, to include interest and amortisation, operational costs and to provide for shareholder return..."

Residents of Spruce Court spoke to WSWS reporters expressing their worry, and anger at being kept in the dark.

Bob, 62, who lives on the sixth floor, said, "All those people [in Grenfell Tower] died for nothing. They were doing cheap renovations. The council are supposed to be sorting it [remedial work] out, but it could take two years."

"My 85-year-old relative lives on the tenth floor," said Janice, "And I'm worried about him."

Dany, 26, said, "The Council are doing nothing. People are in danger. We're not animals. Capitalism needs to go otherwise there will be more dangers."

Salim, 32, explained he got a flat in Plane Court because "I was homeless, I had no choice. It's scary, I'm worried. I call it modern slavery. It's about the rich people not the poor people."

Residents in the Pendleton Together blocks were recently informed by letter that the company had "secured funding for the removal and replacement of cladding over nine blocks at Pendleton, along with other fire related works. Further details on the work will be available shortly..."

There was no information on the amount of funding, or whether work would proceed on other defects in the blocks, such as faulty wiring, windows and entrance gates.

Salford City Council are equally unforthcoming, refusing to reveal the contents of a safety report into their flats commissioned by PTOL, saying it was up to the company to do so.

As there was initially no commitment by the government to fund work to remove ACM cladding on privately owned blocks, a government spokeswoman indicated that the cost for remediation should be met by landlords: "This is money for social housing. We expect private building owners to take responsibility for removing and replacing and to not pass the cost on to leaseholders."

A recent legal judgement, however, ruled in favour of freeholders, who own the land on which flats stand. It ruled that leaseholders (flat owners) can be charged for removing dangerous cladding from buildings.

The quagmire has not been resolved by the government's recent about-face on the issue—more apparent than real—authorising Councils to do the necessary remedial work, for which they will be reimbursed from central government funds.

Given the dire state of Local Authority finances—depleted of funds by massive austerity cuts to their budgets by Labour and Conservative governments since 2008—and the stipulation by both parties for councils to balance the books, it can be expected that councils will continue to prevaricate.

At the end of November, James Brokenshire MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, banned all combustible cladding, including ACM, from new buildings taller than 18 metres. The ban will be effective from December 21.

Combustible doors, windows, seals and thermal break materials will be exempt, however—even though these were proved to have contributed to the rapacious fire spread at Grenfell tower. The government said only that this exemption will be "reviewed."

Moreover, tower blocks built before 2013, wrapped in combustible cladding other than ACM, will not be covered by the ban. This means that approximately 160 high-rise flats, hotels and student blocks will remain wrapped in rainscreen cladding made from combustible materials—because the government in its indifference and criminality has only committed to fund the removal of buildings wrapped in ACM.

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