

Fire devastates student accommodation block covered in combustible cladding in Bolton, England

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At around 8:30 p.m. last Friday, a fire broke out in a student accommodation block in Bolton, a town in the Greater Manchester region of northwest England.

The accommodation block, known as the Cube, is a six-storey building that houses students attending the University of Bolton. The fire started in the upper part of the building, and, in a frighteningly reminiscent manner to the Grenfell Tower fire in London in June 2017, rapidly spread up and around the building.

At the height of the fire around 200 firefighters and 40 fire engines were present. The fire burnt fiercely and rendered the upper floors a bare framework. It was 5:30 a.m. the following day before all pockets of fire had been extinguished.

The block was home to 211 students but at the time of the fire only around 100 were in the building. Fortunately, there were no fatalities, but two students had to be treated by paramedics for minor injuries sustained. One student was rescued from the building by firefighters using an aerial platform ladder.

All the students' belongings, including passports and laptops, were destroyed by the fire or resulting water damage from firefighters' hosepipes. Bolton University has arranged emergency payments of just £500 to each student to enable them to buy replacement clothes and essentials and has arranged temporary emergency accommodation.

The block is owned by private landlord group Urban Student Life (USL). Speaking to the media, Cube residents raised long-standing issues such as alarms going off for no reason—which led to some complacency.

Afnan Gohar told BBC News she initially thought it was a false alarm. She explained, “We didn't take notice of it until a girl came running and screamed, telling us to get out and we didn't believe it at first.”

Melissa McGarrigle said, “The fire alarms in the corridor went off but they aren't particularly loud, especially if you're asleep. It just doesn't feel real, everyone thought it

was just the fire alarms acting up as usual until we heard people screaming.”

There have been problems with other USL developments, including fire safety issues. In 2016, it had developed a new student block in Leeds, Asquith House.

A September 2016 National Union of Students article highlighted problems with the block: “A student accommodation company (USL) has been suspended from a national code for providers, after a new development was held up by 11 weeks and there were significant delays in providing rent refunds and fire safety information... (it) was suspended for a year from the Code for Non-Educational Establishments by the Codes Full Tribunal ... Following the tribunal's ruling, Leeds City Council sent the Fire Authority to inspect the building, and has decided it is still not fit for use. The tenants who were due to move in are now required to find alternative accommodation...”

The rapid spread of the Bolton fire was recorded in a video by Ryan Pardon, a resident in a neighbouring block. The Daily Mirror Online notes the “[t]errifying footage shows devastating flames rip through the fourth floor right up to roof ... in a matter of minutes.” The article continues, “Ryan ... started recording when the fire had taken hold of the fourth and fifth floors ... but within 90 seconds it had spread to (the) top level—and a mere 40 seconds later they went through the roof.” The Mirror added, “A shocked witness spoke of flames ‘crawling up the cladding’ with every floor of the six-storey building alight.”

Speaking to the *Sunday People* newspaper, Ryan said, “The speed it spread was terrifying. The cladding has to be looked at. My building has the same cladding, they're only four metres apart, and we were worried the fire would spread. ... I couldn't sleep last night, my mind was racing about what could have happened.”

Ace Love, who witnessed the fire, told BBC Online the fire “kept getting more intense, climbing up and to the right because the wind was blowing so hard. We could see it

bubbling from the outside and then being engulfed from the outside ... The fire got worse and worse, to the point where you could see through the beams, it was just bare frame.”

The cladding on the student accommodation block was not the aluminium composite material (ACM) used on Grenfell Tower, which had acted as a fire accelerant. The cladding used on Cube was high-pressure laminate (HPL). The material used in HPL panels can vary and include compressed paper and wood fibre having different combustibility ratings.

An *Inside Housing* article of June 20 noted that “Kim Malthouse (then Tory Minister of State for Housing and Planning) this week confirmed his department became aware eight months ago that (HPL) cladding failed a large-scale test when combined with combustible insulation.”

HPL cladding releases can heat 25 times faster and burn 115 times hotter than non-combustible products, a recent study found.

In July, the government’s expert panel on fire safety demanded HPL panels be removed as soon as possible from buildings higher than 18 metres.

Grenfell United, the group representing survivors and relatives of the bereaved from the Grenfell Tower fire expressed support for the students affected by the fire and called for a national emergency to be declared because of the lack of action on unsafe cladding of buildings.

Quoted in the *Guardian*, the group said, “It brings back memories of Grenfell and we can’t believe that over two and a half years later this is happening. Our hearts go out to all the students affected. Hundreds of people go to bed scared every night in buildings covered with dangerous materials. When will this be treated as a national emergency? This cannot go on.”

Public safety over two and a half years after the Grenfell fire remains imperilled due to the massive number of people who live in buildings clad in dangerous materials.

The *Financial Times* (FT) explained that around 17,000 households in 184 privately owned residential tower blocks are still clad with dangerous materials. It noted, “A £200m government fund was launched this year to replace cladding on these buildings but it has so far approved preliminary funding for just one tower...”

The article continued, “Fixing private sector buildings has proved problematic, however, with freeholders, developers, leaseholders and warranty providers battling over who should bear the cost.”

The article cites Ritu Saha, who is a spokesperson for the campaign group UK Cladding Action. She explained that applying for the grant money is complex: “The application process also makes little provision for residents who cannot afford to complete an expensive cladding survey in

advance.”

Speaking of the impact on fellow residents in her affected tower block in Bromley (southeast London), Saha told the FT, “This has come at huge financial costs to all of us ... People are reaching breaking point.”

The government funding scheme is confined to buildings covered in ACM cladding—it does not cover other types of cladding such as HPL.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, aware of the implications of criticism during the general election campaign of his tardy visit to the sites of flooding in South Yorkshire and other parts of the country, made a fleeting visit to Bolton University on Saturday following the fire. He attempted to use the visit as a photo op with the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* stating that “many people” were “happily greeting the PM.” However, even its own footage had to show a man say to Johnson, “Don’t talk to us. Get out of here. How dare you come up here a day late.”

As Mayor of London, Johnson imposed huge cuts in the fire budget leading to reductions of firefighters, fire stations and equipment. Captured on video in 2013, he told a Labour Party London Assembly member to “get stuffed” when he accused Johnson of lying over the scale and consequences of his cuts to the London Fire Brigade.

Responding to the Bolton fire, Labour Party Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, told the *Guardian* November 16, “[The Cube] does not have the same ACM cladding [that was on Grenfell Tower] but nevertheless it does have a form of cladding that causes concern and raises issues that will have to be addressed.”

As Mayor of Greater Manchester, Burnham pushed through cuts in the Greater Manchester fire service, which covers Bolton. A package of cuts was imposed on the Greater Manchester population of 2.8 million people on the day of the Bolton fire. The number of fire engines in Greater Manchester are being cut from 56 to 50, with the possibility of another three going, including one at Bolton. Sixty non-uniformed staff are being made redundant. A proposal to reduce the manning on fire engines from five to four has been postponed for now. A total of nearly £13 million will be cut from the Greater Manchester fire service budget over the next three years.



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