

Two and a half years after Grenfell fire:

Tens of thousands of UK households live in buildings covered in flammable cladding

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25 January 2020

With the release of the Phase 1 Report on the Grenfell Tower Inquiry last October, Chairman Sir Martin Moore-Bick advised the replacement of dangerous, flammable cladding on residential buildings should “be done as quickly as possible” and that “the programme of remedial work should be pursued as vigorously as possible.”

Not only has this not happened, but since the day of the Grenfell fire in London over two and a half years ago, next to nothing has been done by the UK’s Conservative government to remove dangerous cladding from the mainly residential buildings that are enveloped in the material.

According to government data, more than 400 residential blocks, in both the public sector and private, were found, after testing, to have flammable cladding on them.

Yet as of January 16, at least 315 private and public high-rise buildings in England remain covered in the same Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) that caused the terrible deaths of 72 people at Grenfell. Remediation work has been completed on only 135 buildings, all but one in the public or social sectors, for which just £400 million has been made available since October 2018.

Taking into account the negligible amount of remedial work done so far, between 13,300 and 17,100 households, comprising tens of thousands of people, live in privately-owned homes yet to be made safe.

Last May, the Tory government announced a £200 million Private Sector Remedial Fund meant to handle all at-risk buildings, but as of November 30 only two applications had been approved, with completed applications received for another 29. The applications deadline came and went on December 31.

Only a single building out of 184 “with ACM cladding systems unlikely to meet Building Regulations” has received full funding costs.

At the current rate, remediation on public sector blocks covered in ACM would take until October 2022 to finish, and private blocks not until October 2033.

It should be noted that the identification of 400 blocks that need remedial work conceals a far worse crisis, with many thousands more residents affected and their lives in constant danger.

On Friday, BBC News reported that all 11,000 tower blocks in the UK are being tested for ACM type cladding but that the government has released no figures on how many blocks are clad

in High-Pressure Laminate (HPL) panels. HPL panels also pose a serious fire risk, and all buildings with it, according to fire experts, should have the panels removed.

HPL is estimated to cover some 440 blocks, dozens of them occupied by students, housing some 26,000 people.

The BBC contacted 209 local authorities under Freedom of Information legislation, and from the responses, it found that one in three high rise residential blocks had some form of cladding. Ninety-nine tower blocks were clad in HPL.

The BBC reported that when considering all buildings “the final figure will be much higher.” They contacted National Health Service Trusts and found that 75 hospital buildings have ACM cladding and 50 have HPL. A number of councils refused to hand over data. Labour Party-run Tower Hamlets borough in London, that has *700 tower blocks* within its borders, replied that it was “too early to know” how many blocks were affected. Enfield London borough council, also Labour-run, said cynically that to reveal the information would constitute an “endangerment to mental health” of residents.

Whereas the Tories have banned the future use of ACM and promised its removal on identified blocks, they have virtually ignored other flammable materials and safety hazards, and the complications arising from private sector applications.

The government considers HPL less risky than ACM, but classified it for removal only in cases where it is not paired with fire-resistant insulation. Last October, experts said all HPL should be stripped because the BS8414 fire test for external cladding fails to reflect real world conditions.

They were soon proved correct when an HPL-clad building known as “The Cube,” housing over 200 students at the University of Bolton, burned down in November. Despite having HPL cladding that should be stripped, the building was not listed for remediation because it was 14cm short of the highly arbitrary 18 metres (six storeys) threshold used by the government to define high-rise structures.

A spokesman for Rockwool, an insulation manufacturer, warned, “This fire has underscored that the 18-metre threshold is not good enough, and that all types of combustible insulation and combustible cladding can pose a risk to public safety, not just ACM cladding.”

Fire Brigades Union general secretary Matt Wrack noted that the

18-metre height requirements were based on wheeled escape ladders that have not been in widespread use since the late 1980s, and that restrictions should be reset at 11 metres, reachable by current methods.

Residents in private high-rises across England are finding getting remedial work done extremely difficult. At the Leeds Dock buildings, hundreds of homeowners are facing “life-changing bills” after demands that they pay for all needed remediation themselves. Letters last month from West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (WYFRS) and/or from the senior leaseholders or building owners claimed residents face legal liability.

Describing the situation as a “nightmare,” high-rise inhabitants told the *South Leeds Life* they “feel trapped, at gunpoint to costs that we cannot control.” More than 600 local households of more than 1,000 people are affected in Leeds, but no credible estimate exists of how many of the 17,000 households nationally are faced with these demands. WYFRS have forcibly evicted tenants unwilling to cooperate with this extortion.

Leeds Dock resident Daniel Marquina told *South Leeds Life*, “Most of us are first-time buyers, living here, putting all our savings into the mortgage—but now we’re facing these very high costs, and it’s very worrying. I don’t understand why we (the leaseholders) have to pay, instead of the building owner. The government has to help us.”

The original development companies that built Leeds Dock constructed buildings below regulatory standards and have since been dissolved. Some have claimed that they acted as “shell companies” to avoid such consequential liabilities. And now that the development is over 10 years old, warranties no longer apply.

Accessing the government remediation fund is immensely complicated. Not only does it exclude needed internal reconstruction, it requires a survey to determine full costs and consultation with all leaseholders—some of whom live abroad or cannot otherwise be reached—to submit a state aid form. During this time their homes cannot be sold as they would not qualify for a mortgage.

Meanwhile, residents must cope with the fear and anxiety of living in unsafe premises. At the Northpoint development in Bromley, tenants have organised “waking watches,” 24-hour fire patrols, to ensure their building meets local fire service inspections. The situation has raised their annual service charges from £2,000 to £7,000, with total costs of remediation expected to total £70,000 for each flat, or they face breaching tenancy.

In addition, new alarm systems and fire doors are often needed, and sprinklers—which are a requirement for high-rise buildings—have been labelled “non-essential” for retrofitting by government ministers.

The constant safety dangers caused by long-term government neglect have led to stress, and in some cases bankruptcy. Disasters and emergencies continue.

On January 13, 584 Kings College London students, many of them studying medicine, received a mass email telling them a fire hazard required them to move. The University, which had made the decision on December 19, refused to provide any more information about the Champion Hill, South London property, but insisted there was no imminent danger.

Photographs suggest the blocks have cladding, leading psychology graduate student Anne Kay to tell the *Daily Mail*, “They didn’t officially mention cladding but we basically got an email yesterday explaining they fear there are fire hazards. I feel anxious.”

Two days later, on the evening of January 15, students of the 16-storey Lansdown Point building in Bournemouth were provided with the option of moving to other accommodation while their building undergoes remediation. The building houses some 400 residents, including students at Bournemouth University International College.

Inspectors visiting the structure in September 2019 unearthed a series of “category 1 hazards,” in addition to finding cladding similar to Grenfell, including faulty emergency lighting, fire doors, and faulty sprinkler and fire alarm systems.

The callous indifference of the government in denying thousands of people the right to basic safety since Grenfell has resulted in suffering and anguish. With three additional buildings discovered just this month to have unsafe cladding, residents have serious cause for concern.

Last year, the UK Cladding Action Group surveyed 200 homeowners in 21 buildings. Fully 127 claimed their mental health had been “highly affected,” 160 experienced stress, and 50 had sought medical help. Some 75 people turned to alcohol and seven to drugs, while 17 others experienced suicidal thoughts.

The government’s main response has been limited to reminding *others* of their responsibilities. A spokesman for the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government recently described the ACM cladding situation as “unacceptable,” adding, “We have written to building owners to reiterate their responsibility in keeping residents safe and we will not hesitate to name and shame those who do not have a clear plan to safeguard their residents.”

In Parliament last week, Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick had to admit fire safety efforts had been “unacceptably slow” and continuing problems could lead to a “risk of further loss of life.” All that will happen is that next month the government will begin to name those responsible for buildings where work has not begun.

In response to Jenrick’s speech, Labour called the moves “too little, at least two years too late.” They recommended Prime Minister Boris Johnson—who carried out mass cuts to the fire service and is one of the main figures responsible for Grenfell—take personal charge of a task force to check high rises and require work to commence!

For further details visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page.

The author also recommends:

Britain’s cladding crisis: Socialist Equality Party campaigns at Chalcot Estate in North London
[28 November 2019]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact