

Parliamentary report exposes widespread fire-safety failings three years on from Grenfell Tower inferno

Alice Summers
26 June 2020

Three years on from the deadly Grenfell Tower fire, around 2,000 high-rise residential or publicly owned buildings are still covered with dangerous cladding, says a cross-party parliamentary report.

Titled “Cladding: Progress of Remediation,” the report by Parliament’s Housing, Communities and Local Government (HCLG) committee exposes the deadly conditions still facing thousands of residents in high-rise buildings across the country. While the Conservative government pledged to do whatever was necessary to make tower blocks safe after the catastrophic inferno at Grenfell in 2017, in which 72 people died, next to no remedial work has been carried out.

Of the 2,000 high-rise buildings still coated in highly flammable materials, 300 are clad with Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) panels. This cladding used on Grenfell Tower was the most significant factor allowing flames to rapidly spread up the entire 24-storey building in less than 20 minutes.

Although official figures do not exist for the number of high-risk buildings over 18 metres clad in non-ACM forms of flammable cladding, the minister of state for building safety, Stephen Greenhalgh, told the HCLG committee that approximately 11,300 buildings are believed to be covered in non-ACM cladding, with 1,700 being high-rise buildings in need of urgent remediation works.

Dangerous non-ACM materials include High-Pressure Laminate (HPL), a widely used form of cladding shown in tests to pose a similar level of fire risk to ACM.

The continued use of flammable cladding materials and lack of remediation work testify to the contempt evinced by central and local government for the lives of working class residents.

According to official figures, as of May this year, only

155 of the 455 high-rise buildings clad with ACM identified as at-risk had cladding removed and replaced with safer alternatives. Of the 300 that remain unsafe, work has yet to begin on 160 towers, with repairs on the other 140 in various stages of completion.

A separate report from the National Audit Office (NAO) revealed that as of April 2020, just 0.7 percent of the £200 million funding made available by the government in May last year to handle at-risk private-sector buildings has so far been disbursed. This is only £1.42 million of the already paltry funding pot, with a further £24.98 million (12.5 percent of the total fund) worth of applications having been approved but not yet paid out.

Of the government’s £400 million public sector fund—made available 20 months ago in October 2018—just £133 million (33.3 percent) has been paid out.

In March this year, Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced another £1 billion “Building Safety Fund.” This inadequate amount is subject to numerous restrictions on its use. According to the HCLG committee, funding can only be accessed to remediate residential buildings over 18 metres high and will be allocated on a first-come first-served basis, with the window for applications closing by July 2020. Buildings that started remediation work before the chancellor’s March 11 announcement will be excluded from funding, as will non-residential buildings such as hotels and hospitals.

The HCLG committee estimates that the £1 billion fund will cover the costs of removal and replacement works on only 600 buildings—one third of the 1,700 high-rises with unsafe non-ACM cladding. The government’s own estimate is that remediation of all high-rises with unsafe cladding will cost between £3 billion and £3.5 billion, while the National Housing Federation calculated that total costs for cladding removal work are expected to

easily top £10 billion in the social housing sector alone.

The Greater London Authority told the HCLG committee that the average cost of cladding remediation was £1.7 million per building, with the Greater Manchester High Rise Taskforce reporting an average cost per building of £4 million. This means that approximately 25 percent of the fund would be required to fund remediation of high-rise buildings in Greater Manchester alone.

The HCLG committee reports concerns over the arbitrary 18-metre threshold for determining eligibility for funding. Dr. Jonathan Lacy, chief executive of construction manufacturer Ash and Lacy, told the committee that the Building Safety Fund dictates that the height of a building be measured from ground level to the surface of the top floor, as opposed to roof level. Several buildings which are 18 metres to the roof have been excluded from applying for remediation funding.

The report notes that two of the most high-profile residential fires in the last year—at student accommodation The Cube in Bolton and at Samuel Garside House in Barking—were in buildings below 18 metres in height. The National Fire Chiefs Council told the HCLG committee that there are around 100,000 buildings between 11 metres and 18 metres in height, many covered in flammable cladding.

Many residents in high-rises surveyed by the HCLG committee reported concerns over numerous other fire safety defects in their buildings, none of which would be addressed by the government’s Building Safety Fund. Thirty-four percent reported missing or inadequate fire breaks, 30 percent described combustibles or missing insulation, with timber balconies or walkways (14 percent) and inadequate fire doors (5 percent) also featuring prominently.

The HCLG committee wrote, “There is no point fixing the cladding, but leaving a building fundamentally unsafe. We believe that there is no reason to fund the remediation of some fire safety defects but not others. *Our view is that funding will need to be increased to address all fire safety defects in every high-rise or high-risk residential building—potentially costing up to £15 billion*” (emphasis in original).

Many tenants have been forced to pay for interim fire-protection measures out of their own pocket, at a huge cost, while they endure agonising waits for their buildings to be made safe. These measures include installing new fire-alarm systems and putting in place 24-hour waking watches, with tenants reporting increases in service

charges of up to £1,000 a month, according to the HCLG committee.

The impact on the mental health of the approximately 500,000 residents in properties with serious fire-safety defects has been substantial. Rituparna Saha, from UK Cladding Action Group (UKCAG), told the HCLG committee, “I would summarise my life as pretty much a living nightmare...we basically feel like we are completely trapped. We feel hopeless.”

A separate report from UKCAG found that of the 550 tenants of tower blocks with ACM cladding they surveyed, almost a quarter had had thoughts of suicide or self-harm due to cladding issues.

As the WSWS noted in an article commemorating three years since the Grenfell fire, “Despite its damning findings, the HCLG, made up of Tory, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs, offers nothing to remedy the crisis. It merely asks the government ‘to ensure that all buildings of any height with ACM cladding...be fully remediated of all fire safety defects by December 2021’ and that buildings ‘with other fire safety defects, including non-ACM cladding, should be remediated before the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire in June 2022.’”

As the report makes clear, there is no obligation for building owners to do any such thing, with Minister for Building Safety Stephen Greenhalgh refusing to set a deadline for when remedial work must be completed. Greenhalgh spoke of his “ambition, as opposed to a commitment” that works to remove ACM cladding should be “completed sometime in 2021.”

Even the limited measures put forward by the government have been opposed by building corporations, with property developer Berkeley Group calling for some forms of “low risk” ACM cladding not to be banned or removed. Speaking to the *Times*, Rob Perrins, the company’s chief executive, said: “It shouldn’t be ‘all ACM should be removed’ or ‘all HPL should be removed.’ It’s low risk.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact