Cheaper flammable cladding was ordered for Grenfell tower to save time

Charles Hixson
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Harley Facades project manager Ben Bailey admitted ordering substitute insulation for Grenfell Tower to avoid a four-day delay in the building's refurbishment, the Grenfell inquiry heard.

Harley Facades was one of the main subcontractors in the refurbishment of the Tower—applying the flammable cladding which turned it into a death trap and 72 fatalities.

Bailey was just 25 when his father, Harley managing director Ray Bailey, appointed him project manager. He ordered another product after supplier SIG had mistakenly sold an order of Celotex RS5000 intended for Grenfell to another buyer. When informed of the delay, Bailey wrote, "Are you joking? Is K15 held in stock at the same thickness?" An email order for Kingspan Kooltherm K15 is shown being sent a few minutes later.

Bailey claimed the timing of the emails was faulty, insisting he spent an hour discussing the matter with his technical team who advised him it was a similar product after examining the K15 certificate. However, the certificate states the product had only been tested for use with a cement fibre cladding, rather than the combustible aluminium cladding material (ACM) that would be utilised on Grenfell. It said Kingspan should be contacted if the insulation was used on buildings over 18 metres.

Richard Millett QC, noting that the delay covered only four working days, asked Bailey, "Was the delay so critical that you had to change insulation?" He replied that the delay might have brought difficulties, "Because you could have teams of fixers not doing anything because there isn't any material... Rydon [lead contractor] was also putting pressure on subcontractors to stick to programme."

Bailey admitted failing to inform the client, Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), who ran the Tower on behalf of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea London council (RBKC), or architect Studio E of the change. This violated the contract's clause requiring the client's permission for any substitution. Subsequent emails from Celotex asked Harley if they could use Grenfell Tower as a "case study" for their insulation, characterised by Millett as the building acting as a "guinea pig."

Bailey claimed he had harboured a "misconception" that materials rated "Class 0" could be used for high rises. He admitted he had no qualifications or training in industry codes of practice for design, in building regulations, in the installation of windows and cladding, and in fire safety. He also denied knowing the contractual obligations regarding substitution and said he hadn't read the contract rendering Harley responsible to see that cladding met official guidelines on fire performance. As with all Harley witnesses, he claimed compliance with regulations was the responsibility of the architects, and that his role just dealt with running the work programme.

Under questioning, he admitted that some days he failed to inspect work on the site, agreeing that workers were "left to get on with their job unsupervised." His inspection of barrier installation was described as "ad hoc," and he missed an entire face of the building. He reported being "shocked" by "sloppy" workmanship that he found after the fire. Bailey was shown a photograph of the Siderise horizontal cavity barrier. It had been installed both vertically and back-to-front.

A yet more damaging admission came when the inquiry reviewed a dispute between Harley and building officers at RBKC in March 2015 about whether fire stripping or cavity barriers were required. Bailey emailed manufacturer Siderise to provide a quote and designs in case the council decided to meet the requirement for a two-hour delay of flames. Siderise technical development director Chris Mort responded, adding, "Also, on the second page of the attachment I have highlighted the weak link so to speak in terms of fire."

The page shows an orange circle around the bracket at the top of the windows, with the words written in capital letters: "WEAK LINK FOR FIRE." Mort then advised shifting the cavity barrier down to the top of the windows. But the RBKC building control officer decided against the two-hour requirement, and Mort's warning was ignored. Mort told the inquiry explained that he was "highlighting that there was nothing to stop fire in an internal compartment moving to an external cavity… It was a clear error and I felt I should highlight it."

Bailey admitted that he found Approved Document B of the building regulations concerning fire, confusing. Finally, Millett asked him, "Are you able to explain how Harley, as a specialist cladding contractor, and you—as the project manager overseeing

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the installation—so lacked expertise in the placement of cavity barriers that you had to seek advice from the manufacturer?" After repeating that he was "not in a technical role," Bailey answered "no" after the question was repeated.

The role of cladding manufacturer Arconic (then known as Alcoa) was examined last Wednesday. An email from Richard Geater of rival manufacturer 3A claimed his company was undercut by Arconic because 3A was offering the more expensive FR fire-rated core rather than the more combustible PE (polythene) cladding. The inquiry heard testimony that a mock-up of the cladding on the refurbishment used FR rather than the PE with which it was later constructed.

Arconic had long been aware of polythene's poor performance in fire tests, especially when cut into "cassette" shapes. Technical manager Claude Wehrle wrote in 2011, "For the moment, even if we know that PE material in cassette has a bad behaviour exposed to fire, we can still work with national regulations who are not as restrictive." In 2015, he observed that "PE is dangerous on facades, and everything should be transferred to FR as a matter of urgency," but said this conclusion was "technical and anti-commercial."

The inquiry heard that Geof Blades, sales director of CEP Architectural Facade, admitted ignorance that an FR version of the panel existed. Despite being asked to give quotes on a "VM Zinc" product, he based his offers on an Arconic Reynobond PE product painted to look like zinc. He claimed he "introduced" it rather than recommended it and insisted he didn't approach other companies because it was a "courtesy" since the two companies had been discussing the project. Blades said he was "not consciously aware" that the polythene core of the panel was plastic and combustible. He agreed with Millett that his failure to realise that Reynobond 55 also came as an FR was "something of a missed opportunity."

Andrew McQuatt, project manager for the consultant Max Fordham, was questioned last Thursday. He explained he had selected the insulation product as best suited for a thermal efficiency target that was double the standard in guidance for refurbishments. Described at the time as "over the top" and "a bit aspirational," McQuatt called the insulation his top priority. He chose Celotex FR5000 because he was unable to log onto Kingspan's website. He wrote Studio E lead architect Bruce Sounes in August 2012 that it "is the only type of product that will give us the required performance." He hadn't carried out even the most basic checks on its fire performance, saying he saw it used on so many projects, he assumed it was safe.

Three years after a complaint was filed, a report by the Metropolitan Police's directorate of professional standards absolved police surveillance helicopters of fanning the flames or misleading Grenfell residents to believe they would be rescued by rooftop landings. A 999 call on the night of the fire asked, "Can the helicopter take us, please?" They were told, "OK. We are trying to get you." Another caller was told, "There is one there, OK, all right, the fire brigade are on their way now, making their way."

The police's investigation concluded, "At no point were they told or led to believe by police, that there may be a helicopter or rooftop rescue… Despite some examples of unclear responses, no emergency call centre operator told any callers that helicopters would rescue them."

Nabil Choucair, who lost six family members in the fire and initiated the complaint, observed, "The police didn't do enough to make clear the helicopters were not there to rescue them, especially since they were equipped with loudhailers. It is sadly similar to how the buck is being passed at the public inquiry."

During Prime Minister's Questions last week, Labour MP Florence Eshalomi pointed out that the unsafe cladding on high-rise buildings had still not been replaced, trapping leaseholders in unsafe flats, "unable to sell or remortgage their properties." Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who imposed fire service cuts as London Mayor, replied, "I think it is disgraceful, and both ACM and HPL [high-pressure laminate] cladding should, in my view, come off as fast as possible and we are investing massively to achieve that as fast as we can."

Despite £200 million promised in May 2019 and a further £1 billion in May 2020—still nowhere near enough—hundreds of high-rises are a threat to the lives of those who live in them.

The inquiry has no powers of prosecution and has—in alliance with the Tories—ensured that those giving testimony from the corporations are immune from future prosecution. The Socialist Equality Party calls on Grenfell survivors and the bereaved to end cooperation with it and demand the immediate arrest and criminal prosecution of the guilty parties.

For further information visit and join the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook **page**.

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