

Cost cutting and council's austerity measures led to Grenfell tragedy

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Thousands in high-rise flats nationwide continue to live in fear because the Johnson government will not take action to remove dangerous cladding that threatens their lives. The Grenfell Inquiry heard evidence this week that similar economic considerations led to the June 2017 fire that killed 72 people.

The consultant hired by the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) to act as clerk of works on the refurbishment told the hearing on Monday that it was “crystal clear” their client understood they would receive a more limited site-inspection service. Gurpal Virdee, head of John Rowan & Partners (JRP), said talks during the bidding process made it apparent that the clerk of works they were seeking would act as site inspectors rather than providing a more expensive end-to-end service. He claimed his firm would have required “too many experts” to assure the project complied with all building regulations.

Instead, JRP offered Jonathan White, a general building clerk of works, and Tony Batty, a specialist on mechanical and electric systems. They worked for a total of 80 days, occasionally just once a week. The limited role reflected the fact that main contractor Rydon had been given a design and build contract, making them responsible for the quality of the completed work.

JRP's role mainly consisted of walking around and reporting on building activity. “I would expect us to walk around, get a general feel for what the client has asked us to do, and prepare a report... The best we can do is ask the question ‘have you guys checked that it's compliant and have building control approved it?’”

Mark Osborne of cladding installers Osborne Berry claimed he was “shocked” by the lack of vertical cladding barriers, could not explain why fire breaks were missing, and confessed that poor workmanship was to blame. “As far as I'm aware they were on the tower because I fitted them myself. I know they were on site because I unloaded

them off the lorry. He was shown photographs of horizontal cavity barriers that had been installed vertically and back to front with rough edges, which allowed for fire to spread between compartments.

He told inquiry lawyer Kate Grange QC that it would have been an “impossibility” to “keep an eye on everything that was going on... It would even be hard for building control or clerk of works to see some of these things because they were being covered up so quickly.” Asked what he would have done if he had noticed the shoddy work, he replied, “I would have ripped it off and redone it.”

After all the talk of cost cutting and limited inspection, it was confirmed that Grenfell cladding installers were paid for doing nothing. Grahame Berry, Director of Osborne Berry, had to explain an invoice from the company to contractor Harley Facades, reading, “8 men no work for 1 day machines up in air to look like working,” and a bill for £880.

Since no material was on site for the day and contractors Rydon had a client meeting for another possible building contract, Berry said the installers were instructed to look busy. “So Harley asked us to be up in the air to look like we were working, to look like a normal building site, rather than people sat downstairs just doing nothing.”

He admitted never having installed cavity barriers around windows before and described photographs of the work done as “unacceptable.”

Berry had to deny allegations made against him in an earlier email to Harley from Rydon project manager Simon O'Connor. These included displaying a general disregard for health and safety, and behaviour such as banging on windows to frighten animals in flats and telling residents that cladding had been installed incorrectly.

In the afternoon, director Mark Dixon of SD Plastering said they assumed other contractors had checked

compliance as they had joined the project late. As head of the firm installing the windows, he admitted not considering insulation and fire performance, saying we was unaware insulation had to be of “limited combustibility.” He had believed that process “had already been done” and that “everybody knew exactly what was required, where it was required and the safety to ensure that nothing is missed is that site management team, building control officer and Studio E [Architects] have the ability to sign those off and say ‘we are happy with what’s being done.’”

The employee at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council whose job it was to sign-off on the safety of the refurbishment was so swamped with work that he ended up resigning ten weeks before the fire. John Hoban, senior building control surveyor, told the inquiry Wednesday that by 2016 he was covering the work of three former colleagues, and was involved with 130 projects at any given time.

A September 2013 restructuring aimed at making the council department “self funding” slashed the workforce from 12 members to 4 or 5, requiring inspectors to pick up areas left by vacancies. Hoban was assigned Grenfell, previously the responsibility of a senior officer. When asked by Richard Millett QC how this had influenced his effectiveness, he observed that before austerity cuts, a “special projects team” would have taken on Grenfell. He was so busy he was forced to email clients he would have met personally before.

He admitted not knowing about the series of fire risks and approving designs in 2014 that did not include insulation or cladding details. Since the cladding panels were rated “Class 0,” he assumed they were safe, but they had only been tested with non-combustible cement-fibre cladding panels. He had trusted Studio E Architects because he had worked with them before and drew “comfort” from fire safety experts Exova’s advice, although the latter dropped out of the project in 2014.

Asked by Millett, “Was it not your job to hold them to the highest standards of building regulation completely independently and ruthlessly?” He replied, “In hindsight, yes.” Breaking down in tears he said, “I was having difficulty dealing with things because of family matters going on.” Of quitting his job, he recalled, “I resigned because I had enough. I wasn’t able to do the job how I was taught to do it. It was affecting my health and I just didn’t want to work there anymore.”

On Thursday, Hoban appeared to be addressing survivors and bereaved watching online, sobbing as he

described his sorrow over those who died. While admitting his shortcomings, he described the effects of the council’s cuts, which at the time of the refurbishment had seen 10 building inspectors with 230 years of experience between them replaced by a single new graduate. “I don’t believe that was the correct way to run a department,” he concluded.

Despite coming into the office at weekends and taking his work into bed at night, he retained confidence in the design team and the engineers. When asked by Millett if this had made him less rigorous, he replied, “I can only do so much in a day, Mr. Millett, and I have to prioritise my work, I have to make judgements.”

He observed:

“If we had a regulatory body like we had with the Greater London Council and the regulations and building act and bylaws we had at the time, and a support network of experts that administered the regulations, I don’t think we would be... here talking about people that lost their lives and all these buildings with flammable cladding and the stress and uncertainty that leaves with people living in those buildings now.”

In the middle of the week’s testimony, 22 lawyers representing solicitors firms and counsel for the Grenfell community took what they described as an “unusual step” to urge the government to immediately adopt the recommendations made in the Phase 1 report of the Inquiry. Key elements such as evacuation plans, and inspection of fire doors have already been watered down.

“The most urgent and obvious need,” they said, “is the immediate removal of all combustible cladding facades from residential and other buildings... The people living in those blocks are living in fear.” Some 291 of 458 high-rises with Grenfell-like aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding have still not been refurbished, and nearly 3000 registrations have been received for buildings with other types of dangerous cladding.



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