

Fire official warned of cladding facade danger weeks before Grenfell fire

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Kevin Hughes, London Fire Brigade (LFB) head of fire engineering and specialist fire safety officer, sent a draft of a slide show presentation warning of a “significant threat” of “flammable building facades” in May 2017, three weeks before the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Addressing the Grenfell Tower Inquiry’s Phase 2, Hughes said that for a talk scheduled for the following month, to take place just a week after the fire, he had made notes reading, “in residential buildings the fire is not confined to the flat of origin and our ‘stay put’ limited evacuation strategy is compromised.”

He continued, “Large-scale evacuations in residential buildings especially those with single staircases cause a problem in terms of staircase capacity and obstruction to firefighters.” Prophetically, the notes read, “The reason for highlighting this is to raise awareness of the problem. I believe that the codes and fire engineering principles we use to design fire safety into buildings are excellent, but facade fires and uncontrolled spread of fire across the outside of tall buildings is a significant threat to the effectiveness of the many systems within the building.”

The week’s testimony began with former LFB commissioner Rita Dexter noting that “large scale evacuations in residential buildings especially those with single staircases cause a problem in terms of staircase capacity and obstruction to firefighters.”

Assistant Commissioner and former head of fire safety Dan Daly was asked about the Madingley House Fire in Kingston, southwest London in 2010 when the facade “had no resistance to ignition” and of the Lacrosse fire in Melbourne and Torch Tower Fire in Dubai. He was shown LFB presentations called “Tall Building Facades” from July 2016 which called for a “need to understand” facade products, their “fire behaviour,” and “if they are used appropriately and meet the relevant guidance.”

He stated, “I would say that certainly my opinion at the time was that stay put is absolutely incumbent on

compartmentalization working, that if we were to have an example where those compartments could be overwhelmed or overrun, that would compromise stay put.”

The London Fire Brigade’s (LFB) “stay put” policy, recommending residents not directly affected by the fire remain in their homes with doors and windows shut, was based on the long-established fire-fighting knowledge that fires within residential tower blocks would be contained within individual flats.

Daly stressed that on the night LFB commanders were unable to immediately recognise that Grenfell Tower was a flammable cladding fire. If they had done so, he said, they could have sooner dropped their advice that the residents stay put. He expressed “faith in the regulatory system that we weren’t using those materials in this country.” But just last week the inquiry heard that in the years immediately prior to Grenfell, ministers had been pushed to review building guidance on fire spread.

Another incident that raised the grave implications of placing dangerous cladding on residential buildings was the 2009 Lakanal House fire in south London that killed six people. Gary Reason, former LFB director of operational resilience at training, was asked about recommendations stemming from the incident. These included the recognition that “a fire might behave in a manner inconsistent with the compartmentation principle” and awareness “of the risks to those above and adjacent to the fire flat.” Despite an April 2013 deadline for the completion of these changes, the new training materials remained in the pilot phase at the time of the Grenfell fire four years later.

The period 2009-2016 was characterised by budget cuts carried out by London Mayor and now Prime Minister Boris Johnson. These “budget efficiencies” included the closing of 10 fire stations, cutting 685 frontline posts, and reducing the LFB’s pump fleet by 13. Reason claimed

this was a “particularly difficult period for the brigade,” but denied it adversely affected the response to Grenfell.

Equally damaging, Reason said, was the privatisation of fire training to contractor Babcock International. Reason described Babcock as heavily reliant on the expertise of busy top LFB staff, including incident commanders, in developing training packages, which slowed progress. When the training materials were finally produced, they were far from satisfactory.

They failed to consider radio communication problems, never mentioned cladding in relation to external fire spread, and in Reason’s words did not “convey a response” to Lakanal. He insisted, “the concept that a fire like Grenfell could happen was not something that I would ever imagine could happen, both in terms of its scale and indeed the spread of fire development.”

The inquiry continued to criticize the LFB during testimony the following week. On Monday Assistant Commissioner Daly admitted he was reluctant to express concerns about building materials following the Shepherd’s Court fire in August 2016, during which a blaze spread across five floors from a kitchen window, leading to partial evacuation. By October 2016, the fire was found to have been fueled by timber and polystyrene window panels, covered over by steel sheets.

At the time, a colleague wrote, “this fire adds to the concern about understanding of... the building regulations and the standard of work by the construction industry,” and recommended “compiling evidence which allows us to lobby for improvement.” However, another warned, “There is a partnership at stake,” and Daly himself admitted, “What I didn’t want to do was to suggest without evidence that this issue was widespread and cause unnecessary concern for residents and equally for local authorities....”

The inquiry then switched to, at the time of Grenfell, the existing inaccurate and incomplete “operational risk database,” and heard the testimony of former director of operations David Brown. Phase 1 had already described the system as “woefully inadequate,” with no plans or aerial picture of Grenfell Tower, no tactical response listed, and with the wrong number of floors.

After the Lakanal fire a coroner’s inquest recommended improvements to the system, and a February 2013 report committed to carry out an audit to review how stations identified the buildings and entered them into the database. There was no evidence this was carried out, and by October 2017—four months after Grenfell fire—only 1,700 high-rise buildings out of London’s 6,900 appeared

in the database.

The same coroner’s report called for altering the assumption of the “compartmentation principle” in training, and the brigade recorded the recommendation as closed the following year. Again, there was no real implementation of the new training, despite the development of a new package. The inquiry previously heard that on the night of the fire, “none of the incident commanders had been able to conceive of the possibility of mass compartmentation failure” which would warrant “a total evacuation of the building.”

The LFB made mistakes, particularly in the run up to the fire in its policies and training. But the deaths and suffering at Grenfell were not its responsibility. Yet the inquiry, under the direction of its Conservative government-picked chair Sir Martin Moore-Bick is following the same path as it did in Phase 1, which was a whitewash designed to obscure the real causes of the fire and direct blame towards the LFB.

Whatever shortcomings on the part of the LFB, the efforts of the inquiry to scapegoat them after their budgets had been cut to the bone, faced with a criminally-unsafe building in which many in corporate and political circles had conspired to save money and maximize profits, is filthy. Firefighters arriving to tackle the Grenfell fire did so under almost impossible conditions, with many testifying that they had never witnessed a fire of this scope before.

The Socialist Equality Party and Grenfell Fire Forum has warned since the inquiry’s beginning that the entire process would be a fraud. The massive emphasis on the few minutes of response to a fire in a building made into a death trap over many years confirms this. We reiterate our call for the inquiry to be halted and arrests of those responsible for the fire in corporate and political circles to proceed.

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum.



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