

New type of dangerous building cladding uncovered in Britain, as another fire breaks out

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As the Grenfell Inquiry continues to steer responsibility for the tragic deaths of 72 people in a London high-rise in June 2017 towards the undermanned and under resourced London Fire Brigade, the consequences of the criminality that made death traps of many residential buildings continue to be felt across Britain.

The Inquiry's Phase 1 report concluded that the "principal reason" flames spread up the outside of the tower at such speed was because of combustible cladding that acted like a source of fuel. Since then, testimony has been heard of the deliberate supply of products known to be dangerous, falsification of fire tests, collusion of public and private entities, and any number of other underhanded and criminal activities, many worthy of immediate arrest and prosecution.

Over four years after the inferno, what is being played out is a toothless hearing in which the political and corporate criminals giving evidence are immune from prosecution for anything they say, while millions of people living in unsafe housing fear for their safety and lives.

The number of people living in buildings at fire risk from flammable cladding is staggering. Inside Housing suggests that 657,000 people living in 274,000 high-rise flats are in danger of death. The End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) organisation claim that up to 3 million in variously sized structures may be threatened.

EOCS estimates the total cost of remediation is £15 billion. It found that 23 percent of those affected have reported thoughts of suicide. This as the combined profits of the UK's top property developers since Grenfell have topped £10 billion.

Even this may be an underestimate. *The Times* reported last week on a "note of concern" circulated by an experienced surveyor regarding honeycomb panels made of aircraft-grade aluminium foil which the paper reports may be "as bad as Grenfell." The panels, made by a firm in Wishaw, Scotland, are currently being removed from six residential blocks of the Glasgow Harbour development by

firm Taylor Wimpey. The removal is costing £30 million but will not be completed until 2023.

The report warned that a sample honeycomb panel in a fire test "combusts and sustains a flame with limited effort," and that shaved resins "melt and pool on the floor." Samples were sent to the research centre at the University of Edinburgh, and the author called for the former UK government laboratory Building Research Establishment (BRE), privatised in 1997, to examine the problem further. At least 10 other Scottish buildings, including a nursing home, have the honeycomb panels, which were installed on external walls of both low and high-rise structures in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Wishaw-based Powerwall has been making £13 million yearly supplying these panels, starting with the Greenwich Millennium Village. It has sold to other huge contractors since, including Amex, Ardmore, Barr, Miller and Morrison, and Taylor Woodrow (now Taylor Wimpey). According to the report on the panels, "it would seem that this is widespread in the UK and exists on developments in excess of 18m in some locations."

Meanwhile, Grenfell-style aluminum composite material (ACM) continues to be found on an increasing number of buildings. Earlier this month, five Ministry of Defence bases housing 3,396 military personnel in 27 structures throughout Britain were announced to have dangerous cladding. Fully 22 of these 27 flammable buildings, housing 2,440 people, are at HM Naval Base Clyde, also known as Faslane—which is the headquarters of Britain's nuclear submarines.

Other UK defence buildings with dangerous cladding affect 206 personnel at Hyde Park Barracks in London, 180 at the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine in Birmingham, 370 at HMS Drake base in Devonport, and 200 in two tower blocks at the HMS Nelson base in Portsmouth.

An inferno on the scale of Grenfell is a constant threat with so many residential buildings still enveloped in deadly flammable cladding. Already this year, several buildings

with dangerous cladding have broken out in flames. In May, a 19-storey block in Poplar, east London, then undergoing work to remove flammable cladding, caught fire on the 8th floor. It spread to the 10th floor before firemen were able to stop the blaze.

Another fire broke out in London on November 12 at Chapel Court, Romford. The block had already been found to contain cladding which posed “a significant risk of external fire spread.” The inspection gave the building the lowest possible rating of B2 because of the discovery of dangerous Expanded Polystyrene Insulation (EPS). Builder and owner Swan Housing received the forensic report in September but refused to provide any information to its leaseholders, saying it was “unable to share technical reports until such time as we have concluded legal action with our third parties.”

Filmmaker Reece Lipman, who lives in the block with his partner, organised an October 30 protest rally outside City Hall in Central London less than two weeks before the fire. He said, “It was very scary to have this happen when there’s all this fire safety stuff going on. Someone texted the group chat that there was smoke coming from the bin stores. We ran downstairs and I rang the fire service... What if this had happened at 3am?”

Lipman and his partner have delayed starting a family, and countless others have been seriously affected, as a result of occupying homes now found unsafe.

Another Chapel Court leaseholder, National Health Service consultant rheumatologist Teresa Doherty, now lives in a cheap hotel and faces bankruptcy. After taking a new position at Brighton last year, she accepted an offer on her flat and purchased a new flat nearer her job. However, after the fire inspection her buyers couldn’t find a mortgage company willing to lend them anything. Teresa continues to pay mortgage on the Brighton flat as well as the service charges at Chapel Court.

She told the *Romford Recorder* she currently lives out of “a suitcase in a small room,” unwilling to commute four hours a day to her new job. “It’s incredibly stressful. I don’t know how many people could survive this sort of stress.”

A report published last week by University of Sheffield research associate Dr. Jenny Preece found that leaseholders in unsafe flats suffered from a variety of mental health issues because of safety fears, and even more from financial worries. Issued by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE), the study interviewed 32 leaseholders throughout the country, speaking to people found to be anxious, isolated, withdrawn, constantly worried, incapable of concentrating, depressed, and feeling suicidal.

In September, as the cladding crisis escalated, Prime Minister Boris Johnson shuffled Michael Gove into the

position of Secretary of State at a new ministry for “Levelling Up, Housing and Communities”. But in Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s October budget all he announced was that developers would be taxed to help pay the pittance of £5 billion earmarked for cladding repair nationally. None of this was new funding, indeed it was the fourth time that this measure had been announced!

Gove’s department promised last week only that it would set out “further proposals in due course” to support leaseholders in low and mid-rise blocks.

As the daily danger of death, disruption of lives and threats of financial disaster continue without abatement, the callous attitude of the government was revealed at a Prime Minister’s Question Time session earlier this month. Prime Minister Boris Johnson replied to a question regarding a leaseholder faced with huge repair costs by answering, “What people should be doing is making sure we do not unnecessarily undermine the confidence of the market and the people in these homes. They are not unsafe. Many millions of homes are not unsafe.”

The refusal to do anything to seriously address the cladding crisis prepares the way for more tragic fires and deaths, along with bankruptcies and trauma. Tens of billions must be made available immediately to remove dangerous cladding and make every building safe. This should be funded from the fortunes of the property developer profiteers and large construction firms, who have made billions from the refurbishment, construction and sale of unsafe residential buildings. Those responsible for the social murder of the Grenfell Tower residents must be arrested and brought to justice.

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page.



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