

Footage of trapped Dagenham fire residents published as victims demand secure housing, assistance and justice

Michael Barnes
3 September 2024

Shocking footage has emerged of last week's inferno at the Spectrum Building in Dagenham, east London, showing terrified residents unable to escape the seven-storey building due to a padlocked fire gate. Residents gave the footage to Sky News.

Those trying to flee, with some in their underwear, were trapped underneath the building as burning and toxic debris fell on them. A voice can be heard shouting, "Open the f*****g gate!"

All one hundred residents eventually managed to escape with their lives, with 20 rescued by the London Fire Brigade, after unsafe flammable cladding caught fire and destroyed the building in the early hours of August 26.

Outside Becontree Heath Leisure Centre, where Spectrum building residents were first placed after the fire, their spokesperson Philippa René said, "Our building's fire alarm system failed to go off, denying us the critical warning we needed.

"The fire escape route, which should have been our lifeline, was padlocked shut. Our building lacked sprinklers and the multiple layers of management from landlords to agencies utterly failed to protect us. Until now we have not formally given a statement as a collective as we had hoped the council, Block Management UK, Arinium Holdings Ltd., would help us."

René said of the Labour Party-run Barking and Dagenham Council, "The council has shown inconsistencies in its actions and it is refusing to rehouse us, leaving many without a place to go. Despite the overwhelming need, residents aren't allowed to access public funds, deepening the financial devastation we're facing."

"We need answers, we need housing, we need justice," she concluded.

A local council briefing confirmed the presence and type of "non-compliant" cladding, saying, "Planning drawings indicate that 'Existing non-compliant TRESPA cladding panels and framing system' was in place." The briefing

added that although planning permission to remove the cladding was granted in May 2023, the "permission granted stated that the works needed to be started within three years of the decision, which is the standard timeframe for any planning application."

This contempt for residents meant that the cladding could have still remained on the building until the middle of 2026 when work started, with the finish time months after that!

Despite there being known safety issues with the building, including that an external wall did not fully meet building regulations at the time of construction in 2020—an issue raised with a parliamentary committee in 2022 by the Spectrum Residents' Association—nothing has prompted the responsible authorities to act.

The council was fully aware of fire hazards and other safety problems but did nothing. Instead it hides behind the Blair Labour's government's 2004 Housing Act. *Housing Today* noted in an article last week Labour council leader Darren Rodwell, "speaking to Housing Today, stated that the council did not have grounds to issue an enforcement notice for the fire safety issues.

"The Housing Act 2004 allows councils to take enforcement action, such as issuing improvement notices or carrying out emergency remedial measures, if a building is classified as having a category one hazard.

"However, Rodwell believes the Spectrum Building was a category two hazard, which does not permit council action."

Although only two residents ended up in hospital as a result of the Dagenham fire, the experience of the Grenfell Tower inferno in June 2017 has shown the terrible long-term impact of inhaling smoke from toxic cladding. Mr. Ziad, who lived in the block with his father, told Sky News that as they both knocked on neighbours' doors, "One breath of [smoke] clenches your lungs, you can't breathe, it attacks you."

The footage of residents trying to escape a locked building was released just before the official investigation into the

fire was launched by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and London Fire Brigade (LFB). The investigation was delayed due to the scale and destructiveness of the fire, with smoke still billowing out of the building 24-hours later. HSE is to liaise with police and local authorities and all relevant parties.

The investigation will look into how the cladding remediation work was organised and undertaken, and whether this was a factor in the fire, and also whether the “Principal Accountable Person” for the building had discharged their duties under Part 4 of the Building Safety Act in relation to spread of fire.

On August 19, Valcan, the company hired to replace the cladding at Spectrum, put out a Facebook post dripping with complacency: “We recently popped over to Dagenham to see the progress on Spectrum House. This project consists of remedial work to external cladding to the fifth and sixth floors, removing the non-compliant cladding and replacing with A1 VitraDual compliant cladding, specified by architects GAA Design. Installers Fleetwood Architectural Aluminium Ltd have installed around 700 m2 of our VitraDual A1 rated cladding panels to this section of the building and are installing our Ceramapanel A1 Painted panels to the balcony privacy screens of vibrant colours including violet, green, orange, blue and yellow.

“We’re looking forward to seeing the final works unveiled on this colourful residential building soon.”

The fire broke out one week later.

Residents have lost everything in the fire. Mohammed M. Miah expressed the feelings of residents, saying, “We don’t know where to go, we are in limbo. It’s terrifying, and words can’t fully capture our fear.”

The Spectrum residents were temporarily sheltered at the Becontree Heath Leisure Centre, with the council saying that from August 30 they had been “transitioned” into a Community Assistance Centre located at the Dagenham Learning Centre. They have since been moved into a hotel.

Residents who are now homeless and only own the night clothes they escaped in are expressing growing anger and fears about their housing situation and being denied assistance in a major crisis.

They are absolutely right to mistrust the council and their penny-pinching response. No guarantee of substantial assistance is being provided, with council officials at pains to stress that the Spectrum Building residents are not council residents. A council’s FAQ page on the fire states, “We’re looking at a range of options on a case-by-case basis. As these residents are not council tenants, in some cases we will be able to move them into our Reside properties which are affordable but not council homes, in the borough.”

Instead of acting with an emergency aid package to

permanently rehouse those devastated by a tower-block fire in the middle of London, the Labour government’s Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and council officials are focused on polite requests urging Block Management and the building owners to “comply” with their “obligations.” A hand-washing August 27 statement by the council explains, “We have encouraged Block Management to attend the rest centre to speak to affected residents but they are yet to attend.”

It has set up a Go Fund Me donation page for *the public* to make donations “to help the families impacted by the fire.” However, the council’s main response is to recover costs incurred from “responsible parties.”

Not even a major fire will interrupt an ongoing programme of Dagenham and Redbridge Council budget cuts.

In January 2024, council leader Rodwell warned, “We will need to make some tough decisions to balance our budget over the coming months. We will consider all options. Nothing is off. Our already-overstretched budget is being pushed to the edge, but we are acting to control it. We already run an efficient, low-cost council. Since 2010, we have made £175m of savings, and we will find more. We need to make £11.6m in-year savings in this financial year, and around £23m savings in the next financial year.”

Residents in Dagenham seeking accountability and justice know the experience of Grenfell, where no one has been held responsible for an atrocity which killed 72 people. They are the latest victims of the government and private sector failure to address the threat posed by flammable cladding—affecting another 1,300 buildings in London—which will cost more homes and lives if not urgently fixed.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact