

London schools with flammable cladding deemed “safe”

By Tom Pearce
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Two London schools, including a special needs primary school, have been deemed “safe” by fire authorities, despite tests showing their cladding is combustible.

External cladding samples from the Bridge School in Islington and the London Enterprise Academy Whitechapel were tested by the Building Research Establishment (BRE). In faultless double-speak, the Department for Education (DfE) announced the cladding was “not of limited combustibility” i.e., it is flammable.

In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, it was revealed that up to 30,000 public sector buildings across the UK, including schools, hospitals and aged care homes, may be clad with flammable Aluminium Composite Material (ACM).

Figures from Tussell, a database of UK government tenders and contracts, show that since February 2014, £553 million has been spent on public sector contracts to fit buildings with some form of cladding. Schools and universities accounted for the bulk of this, £504 million across 56 contracts.

On June 23, the DfE announced that it would contact “all bodies responsible for safety in schools” and instruct them to identify any buildings “which may require further investigation.”

Just days later, the Conservative Minister for School Standards Nick Gibbs announced a “strategic approach” to fire safety tests, saying that only schools taller than 18 metres (or three storeys) would have their samples tested. Gibbs’ edict excludes the vast majority of England’s 24,372 nursery schools, primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, and independent schools from inspection.

Despite the widespread use of ACM cladding in schools, only the Bridge School, the London Enterprise

Academy and a third unnamed school (whose sample also passed fire safety inspections) have so far been tested as part of the DfE’s review.

In a vaguely worded statement on July 13, the DfE claimed the use of combustible cladding was not necessarily a fire hazard: “The advice endorsed by the National Fire Chiefs’ Council makes clear that the fire risks posed by those buildings with ACM cladding, which is not of limited combustibility can be mitigated by other actions and additional checks.”

“As a precautionary step, both schools have already been inspected by the Fire and Rescue Service who confirmed appropriate measures are in place to mitigate the risks from potential fire, and the buildings have now been declared safe for continued use.”

Extraordinarily, these “appropriate measures” to “mitigate risks” do not include internal fire sprinklers. When contacted by our reporters on July 14, the DfE claimed they did not know whether fire sprinklers were present in either of the schools where flammable cladding has been used.

Calls to Islington Council later confirmed that sprinklers are not installed in the Bridge School. This is especially serious as the school is a flagship special needs school for children aged 2-11 with “severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders.”

Islington Council’s Deputy Head of Strategy and Communications, Sian Williams, claimed the absence of sprinklers did not threaten safety. Combustible cladding, she explained, is located on the upper residential floors only, while the school itself, housed on the building’s ground and first floors, is made from brick. Fire service authorities, she added, had confirmed all students could be evacuated quickly in the event of fire.

Serious questions are raised by this.

How can the fire service—and Labour-controlled Islington Council—conclude that a school is safe if it is located in a building whose upper levels are wrapped in flammable material? Both the Grenfell Tower fire, which began on the fourth floor, and the 2009 fire at Lakanal House, which started on the ninth floor, saw combustible cladding spread the fire quickly both vertically and horizontally, with falling debris posing a major hazard.

Successive Labour and Tory governments have gutted basic fire safety in schools.

In October 2016, Gibbs' office amended the DfE's building guidance to state: "Building regulations do not require the installation of fire sprinkler suppression systems in school buildings for fire safety."

"Therefore," it added, "[guidelines] no longer include an expectation that most new school buildings will be fitted with them."

After the Grenfell Tower fire, this amended guidance disappeared suddenly from the DfE's website, with the *Guardian* newspaper claiming a "dramatic U-turn" by government ministers in relation to fire safety. According to the *Guardian*, the government was retreating "from a previous preoccupation with deregulation and cost-saving to a safety-first attitude."

In the past decade, the proportion of sprinklers in new schools has fallen from 70 percent to just 35 percent. At least 268 new free schools, built since 2011, are without any fire sprinklers.

The Labour Party has been complicit in this entire process. In 2007, the Labour government introduced "Building Bulletin 100: Design for Fire Safety in Schools." It provided guidance to schools, private developers and construction companies that was conveniently two-faced.

"It is now our expectation that all new schools will have sprinklers fitted," it stated, before adding, "Any exceptions to this will have to be justified by demonstrating that a school is low risk and that the use of sprinklers would not be good value for money."

This has laid the groundwork for academies and free schools to manoeuvre around the issue, placing profit above the lives and safety of children.

Between 2003 and 2014 there were 4,208 fires in schools, resulting in 129 casualties. Some of the worst fires have occurred at schools built under the labour

government of Tony Blair's Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The scheme saw huge swathes of school building and maintenance handed over to the private sector, determined on the basis of competitive tendering.

As a result, thousands of schools are drowning in massive debts imposed by private equity investors and other parasites, while the promised "schools of the future" lauded by Blair in 2007 are in many instances fire-traps.

In January 2015, a fire at a PFI school in Merseyside saw smoke spread from a ground floor kitchen to a protected staircase due to substandard fire-proofing. Fire authorities found the same problem at eleven additional PFI schools, eight of them run by Balfour Beatty, a publicly listed company with an annual turnover of £67 million.

The group was found liable for fitting the schools under their remit with substandard fire resistant material. Fire dampers, designed to stop fire and smoke spreading through ventilation ducts, were installed wrongly, making them inaccessible to fire safety inspectors. Many of the fire dampers failed maintenance tests.

The company paid for the improvements but there were no further charges. Balfour Beatty's PFI company, called Transform Schools (no irony intended), profited handsomely from its wrecking operation. In 2014, it sold to Dalmore Investments for £42 million, more than doubling the company's £19 million investment less than seven years earlier.

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