

News reporter of the year

Block of flats chosen to house Grenfell survivors found to have 'high' fire risk

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/block-of-flats-chosen-to-house-grenfell-survivors-found-to-have-high-fire-risk-62729>

Since the Grenfell Tower fire, Luke has been consistently reporting on the plight of the survivors and their treatment by the council.

This story, on a block of flats set aside to house Grenfell survivors, was one of the most shocking. A contact passed Luke a very recent fire risk assessment on the block, showing that it had a 'high' fire risk.

As a result of the failings, the assessment said, there was a risk that if a fire started it could spread rapidly from flat to flat, a horrifying revelation that survivors of the fire were at risk of seeing it repeated.

The assessment revealed that the block did not have an adequate evacuation procedure for disabled people, and through Luke's other contacts he discovered that a Grenfell survivor with a severe disability that impacted their mobility was living in the block.

This story laid bare the continued failure of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to shield its residents from fire risk, with the local MP describing it as "the same attitude which allowed Grenfell to burn".

It was followed up by *The Guardian* and *The Times*, as well as black British newspaper *The Voice*.

12,000 projects at risk as insurance crisis pushes building control firm to brink of collapse

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/12000-projects-at-risk-as-insurance-crisis-pushes-building-control-firm-to-brink-of-collapse--62246>

The impacts of the post-Grenfell fire safety crisis have been wide-ranging and this story exposed a side of it that had been largely ignored.

Luke was informed by a contact that approved inspectors – private building control companies – were facing an insurance crisis. He obtained a letter from the regulator of such bodies indicating that one of the two insurance brokers to the sector had decided not to renew policies for its inspectors. He also got hold of an email from one of the larger approved inspectors, Aedis Regulatory Services, stating that it had as a result of this crisis filed for insolvency.

This email enabled him to get in touch with the company's managing director, who revealed that the company going under put 12,000 construction projects at risk, or 5% of the construction industry. By putting a number on it, Luke outlined the concrete potential impact on housebuilding of what could have been a techy insurance story.

One source also revealed that some projects were continuing even without building control, raising serious safety concerns as well.

This was a classic example of specialist journalism making a complicated story easily understandable to the average reader.

Wood cladding linked to Barking fire identified on multiple housing association developments

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/wood-cladding-linked-to-barking-fire-identified-on-multiple-housing-association-developments-62001>

The Barking fire, which almost exactly two years after Grenfell saw flames rip through wooden balconies and cladding, moved the debate on fire safety.

Where previously the focus had largely been on cladding similar to that used on Grenfell, now fears were raised that combustible wooden panels could cause rapid fire spread.

Just two weeks after the fire, Luke had conducted an in-depth investigation, pulling together information from planning documents and developers' marketing materials to build a list of 20

housing association developments that had used ThermoWood, the same material as the Barking development.

This provided crucial information to social landlords worried about the potential safety risks to their buildings.

The speed with which Luke collected this information was perhaps the most impressive thing about it, broadening out the Barking story and making its wider significance clearer so soon after the initial fire.

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Block of flats chosen to house Grenfell survivors found to have 'high' fire risk

NEWS 14/08/19 10:30 PM BY LUKE BARRATT

A block of flats chosen by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) to house survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire has been found to have "high" fire risk and needs immediate work to make it safe, *Inside Housing* can exclusively reveal.



The block of flats on Hortensia Road set aside for Grenfell survivors

Sharelines

> A block of flats set aside by the council for Grenfell survivors has been found to have "high" fire risk and needs immediate work to make it safe, *Inside Housing* can exclusively reveal #ukhousing

A fire risk assessment of the Hortensia Road block in Kensington, which is currently housing 20 people and was set aside for the survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, also found that there was "no evidence" that the cladding of the building had been inspected.

In response, RBKC claimed that there were a "number of errors" in the assessment, and said it had carried out its own assessment where many of the issues raised during its assessment had already been addressed.

After the Grenfell Tower fire, which killed 72 people in 2017, the seven-storey block on Hortensia Road was allocated as part of RBKC's rehousing effort and Grenfell survivors were moved in.

A fresh fire risk assessment commissioned by the residents and carried out by consultancy Fire-X last month, and seen by *Inside Housing*, found three sources of "high substantial risk" in the building.

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RBKC considers building extra homes on top of existing blocks to save money

As its first substantial risk, Fire-X found "service penetrations" through the riser walls had "either been sealed incorrectly or not sealed at all".

As a result, the assessment said, there was not a reasonable standard of compartmentation, meaning if a fire started it could spread rapidly from flat to flat. Fire-X recommended that fire stopping needed to be installed within a month.

The assessment of Hortensia Road found that the doors leading to the fire escape had gaps larger than the recommended 3mm, meaning fire and smoke could spread through them. It was also found that these doors didn't have intumescent smoke seals to stop the spread.

Inside Housing reported last month that a Grenfell survivor living in this development had the safety of their new home "compromised" after the bottom of the fire door was trimmed off by a contractor.

RBKC said the block had a sprinkler system and 30-minute fire-resistant doors, and that weekly inspections were carried out to ensure safety issues are dealt with.

The Grenfell Tower fire spread rapidly within the building after ripping through the external cladding. The tower's fire doors later failed fire tests carried out by the Metropolitan Police.

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Fire-X recommended in its Hortensia Road report that RBKC should carry out a compartmentation survey immediately "as a matter of extreme urgency".

RBKC said that it had already completed works to improve compartmentation in the block's basement rooms and riser cupboards to all floors.

As its third substantial risk, Fire-X noted that the electrical riser cupboards were full of personal items and "housekeeping is very poor in the carpark and the refuse area that has spilled into the carpark".

As well as these three risks, the assessment noted that the smoke extraction system was not working and there were no adequate procedures for evacuation of disabled residents.

One resident of the block has a disability which severely impacts their mobility.

Emma Dent Coad, MP for Kensington, said: "This is the same attitude which allowed Grenfell to burn.

"The deficient compartmentation, poor housekeeping and maintenance, inadequate fire safety signs and alarms are bad enough – the lack of procedures to evacuate disabled people who live there is frankly unforgivable. These must be actioned immediately."

When contacted by *Inside Housing* for comment, a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government spokesperson said that this was a matter for the council.

Update: at 8.48 on 20.8.19 This story was updated to correct the number of storeys from five to seven.

RBKC's full response

"Our first priority is the safety of our residents and we have been working closely with them from the beginning, keeping them regularly informed of progress. The new build property was bought from a private contractor as part of the 300 homes for survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

"It has a sprinkler system, 30-minute fire-resistant doors and a firefighter lift for use in the event of an emergency. We undertake weekly block inspections to ensure communal areas are kept clear and any safety issues are dealt with.

"The fire risk assessment (FRA) being discussed was commissioned by one resident and is a Type 1. It contains a number of errors and parts appear to be cut and pasted from other assessments. There are also references to features which do not exist at Hortensia Road.

"We undertook an enhanced, Type 3 FRA on 18 July, the results of which we will be sharing with residents soon. This will include timescales to deal with the issues raised. Many of the issues have already been addressed and we have recently replaced insulation around windows as recommended by the latest government advice.

"There are currently fire wardens on site who will remain until issues regarding pipes and wiring going through walls and floors are resolved. This has been agreed with residents at the last meeting. We have already completed works to improve compartmentation in basement

rooms and riser cupboards to all floors.”

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12,000 projects at risk as insurance crisis pushes building control firm to brink of collapse

NEWS 11/07/19 7:00 AM BY LUKE BARRATT

A private building control firm is being wound up, putting around 12,000 building projects at risk amid a wider insurance crisis for the sector, *Inside Housing* has learned.



Picture: Getty

Sharelines

> A private building control firm has filed for voluntary liquidation, amid an insurance crisis for the sector putting around 12,000 building projects at risk #ukhousing

> 12,000 projects at risk as insurance crisis pushes building control firm to brink of collapse #ukhousing

Darlington-based Aedis Regulatory Services (ARS) has filed for voluntary liquidation after it was unable to secure insurance cover, according to the firm's boss.

ARS was carrying out building control on around 12,000 projects, which is approximately 5% of the construction industry, according to its boss. Housing industry figures warned the wider crisis has "potential consequences for housing supply".

Joe Ayre, managing director of ARS, told *Inside Housing*: "Without insurance we can't operate. For six weeks [since it expired], we haven't taken any business in, we haven't taken any money in. There's no light at the end of the tunnel."

The move is part of an ongoing crisis for 'approved inspectors', which are private companies qualified to inspect construction work for compliance with building regulations.

They compete against local authorities to win contracts from construction firms.

However in recent weeks it has emerged they are struggling to find the necessary insurance to work - as the ongoing cladding crisis and the potential associated liability drive insurers away.

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Check cladding on buildings under 18m, government tells building control



Local authorities accuse government of 'sleight of hand' over post-Hackitt regulation



NHBC signed off more than 50 towers with Grenfell-style cladding systems, investigation reveals

Two companies provide insurance to approved inspectors: Griffiths & Armour and Howden.

According to a letter from the regulator of Construction Industry Council Approved Inspectors Register (CICAIR), Howden has been unable to renew policies for its inspectors.

Mr Ayre said Griffiths & Armour declined his request to switch to their policy.

Of the 95 approved inspectors operating in the UK, 15 have insurance with Howden. Of these, five have seen their policies expire and four more are set to expire in less than a month.

When an approved inspector is forced to back away from a project, it is supposed to issue a cancellation notice so that the local authority can take over the work.

Barry Turner, director of technical policy at Local Authority Building Control told *Inside Housing* that emails from members suggest that inspectors are walking away from thousands of projects as a result of the insurance crisis.

He said that cancellation notices are not being issued and so local authorities are not legally allowed to take over the work, meaning the work should halt.

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But Mr Turner added: "The work on site, as far as we are aware, hasn't stopped. It's effectively unregulated. To the best of our knowledge, nobody's inspecting it."

Mr Ayre told *Inside Housing*: "We're trying to work our way through [the cancellation notices] but I've gone from 120 staff down to eight at the minute and most of them will be gone by the end of the week."

A spokesperson for the Home Builders Federation said the insurance issue "potentially has implications for housing supply", adding that it "is particularly impacting small and medium-sized builders".

Inside Housing has also seen a letter from CICAIR, which regulates approved inspectors. Sent on Monday to all approved inspectors, it is thought to be the first time CICAIR has directly addressed the issue.

CICAIR threatened in the letter to de-register approved inspectors if they could not get new insurance 56 days after their previous policy expired.

CICAIR's letter also warned that the Building Act 1984 requires that if an approved inspector "expects to become unable to carry out its functions", it should issue a cancellation notice and inform the local authority.

Mr Turner told *Inside Housing* that LABC is getting "hundreds of emails a day on the subject". He added that in many cases when an approved inspector has walked away, it has not left records of the work done. The council has had to restart the work, slowing down construction and increasing costs.

It is understood that Aedis Structural Warranties, a separate company to Aedis Regulatory Services, is unaffected and remains a going concern.

In a statement to *Inside Housing*, Howden said: "The strict insurance criteria set in 1996 by the Secretary of State has not been modified to account for today's challenging market conditions. Howden is one of only two brokers approved to arrange Professional Indemnity insurance for Approved Inspectors, and the current situation has put incredible pressure on the only compliant scheme available.

"Howden is working with our clients to solve this issue, and has been in conversation with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government for a number of months, recently submitting a full and detailed proposal for changes to the insurance criteria. If accepted, this would provide a practical solution to the problem."

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Wood cladding linked to Barking fire identified on multiple housing association developments

NEWS 24/06/19 7:00 AM BY LUKE BARRATT

Housing associations are urgently investigating developments using the same material found covering the Barking block partly destroyed by a fire two weeks ago, as an *Inside Housing* investigation has discovered 20 developments using the product.



Merchants Walk Estate in Bow, owned by Peabody, has ThermoWood panels (picture: Google Street View)

Sharelines

- ▶ Housing associations are taking urgent action to investigate developments using the same material covering a Barking block partly destroyed by fire #ukhousing
- ▶ Inside Housing analysis has discovered 20 blocks clad in the same material as a Barking building partly destroyed by fire, seven of which are high rises #ukhousing

Clarion, L&Q and Peabody have all said they are carrying out work to deal with potential issues arising from ThermoWood, the wooden material used on the balconies and cladding at Samuel Garside House, the site of a fire earlier this month.

The fire damaged 47 flats, including eight that will take six months to make habitable again, with residents forced to flee for their lives.

Inside Housing revealed shortly afterwards that the cladding used was ThermoWood, a Class D-rated material.

Following a ban on combustibles on high rises brought in last November, official government guidance does not permit the material to be used on new build blocks over 18m.

It would still have been banned on high rises under previous guidance, unless it was proved safe by evidence from a large scale test or used on balconies.

However, it was and is permitted on buildings below 18m. Samuel Garside House is understood to be under 18m.

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Barking fire: risk assessment identified



'Significant risk' from wooden cladding months before fire



Government reveals materials for new cladding tests



Social landlords hold off removal of potentially dangerous cladding until government test decisions

Inside Housing has used planning documents and developers' marketing material to build a list of 20 more schemes – mostly in London – using ThermoWood as either cladding or decking for balconies.

This includes a six-storey development in Lewisham which is owned by Clarion and is clad with ThermoWood. Responding to *Inside Housing*, a spokesperson for the organisation said: "Our residents' safety is paramount.

"We are working alongside our partners to investigate the issue as a matter of urgency and will carry out any improvement works that are required."

Seven of the 20 developments identified include at least one high-rise building, of six storeys or more, within the scheme.

One of these was Titanic Quarter in Belfast, a massive development including 474 apartments, with balconies clad in ThermoWood.

A spokesperson for Titanic Quarter said: "Our development - the ARC, Titanic Quarter - has been constructed in compliance with building control and fire safety regulations and received Full Building Control certification. We are aware of the recent fire in Barking and are closely monitoring the outcome of the investigation."

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Meanwhile, L&Q's flagship Quebec Quarter development in Canada Water, which includes blocks of up to six storeys but all under 18m, has also been revealed to have ThermoWood present.

An L&Q spokesperson said: "L&Q is compiling a list of blocks which have extensive timber cladding, including but not limited to ThermoWood." They added that they were undertaking this work in preparation of the latest fire safety advice from experts and said all of its buildings had up to date fire risk assessments.

A source close to Peabody, which owns a 10-storey block in Bow called Merchants Walk with ThermoWood panels, said the association is looking at the whole estate to evaluate the risks.

A spokesperson said the association was reviewing all of its blocks and making improvements where needed, and had acted on a number of blocks. They added: "We continue to replace materials we consider to be higher risk."

The builder Countryside, meanwhile, declined to comment on its Silver Point scheme in Enfield, which at one point is eight storeys high and uses ThermoWood cladding.

Inside Housing also identified 13 mid-rise blocks of between three and five storeys using ThermoWood as either cladding or balconies.

It is possible to treat ThermoWood to give it a higher fire rating of Class B. This would mean current building regulations would still forbid it from being used on new high-rise buildings.

However guidance before regulations were changed by the government last November would have permitted it. It is still permitted on buildings built before that period.

None of the organisations contacted by *Inside Housing* was able to confirm whether or not the ThermoWood used on its scheme had been treated in this way.

The organisations involved in Samuel Garside House





Inside Housing has identified the key organisations involved in developing and managing Samuel Garside House:

Developer: Bellway

Architect: Sheppard Robson

Building owner (headlease): Adriatic Land

Freeholder of land: Greater London Authority/L&Q

Management: HomeGround, which appointed RMG (part of Places for People)

Building control: NHBC

Owner of affordable homes (32 of 80): Southern Housing Group



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David Sugden 24-Jun-2019

It has been reported that the Thermowood used at barking had D-s 2, d0 fire rating. Under EN13501 that means it is combustible giving a medium contribution to fire under the definition in the standard. This EN does not have a pass/fail level, merely a rating of combustibility. Unless otherwise treated it will burn very well, as seen in this case and whilst it may technically not go against the ADB guidance it is a matter of judgement by the Building Control Officer concerned as to its suitability for a particular purpose.

Thermowood is advertised as having a 4 to 6% moisture content and as anyone with a wood burning stove knows, at that it will make a nice fire!

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