

Jack Simpson – Scoop of the year

Barking fire risk assessment identified significant risk from wooden cladding months before fire

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/revealed-the-type-of-cladding-used-on-barking-block-destroyed-in-fire-61848>

When a building in Barking was consumed by fire just a week before the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower disaster, this presented both an opportunity and a challenge for *Inside Housing*. Having earned a reputation as an authority on residential fire safety following its work on Grenfell, there was a new expectation on the magazine's journalist to deliver cutting edge stories about this new fire, in competition with national papers which paid an unusual amount of attention to the blaze given its prescient the timing.

That *Inside Housing* was able to deliver a string of important scoops on the Barking fire was largely due to Jack's skill as a reporter. A day after the blaze he was in Barking, meeting residents, attending meetings and building trust.

This groundwork built into a series of stories about the fire itself, the type of cladding and the rehousing process. But it was his scoop about the fire risk assessment which was the most eye-catching.

He used the relationship he had developed with residents to become the first journalist to discover the block's fire risk assessment had specifically warned about a fire safety risk from the wood cladding – and that this warning was ignored by the owners and managers, placing residents at risk. This story was eventually covered on LBC and by *The Guardian*, but it was Jack who was first to it – cementing *Inside Housing's* reputation as the leading authority on fire safety in people's homes. He was able to get to this story through the persistence of attending meetings, speaking to and building trust with the residents so that they began to see him as the 'go to' journalist for new information

It is a crucial piece of the puzzle in establishing liability for a fire which left dozens homeless and was so nearly the cause of several deaths.

NEWS

Barking fire: Wooden balconies were a 'significant hazard'

20 June 2019

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Local resident: "The whole thing was an inferno".

A safety inspection carried out at a block of flats that became engulfed by fire found that its wooden balconies posed a "significant hazard."

Twenty flats were destroyed and another 10 damaged in **the blaze in Barking, east London, on 9 June.**

During an assessment on 28 January, inspectors said they could not confirm if the decking and joists were made from fire resistant materials.

The building manager said all concerns in the assessment "were addressed".



More than 100 firefighters tackled the blaze on 9 June

The fire risk assessment was carried out by Osterna Limited five-and-a-half months before the blaze at Samuel Garside House.

Overall, inspectors found that the state of the building presented a "tolerable" risk to life from fire.

Assessors said the building's owners should check with developers to "ensure that fire retardant materials have been used" on the balconies.

They also recommended that the company should write to residents to warn them against having barbecues on balconies.

Bellway Homes, the block's developer, previously said the blaze **could have been caused by a barbecue.**

A spokesman for building's managing agent RMG said "all of the actions identified by the risk assessor were addressed and tracked for compliance purposes."

He said the building developer had "reported back... that the structure was

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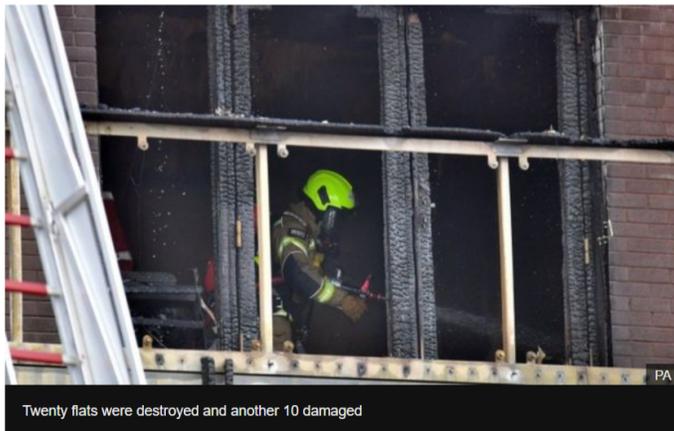
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compliant with the appropriate regulations" and residents had been informed not to have barbecues.

Bellway Homes previously told residents the decking and joists were not fire-retardant when they were put in.

However, they said they had followed up on the assessment and believed the materials used met with regulations.



Twenty flats were destroyed and another 10 damaged

More than 100 firefighters tackled the blaze, which spread over six floors, for more than two hours.

Residents described it as "an inferno" with the block being engulfed "in about two minutes".

Two people were treated for smoke inhalation and up to 18 families were evacuated from their homes and taken to a community centre.

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Experts had warned of fire risk at Barking block of flats

Independent assessment in January said wooden balconies could accelerate spread of fire



▲ The independent fire risk assessment warned the wooden balconies on Samuel Garside House could 'accelerate fire spread'. Photograph: @mabee_me/PA

Fire experts had warned of the risk of deaths at a block of flats in east London as a result of the building's wooden balconies five months before it went up in flames.

An independent fire risk assessment of Samuel Garside House in Barking, built by Bellway Homes, was carried out in January. It warned that the wooden structures might not be fire-resistant and could "accelerate fire spread ... and this will put residents and visitors at risk of smoke inhalation and burn injuries". When the building caught fire on 9 June onlookers watched as flames swept through the balconies in minutes.

The report, seen by the Guardian, also noted gaps in service cupboards where pipes and cables had been routed which "may compromise the fire barrier to floors above and may allow for fire and smoke to spread" and that there was no maintenance and testing contract in place for the dry rising fire main used by firefighters to get water to fires.

The faults at the block of 80 flats were all considered high-risk, which means they could cause deaths, according to the fire risk assessment commissioned by Residential Management Group (RMG), which looked after the building for the head leaseholder, a company called Adriatic Land 4.

Building safety experts warned there would probably have been deaths if the fire had started at night. Three cats were killed and a dog was badly burned.

Peter Mason, the chair of the Barking Reach residents' association, said "everybody is very angry" after news of the warnings emerged. He said most residents did not know about the assessment.

The block was one of several built recently by Bellway at the Barking Riverside development. After the fire Bellway said it had commissioned an independent fire expert "to undertake a full review of the properties we constructed".

"At the time of construction, the apartments received approval by the relevant authorities," it said. "Whilst the fire safety measures designed within the building ensured the safe evacuation of residents, we have commissioned an independent fire expert to undertake a full review of the properties we constructed at the Barking development." It said it would remove non-essential timber and was discussing treating other wood with

Robert Booth *Social affairs correspondent*

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fire-retardant coating.

A spokesperson for RMG and Homeground, an agent for Adriatic, said all actions identified by the risk assessor had been followed up and added: "At the time the risk assessment was carried out, remedial works to address relevant authorities," it said. "Whilst the fire safety measures designed within the building ensured the safe evacuation of residents, we have commissioned an independent fire expert to undertake a full review of the properties we constructed at the Barking development." It said it would remove non-essential timber and was discussing treating other wood with fire-retardant coating.

A spokesperson for RMG and Homeground, an agent for Adriatic, said all actions identified by the risk assessor had been followed up and added: "At the time the risk assessment was carried out, remedial works to address certain issues were already being undertaken in the building by Bellway."



▲ Firefighters at the scene of the blaze at Samuel Garside House in Barking. Photograph: Dominic Lipinski/PA



The Guardian has also learned that fire hazards were discovered in two other apartment buildings on the same estate, including faulty fire doors, holes in walls and ceilings that could spread smoke and flames, and missing fire safety notices. A fire risk assessment conducted in October on Farsby House and Dalton House, which contain 94 flats, found damaged smoke seals on 19 fire doors, gaps where electrical wires pass through walls and floors, through which smoke or flames could pass, doors that were left open, and a barbecue, rubbish, furniture and other combustible materials in service corridors and shafts.

One leaseholder who moved in last August said they were "very distressed" by the problems. Bellway said it was on site on Wednesday addressing some of the issues.

A spokesperson for Pinnacle Places, the managing agent that commissioned the Farsby and Dalton report, said: "We responded on receipt of the report and carried out remedial actions accordingly."

The problems have emerged two years after the Grenfell Tower fire killed 72 people and add to growing concerns about the fire risks posed by modern building techniques beyond the use of combustible cladding of the kind that was wrapped around Grenfell Tower.

Manchester city council, where dozens of blocks of flats have been built in recent years, has said that as well as 31 towers clad in Grenfell-style combustible aluminium composite material it has discovered other risks at 14 other blocks, including missing fire breaks, timber cladding and balconies, missing intumescent paint and defective insulation. These include Burton Place, where leaseholders are facing bills of up to £80,000 each to make their homes safe.

The government also admitted this week it has known since November that another type of cladding panel, high-pressure laminate (HPL), had also failed fire safety tests when used with combustible insulation. Industry data suggests scores of high-rise residential buildings could be built with such panels, which are often made from compressed paper or wood and synthetic insulation.

The Labour party said ministers should have taken immediate action to remove it from buildings in the same way as it has announced £600m in funding to remove aluminium composite material panels from social and private residential towers.

"There must be no more excuses and no more loss of life," said Steve Reed MP. "All flammable cladding must immediately be banned and removed, including HPL."

Kit Malthouse, the housing minister, told parliament on Tuesday that the government was carrying out its own tests on HPL panels and that wall systems using combustible materials would be in breach of building regulations unless they had passed a fire test.

The leader of Barking and Dagenham council, Darren Rodwell, and the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, have written to the housing secretary, James Brokenshire, calling for the government to apply its ban on combustible materials on new buildings to all residential buildings instead of only those over 18 metres high.



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Barking fire: risk assessment identified 'significant risk' from wooden cladding months before fire

NEWS 19/06/19 3:55 PM BY JACK SIMPSON

The fire risk assessment of the block of flats in Barking devastated by a huge fire last week identified the wooden balcony cladding as a "significant hazard" that "put residents at risk", *Inside Housing* can reveal.



Picture: Nathaniel Barker

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► Barking fire: Block manager was warned about 'significant' cladding hazard months before the fire #ukhousing

Inside Housing has obtained a copy of the assessment, carried out in January on the Samuel Garside block where dozens of apartments were badly damaged by fire on 9 June.

The assessment said external cladding, wooden joists and deck balconies were a "significant hazard" that could put residents at risk of smoke inhalation and burn injuries.

The assessment, carried out for building manager RMG by assessor Osterna, said: "It is assessed that the wooden decks and joists are over 90mm thick and should have been formed of or treated with fire resistant materials but this could not be confirmed during the assessment.

"If a balcony does catch fire it should be noted that this will accelerate fire spread through either setting the balcony above alight or through entering the flats through open windows and this will put residents and visitors at risk of smoke inhalation and burn injuries."

The fire damaged 47 flats, including eight flats that will take six months to make habitable. Two people were treated for smoke inhalation.

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Osterna recommended that a responsible person check whether cladding materials had been treated.

It also called for the building's manager to warn residents not to have BBQs on the balconies.

The BBC reported last week that a barbecue "may have been the cause of the fire". However, an investigation is yet to confirm this.

Last week, Ian Gorst, regional chair for London and South East at the building's developer Bellway, confirmed at a meeting with residents that the wood used on the block had not been treated and was not fire retardant.

The cladding on the balconies used on the block was ThermoWood, which has a Class D fire rating if not treated to make it more resistant to flame.

Government guidance requires the higher Class B for the external surfaces of walls on buildings above 18m and limited combustibility, but sets no standard for buildings below this height. The Samuel Garside block is understood to be below 18m.

A source close to Bellway said that the company had not received the report before the fire.

Bellway completed the Samuel Garside block and adjoining blocks in 2014. It sold the freehold of the block to property company Adriatic Land, which is ultimately responsible for the fire safety of the building. HomeGround, an Adriatic Land company, is the manager of the block but has contracted RMG for the day-to-day management. RMG is a subsidiary of Places for People.

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The assessment also raised concerns about fire safety in other parts of the building, including issues with the compartmentation of the block and the fire alarms used.

It said it found "gaps and holes" in the service cupboards where pipes and cables have been routed, which could allow fire and smoke to spread internally through the building and block escape routes. This, it added, would put residents and visitors at risk of smoke inhalation and burn injuries.

The report did note that remedial work to fix the fire stopping was in progress.

It added that a fully automatic fire alarm had been fitted within the common parts of the building, which was at odds with a block purpose-built to building regulation standards designed with a high degree of fire compartmentation.

External elevations free	N/A	
Buildings under 18m)	N/A	
Fire on external	N/A	
from hazards?		
(or above)		
Fire on external	No	Refer to 16.8
from hazards?		
(or 18m)		
Fire on any other	No	External decorative cladding and wooden joist and deck balconies are fitted to the upper floors of the blocks. It is assessed that the wooden decks and joists are over 90mm thick and should have been formed of or treated with fire resistant materials but this could not be confirmed during the assessment. If a balcony does catch fire it should be noted that this will accelerate fire spread through either setting the balcony above alight or through entering the flats through open windows and this will put residents and visitors at risk of smoke inhalation and burn injuries.
from any other		
part?		
Fire 3 FRA	N/A	Type 1 Fire Risk Assessment.
assessment		
Conclusion of the general	N/A	

A screenshot from the risk assessment

It also reported that there were no records of fire alarm tests, emergency escape lighting tests, or maintenance and testing of other fire protection systems. A RMG and HomeGround spokesperson said that there were records for all fire safety measures, but these are not held on site and would not necessarily have been reviewed as part of the process

The overall risk of the block was "medium", meaning it had normal hazards subject to appropriate controls for the type of occupancy.

The building was given a "tolerable" risk rating, meaning no major additional work was required but there might be some improvements needed.

Last week, residents claimed that the fire alarm for the block had been on silent at the time of the fire and had to pull open some of the building's

silent at the time of the fire and had to pull open some of the building's magnetic doors.

Inside Housing has also seen a fire risk assessment from Samuel Garside's adjoining block, Ernest Websdale House, which also includes concerns over the cladding, compartmentation and fire alarms.

In response, a spokesperson for RMG and HomeGround said: "RMG, as the managing agent for Samuel Garside House, commissioned a fire risk assessment for the building in January 2019. All of the actions identified by the risk assessor were followed up and tracked for compliance purposes.

"At the time the risk assessment was carried out, remedial works to address certain issues were already being undertaken in the building by Bellway."

Bellway declined to comment while an investigation into the fire is ongoing.

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