

Fire safety and high rise student accommodation

This practical leaflet aims to explain the following:

- the Grenfell Tower fire
- the potential implications for students living in high-rise halls
- what students and students' unions can do to ensure student safety

What happened to the Grenfell Tower and why?

The Grenfell Tower fire occurred on 14 June 2017 at the 24-storey Grenfell Tower block of public housing flats in North Kensington, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, West London. It caused at least 80 deaths and over 70 injuries, with many more missing.

A number of factors have been sighted for contributing to the incident. Most visibly the use of flammable cladding (called ACM) was an important factor in spreading the fire beyond the flat it originated in, however this is only part of the picture. Residents complained frequently before the fire of fire alarms not working and exposed gas pipes. The council operated a 'stay put' policy (where residents are told not to evacuate in the case of a fire) which was untested and many say unsuitable for that building. Questions have arisen as to why unsuitable building materials were allowed and passed building control measures, as well as why tenants were not listened to.

More recently experts have said that it is important to look at the whole picture including how the building was operated and managed rather than just focus on building materials.

David Orr of the National Housing Federation has spoken out saying that the money spent on testing would be better spent on improving overall building safety.

Why is this an issue for students?

A number of student halls are high rise blocks (over 6 storeys). Concerns have also been raised about the potential use of ACM cladding on the exterior of these halls, and what this could mean for student safety. A number of student halls across the UK, both university and private provider managed, have been found to have the same or similar cladding to Grenfell Tower.

While some of these buildings are being stripped on their cladding, some providers have been advised that they can ensure the safety of these buildings by putting other measures in place. Some providers have moved students to alternative accommodation while tests have been taking place as a precaution. Others have put more fire safety trained staff on site.

What action is the UK government taking?

After the fire the Government took steps to conduct an audit of high-rise social housing tower blocks across the country, to ensure that any other similar risks were immediately identified and acted upon.

The government have called for all high rise social housing to be tested for ACM cladding. Offers of free tests have also been extended to providers of purpose built student accommodation, but these tests are not compulsory.

An [inquiry](#) will examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017. It will establish the facts and will make recommendations as to the action needed to prevent a similar tragedy happening again. The government have also called for an independent review of the regulatory system in terms of the design, construction and management of buildings. This review will also look into whether there are problems with the way regulations are enforced and complied with. Why has a type of cladding not compliant with regulations been used?

An Industry response group, led by the construction sector, has also been set up to address some of the challenges the industry might face in implementing any changes.

Please note that as this is a UK government inquiry, it may not have direct implications for Scotland and Wales.

What is ACM cladding?

Aluminium composite panels (ACP), made of aluminium composite material (ACM), are flat panels consisting of two thin coil-coated aluminium sheets bonded to a non-aluminium core. ACPs are frequently used for external cladding or facades of buildings, insulation, and signage. This type of cladding is banned in the

US for buildings over 12m. There are different types of ACM cladding – some of which have fire resistant properties.

What are the tests taking place? Do halls have to get tested?

There are two ways in which a tower block can meet Building Regulations standards with regards to resisting fire spread. Either each material component can be found to be of limited combustibility, or the combined elements of a wall, when tested as whole system, have sufficient fire spread resistance. The government, therefore, have offered two types of testing.

Initially the government ordered tests of ACM cladding in particular, to be carried out by Building Research Establishment (BRE). This offer of testing was extended to both social housing and private residential blocks. On expert guidance the government decided to extend the scope of this testing to look at how different materials worked together to prevent fire spread. With so many of the initial tests of cladding failing to meet standards (including a number of student halls), the government is undertaking large-scale testing of whole wall systems to better understand how different types of ACM panels behave with different types of insulation in a fire.

What rules apply to student halls?

Any new-build or refurbished building in England & Wales, including student halls, must comply with the 2010 Building Regulations. These buildings also need to comply with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). In 2005 it became law in Scotland that new builds over 18 metres must have sprinkler systems. In 2007 it became law in England and Wales it became law that any new build tower blocks over 30 metres need to have sprinklers. In 2014 it became law in Wales for all new residential developments to have sprinkler systems put in place – this goes much further than the law in England and Scotland.

There is currently no minimum standards for rented properties, although Karen Buck MP tried and failed to put a 'fitness for human habitation' test into law in 2015-16.

The accommodation codes helps to regulate the management of student halls. They are voluntary schemes where providers commit to maintaining professional benchmark standards for managing large student developments. This scheme is only relevant for providers who sign up to them and meet certain standards. They cover the management of a property, rather than the construction. Code members are expected to meet certain safety requirements, and if you are concerned you should first raise your concerns with your landlord but if you are not satisfied, or feel your enquiry has not been taken seriously, then you can submit a complaint under the Codes. Follow this link to the [National Codes](#) and here for the [Student Accommodation Codes](#). Your provider may be a member of one or both of these codes.

The management of the National Codes are encouraging and supporting providers to take up the offer of testing and to review their fire safety procedures. Where Code members know they have ACM cladding they must inform their local Fire and Rescue Authorities and act on the advice they receive and they must inform their tenants. Checks are being made by the Code Administrators that tenants have been informed properly.

There are 60 000 bed spaces outside of the Codes. NUS think it is vital that these properties are subject to testing and review.

What should I do if my hall fails the safety test?

Where the cladding has failed safety tests the government have recommended social housing providers take the following actions. (Letter from Melanie Dawes, dated 22 June 2017)

- Notify the fire and rescue service
- Check that the fire risk assessment has been carried out within the previous 12

months, and any recommendations put in place

- Engage with residents to ensure they fully understand the emergency fire procedures
- Check that, at ground level, or on any balconies, there are no combustible materials (e.g. storage of refuse) in the vicinity of the cladding
- Check that all flat entrance doors, and doors that open onto escape corridors and stairways, are fire-resisting and effectively self-closing against any resistance of a latch
- Check all walls that separate flats, plant and store rooms, etc. from escape routes to ensure there are no obvious routes for fire or smoke spread, such as holes
- Check that any smoke control systems, including associated fire detection systems, are operating correctly

Can ACM cladding that has failed the test be safe? It is important to remember that the cladding is a part of a whole building, and often the safety of a building can come down to how it is managed rather than just what the building materials are. If individual components are not of limited combustibility, it may be that they can be safe if when all of those components are combined have fire spread resistance. Please take advice from local fire and rescue experts on a case by case basis.

What should I do if my hall provider refuses to act, or refuses to act quickly?

If you are concerned about the safety of your high-rise block, we recommend initially starting a conversation with your provider. If they refuse to communicate or take sufficient action there are a number of steps you can take. You can talk to your institution and student union to ask them to put pressure on your provider. If you are concerned you can ask your local fire and rescue services to carry out an assessment. Remember you can also speak to your VP Welfare, Izzy Lenga.

Who can you speak to?

- Your Student Union representatives and advice centre
- Local fire and rescue services
- Local council
- VP Welfare

What are NUS doing?

Before developing this resource we took the following action:

- Co-signed letter to accommodation providers who are members of the accommodation codes, as well as continued work to influence and monitor these providers
- Attending a roundtable on fire safety with representatives from the student accommodation sector and government officials
- Letter to Sajid Javid MP, urging him to recognise the concerns of students
- Initial briefing for students' unions with suggested next steps

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Fire safety checklist

Whether your hall has ACM cladding or not, there are a number of fire safety mechanisms you may want to ensure your building has. Please remember that as buildings are different, each may have slightly different fire safety protocols and mechanisms. With this in mind it is important that these protocols and mechanisms result from a robust and up to date fire safety assessment, and consultation with local fire and rescue teams.

Evacuation policy

What evacuation policy does your provider operate? Do you have a stay put policy? If so, do you understand why? Has this policy been assessed for safety?

What policies and procedures are in place for students who may struggle to exit the building on their own? Does your provider proactively make efforts to identify disabled students or students with physical and or mental impairments? Are personal evacuation plans developed with those individual students?

Are fire evacuation practices conducted at the beginning of each academic year and a record maintained?

Escape routes

Are escape routes kept clear, including corridors, landings, stairs and hallways? Are these escape routes available at all times?

Safety systems

Does your building have fire safety systems? Are these systems properly maintained and tested?

These might include the following:

- Emergency lighting
- Emergency secondary power supplies such as generators and battery backup systems
- Fire door integrity including door closures
- Automatic door release mechanisms
- Emergency escape ironmongery such as push bars, which must be regularly tested
- Fire extinguishing equipment
- Sprinkler systems

Alarms

Do you have working fire alarms in the kitchens and bedrooms? Are they tested weekly and recorded? Do students compromise these by covering them up?

Appliances

Are all gas and electrical appliances regularly inspected and tested?
Are these tests recorded?

Information

Does your provider give residents clear information about how to prevent a fire from breaking out, and what to do in an emergency?

Information provided may include the following:

- Their role in the avoidance of fire risks
- Cooking and the safe use of cooking equipment
- Electrical safety – particularly voltage differences
- The dangers of using candles or storing flammable material
- Disciplinary action that may be taken if fire alarms or firefighting equipment is misused