

# Cladding giants chased for millions spent making flats safe

The Sunday Times has set out a five-step plan to fix homes and stop the companies that helped to create the scandal from not paying to end it



Nathan and Tara Jeans are still trapped in a one-bedroom flat with their two children

VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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Manufacturers of dangerous cladding are being chased for millions of pounds of taxpayers' money spent to fix Britain's unsafe flats.

It comes as The Sunday Times submitted evidence to Michael Gove, the housing secretary, revealing that some of the buildings that have applied to the government's £5.1 billion repair funds were covered in flammable panels produced by companies that made false claims about the fire safety of their products.

It is a ray of hope for families who have been caught up in the nationwide building safety scandal exposed in the wake of the Grenfell fire in 2017 when 72 people died.

They include Priyanka Abbi, 38, a hotel manager who bought a flat in the same development in Slough as her parents, only to discover that their home has the same K15 panels that were used on Grenfell. It was later revealed at the public inquiry into the disaster that staff at the manufacturer, Kingspan, had written internally that those questioning its safety

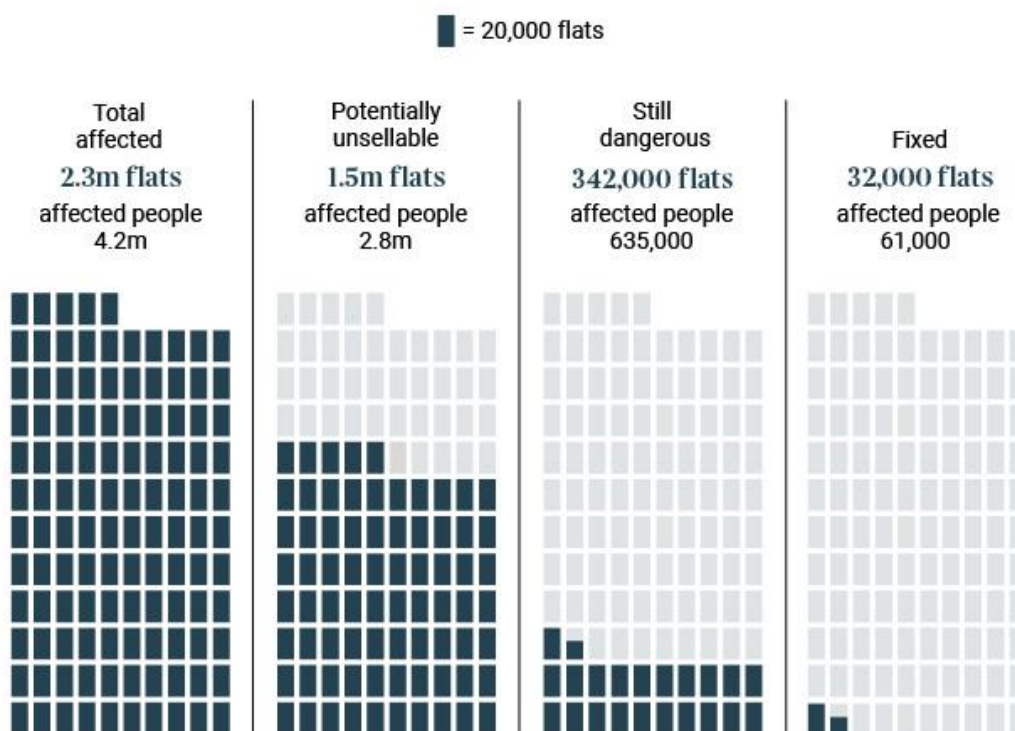
“can go f\*\*\* themselves”. Abbi said: “Who will I save first, my son or my parents?” Every time the fire alarm goes off, Abbi races to check that her parents, almost 80 and on the 12th floor, are safe.

The Sunday Times has campaigned [on behalf of ordinary people](#) who bought their homes in good faith but whose lives remain frozen. Today, with End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) campaigners and Inside Housing magazine, we set out a five-step plan to fix homes and stop the companies that helped to create the scandal from not paying to end it.

“The vast majority of us are still trapped in unsafe homes, still unable to sell, still without any clue when this nightmare will end,” said Giles Grover of EOCS. “Some still face ruinous bills because the government has decided some leaseholders are more innocent than others.”

## The scale of the cladding scandal

Eight per cent of people in England have been caught up in the fallout of nationwide fire risks exposed by the Grenfell fire



Graphic: The Times and The Sunday Times  
Source: DLUHC building safety data and 11m-18m pilot study

Until June last year innocent flat owners were the only party legally liable to pay for repairs. Many were sent bills costing more than their homes. Then Gove changed the law to make companies that profited from dangerous homes pay. One year on, our investigation reveals:

- 91 per cent of unsafe flats are not yet fixed, leaving 660,000 people still in danger.
- A loophole in a government contract allows developers to leave flammable cladding on blocks they legally agreed to repair.

- Nine of Britain's biggest freeholders have paid £35 million to fix just a handful of blocks. Most of this (£23 million) was paid by the Crown Estate, the King's public estate.
- Flat prices have severely cooled since the cladding crisis took hold.

Meanwhile a merry-go-round of buck-passing and bureaucracy carries on between manufacturers, developers and freeholders. The government has spent only 17 per cent (£1.5 billion) of the £9.1 billion it pledged in grants to fix buildings. Yet small buy-to-let landlords go bankrupt, trapped children become teenagers, and homeowners die without justice.

Here we give our verdict on who should pay, and how much they have paid so far.

## What are cladding manufacturers doing? 'No one has paid a penny'

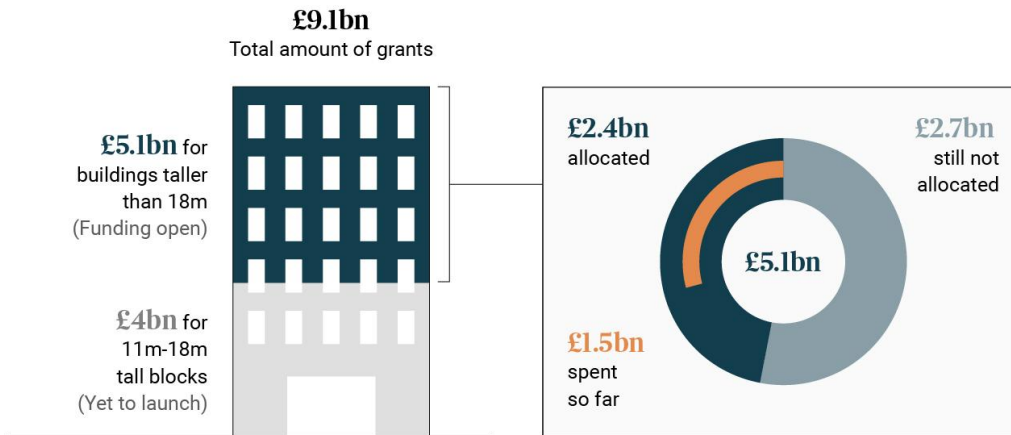
For nine years, between 2005 and 2014, Kingspan manufactured and sold K15, a foam insulation board made from crude oil products, as generally safe for tall blocks (over 18m) without a valid fire test.

We found five high-rise developments with K15 fitted during this period in cladding systems that have never passed fire tests. All five applied for government aid to take it off. Our evidence suggests there are grounds to recoup the money spent on repairing affected buildings from Kingspan and other cladding manufacturers. The cases include Abbi's building in Slough as well as two developments in London, including a 13-storey block in Islington, where Tara Jeans, 36, a charity partnership manager, and her husband Nathan, 40, a copywriter, remain trapped in a one-bedroom flat with two children. Their son, Ernest, was a baby when fire risks first prevented them from selling. He is now four, with a little sister, Etta.

Taxpayers have already paid £5 million to remove K15 systems in Southampton and £2 million in Manchester. Many more cases are likely to be hidden among almost 4,000 buildings – over 230,000 flats – that applied for government funding to fix fire risks. In light of our evidence, Gove has ordered the unit he set up in 2022, led by former Special Forces commando Graham Cundy, to “urgently review” the five cases and all other grant applications for evidence to claw back money from cladding companies.

# The funding trickle

The government pledged **£9.1 billion** in grants to fix unsafe buildings, but has spent only **£1.5 billion** of that since the first scheme opened five years ago



Graphic: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: DLUHC

All three Grenfell manufacturers practised “frauds ... on the market”, the inquiry into the fire heard. Yet Kingspan, the \$3 billion US cladding maker Arconic and the insulation firm Celotex — part of the £24 billion French giant Saint-Gobain — have paid almost nothing to fix other blocks wrapped in their products, their latest financial results show.

Gove said: “No one who witnessed the evidence of Kingspan employees at the Grenfell Tower inquiry could fail to be appalled by their evident disregard for the safety of their products, or the people who had to live in homes covered with them. While Kingspan may have taken tentative steps towards acknowledging its role in the crisis, neither they nor any other cladding companies involved in the Grenfell tragedy has paid a penny to ending it.

“They now have a choice: step forward immediately to begin discussions in a spirit of due contrition; or after legal battles across many fronts, which I assure them they will find expensive, fruitless and commercially reckless.”

Last month Gove wrote to the former US vice-president Al Gore, asking him to use his “position of influence” as a significant Kingspan shareholder to push the manufacturer to pay to fix homes. Gore co-founded Generation Investment Management, which owns a 4 per cent stake in Kingspan worth £417 million.

Gove also raised the Irish construction giant’s failure to pay for remediation with Leo Varadkar, the taoiseach. The situation is “wholly unacceptable”, Gove said.

Kingspan Insulation said it had not been contacted by the government or any party about the five sites we found. “Therefore we cannot comment further on the scope, funding, or reasons for remediation,” it said. “We have publicly committed to pay our share of remediation costs in circumstances where we have responsibility for the inappropriate use of K15 in buildings, and its safe retention cannot be supported by testing. And we stand by this commitment.” The group posted record profits of £822 million last year. Its UK insulation arm paid out claims totalling £263,000, including for products unrelated to Grenfell, according to the most recent accounts.

Saint-Gobain, whose subsidiary Celotex rigged a fire safety test, has still not set aside any money to fix blocks. Its British arm said it was “not possible” to estimate this liability. Celotex said replacing unsafe cladding is “valid” but the solution “is far from straightforward”.

Arconic’s accounts make no provision to strip its highly flammable cladding, which it marketed using a test for a different product. They did not respond to questions.

The only money the three companies have paid is part of a £150 million civil settlement agreed by 22 parties with 900 people involved in the Grenfell tragedy. Any criminal charges will be brought after the Grenfell inquiry publishes its final report next year. All three manufacturers denied liability at the inquiry.

*Hidden Housing Scandal verdict: 1/10*

## What are the developers doing? ‘Using loopholes’

In January, Gove gave developers an ultimatum to sign a government contract to fix their unsafe blocks or be banned from the market. Forty-nine developers signed up to pay for £2 billion of repairs. It was a worthy plan. In practice, [the fine print](#) allows them to fix only what a fire expert they appoint says they should, even if experts assigned by residents or freeholders find lives would remain at risk.

The result? It “is driving a race to the bottom in terms of fire safety”, said Antony Spencer, the freeholder of two developments next to Arsenal’s football stadium in north London. “This is the very problem that the government is seeking to address.” It also leaves flat owners paying sky-high insurance bills on homes they may not be able to sell.

“Some developers just want to do it as cheaply as possible,” said Dorian Lawrence, a director of Façade Remedial Consultants. Other developers “are on the good pile, doing it properly”, he adds. Lawrence estimates that it will take 15 to 20 years to fix all tall buildings. “Anyone who says it’s 18 months doesn’t have an idea of the scale. It’s colossal.”

Taylor Wimpey and Galliard Homes, which built the two Arsenal schemes that Spencer’s group owns, have refused to strip flammable cladding that experts appointed by Spencer deemed life threatening. Instead, they want to appoint new fire experts.

Both say they are being denied site access to decide what work is needed. Taylor Wimpey says it is “not using a loophole to get out of costs” and promises to fund repairs including the disputed cladding if required by a new assessment. Galliard is “confident” that flats will be mortgageable and insurance costs will fall once it is allowed to fix the buildings. The government is mediating in both cases. Ministers also expect new taxes to recoup £5 billion from developers over ten years.

*Hidden Housing Scandal verdict: 6/10*

## What are freeholders doing? ‘Not enough’

A year after a law took effect to make building landlords pay for repairs where the developer cannot be traced, we asked nine of Britain’s richest freeholders a simple question: have you set aside money to fix your buildings? Only three disclosed how much they had set aside for repairs totalling £35 million — less than 0.4 per cent of the government’s £9.1 billion allocation.

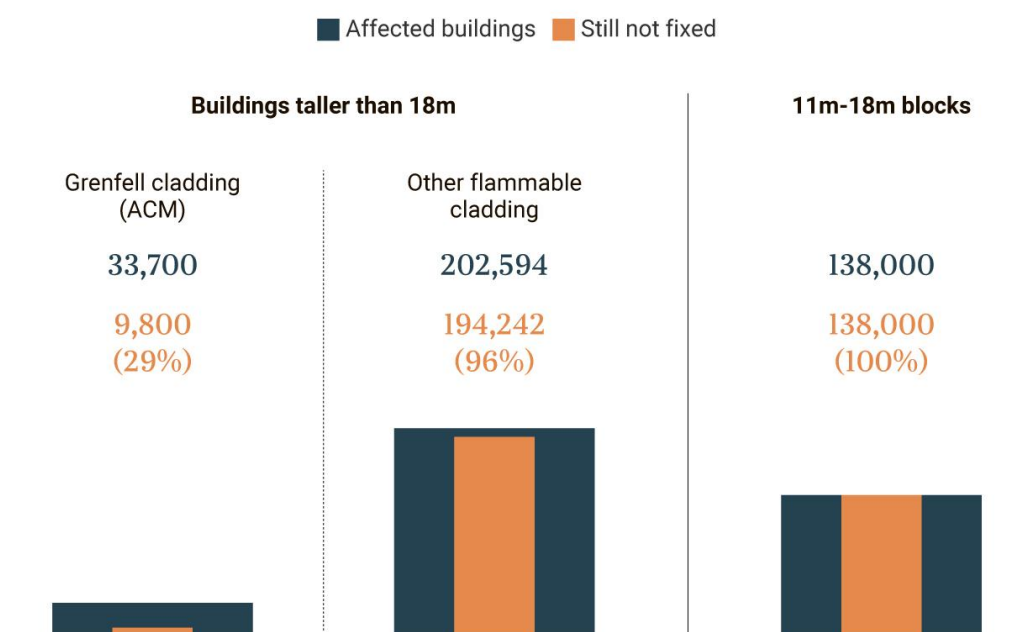
[If freeholders don’t pay](#), the bill falls to flat owners (capped, usually at £10,000 per flat) and taxpayers.

## What is the government doing? ‘Too slow’

Gove has protected many flat owners from life-changing bills, [admitted that the government shares blame](#) and wrested billions from developers. Six years after Grenfell, only 9 per cent of the 374,000 flats with fire risks have been fixed, our analysis of government data shows. Three-quarters (up to 23,900) of the repaired flats had the same cladding as on Grenfell. These make up a fraction of unsafe blocks, leaving 664,000 people still living in dangerous homes.

## Dangerous flats

Most of the fixed flats had Grenfell-type cladding, but these make up a small portion of affected buildings - leaving 664,000 people still living in dangerous homes



Graphic: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: DLUHC

Almost 3,500 buildings (203,000 flats) applied for grants to strip other flammable cladding, but work is complete at only 4 per cent. Another 138,000 flats are in smaller buildings between 11m and 18m tall with fire risks, a government study estimates. Experts say almost no such blocks have been repaired.

Government funding is trickling out too slowly. Of £5.1 billion to fix cladding on tall blocks (over 18m), about half has been allocated and only £1.5 billion spent in five years since the first pot opened. A £4 billion mid-rise scheme for 11m-18m blocks was announced a year and a half ago but is still not fully open. Overall, only 17 per cent of the money pledged has been spent.

## What are lenders and surveyors doing?

Demand for flats has cooled to an “alarming” degree, said Phil Spencer, the property guru. From 2018, when tightened government safety advice triggered a mortgage crisis for flats, a price gap between flats and houses opened up. Since the Grenfell fire, median flat prices have risen by just 8 per cent — a quarter of the pace of other house prices (31 per cent), a new analysis of Land Registry data shows.

The housing ladder “remains severely broken”, the End Our Cladding Scandal campaign wrote in a letter to Gove. Solutions announced by lenders and surveyors are “not working in practice”, they said.

Two years ago, four-year-old Ella Harris [appeared on our front page](#) holding a £100,000 bill for cladding repairs. It was more than the £88,000 her single father, Matthew, an NHS laboratory assistant, had paid for his one-bedroom flat in Manchester in 2012.



Ella Harris appeared on the front page of The Sunday Times two years ago after her father received a £100,000 bill for repairs. He is still unable to sell their one-bedroom flat

PHIL TRAGEN

The developer of their 14m block, Lovell, has signed the government contract to foot the bill but Harris still can't sell. Last month he lost a sale agreed at £130,000. NatWest, one of six major lenders that promised to consider flats with a funded repair plan – like Harris's — refused to grant his buyer a mortgage. Proof that the new owner won't have to pay for any repairs was not enough. Natwest's valuer still wanted an external wall survey (ESW1) form stating whether or not the block needs work.

NatWest said its valuer could not assess Harris's flat without an EWS1 form or a more recent fire report, both of which the building lacked. “We work closely with our valuers to determine the right protections are in place for both buyers and sellers.” NatWest added that it supported 56 flats with fire risks this year.

Gove's law has complicated sales of some flats still further. More than half of 200 conveyancers surveyed by Today's Conveyancer, a trade publication, refuse to handle transactions of flats in blocks of four storeys or more. Others charge buyers £3,000 in extra legal fees.

*Hidden Housing Scandal verdict: 4/10*

## Where are the owners left? 'Still stuck'

Chad Cribbins and Niyati Patel became [the first published case](#) of a sale that fell through in a smaller block because of a bank refusing a mortgage without proof of it being safe. The couple's daughter and two sons were "crammed into one bedroom", said Cribbins, 47, a digital entrepreneur. Their eldest, then seven, is now 11.



Chad Cribbins and Niyati Patel seen on the left in 2020 with their daughter and two sons, who were "crammed into one bedroom" at their flat in Hackney. They have since been forced to let the property

AKIRA SUEMORI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

They still cannot sell their Hackney flat in an award-winning block. Desperate, they have let it and bought a bigger shared-ownership flat, but risk losing £32,600 paid in extra stamp duty because it counts as a second home.

Their block applied to the £4 billion mid-rise scheme announced 18 months ago, but has yet to receive any money.

"We haven't seen any of these promised billions," Cribbins said. Legislation seems to "punish the non-guilty more" while those who profited from unsafe buildings "seem to have gotten away". Two neighbours in their block have died waiting for repairs that are yet to be agreed.

*Market analysis by Tom Calver; additional reporting by Melissa York*



## **The Hidden Housing Scandal campaign**

The Sunday Times is calling for:

- Definitive, risk-based guidance for buildings (inside and out) of all heights agreed by all parties.
- Grants to cover not just cladding but all safety defects. Protect all flat owners from all costs.
- Recoup money from the full range of companies that profited from unsafe homes, including by using evidence submitted to government funds.
- A deadline for all buildings to be assessed and have a repair plan within one year.
- Help trapped residents with accurate information on their buildings and bring down insurance costs with a new risk-pooling scheme.