

**UK property****Slow fire safety reforms risks another Grenfell-style blaze**

Salford mayor attacks government's failure to tackle cladding regulations



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**Andy Bounds** in Salford YESTERDAY

The UK government is risking another Grenfell-style blaze because of its slow progress in improving fire safety, the mayor of one of Britain's biggest cities has warned.

Paul Dennett, mayor of Salford, speaks for Greater Manchester on housing issues and said council leaders were increasingly frustrated with the failure to tackle regulations around building cladding, which was blamed for the fire at Grenfell Tower in London that killed 72 people in 2017.

In November fire ripped through a [student accommodation block in Bolton](#), Greater Manchester, moving rapidly through the building's cladding. Although residents were safely evacuated, Mr Dennett said the incident showed that, despite the Grenfell tragedy, there were still flaws in building safety regulations. The police are still investigating the blaze.

Mr Dennett, a member of the opposition Labour party, said: "Two and a half years on from Grenfell and very little has happened. The whole regulatory system is not fit for purpose. There is real frustration."



The Grenfell Tower disaster killed 72 people in 2017 © Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Mr Dennett’s warning added to a chorus of calls for more rapid action on fire safety. [Martin Moore-Bick](#), who is leading a public inquiry into the Grenfell disaster, in October called for the government-led building safety programme to be “pursued as vigorously as possible”.

The government has banned the aluminium composite material cladding used on Grenfell in new high-rise homes. But the Bolton building was covered with [high-pressure laminate](#) cladding, which academic tests have found is at least as flammable. However, the government has so far published its own test results on only one type of HPL cladding, which campaigners say is not the type used on most buildings.

Another flaw exposed by the Bolton blaze was that it wasn’t even covered by the toughest fire regulations because of its height — flammable cladding is only banned on buildings that are above 18m tall. Fire safety experts have criticised the 18m threshold, which was set because it is the maximum height that equipment such as wheeled escape ladders could reach — even though this type of equipment is no longer used.



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“Fire safety should not be determined by the height of a building,” said Mr Dennett.

He called for a new public regulator to inspect all buildings. Currently developers can choose between a range of private fire inspection providers with councils then signing off new and refurbished buildings. Until the mid-1980s, only council-employed officers could perform this task.

Mr Dennett argued the existing system has led to widespread problems. “There is an issue with the material, there is an issue with how things have been installed and there is an issue with the regulatory system,” he said.

“It is not just about the cladding. It is how it interacts with the building. Is there a gap that acts as a wind tunnel drawing the fire up? Has the compartmentation been breached [by alterations]? Every building should have a manual that looks at what has happened to that building over time.”

Judith Hackitt, who led a review of building safety regulations, is now advising the government on the establishment of a new national regulator with tougher enforcement powers. Salford council has suggested the body should include representatives of the Health and Safety Executive, local fire services and councils.



Dame Judith Hackitt led a review of building safety regulations

In the meantime, thousands of private homeowners are unable to sell their homes because of uncertainty over the safety of their cladding, while a government scheme to fund cladding replacement in private buildings has been slow to start work.

According to Mr Dennett, there are at least 80 [unsafe buildings](#) in Greater Manchester. The owners and residents have resorted to measures, such as fire wardens on duty around the clock, until the cladding issue can be resolved.

Salford council has been unable to make even its own council homes safe, Mr Dennett said. The private finance initiative consortium that runs the properties was deemed ineligible either for government funds to replace cladding on social housing or for a separate pot for privately owned homes. Central government also barred the council from lending £25m to the PFI backers to replace the cladding.

The operators have now raised funds from private sources but in the meantime the council has spent more than £3m on employing fire wardens and the flats have been evacuated twice.

“There are real human consequences,” Mr Dennett said.

The Ministry for Housing and Local Government said: “Residents’ safety is the government’s priority and we have given advice to building owners on how to check the type of cladding on their building — if it is not safe, it must be removed.

“We have given councils funding to identify the cladding used on their buildings and have tested a number of materials, including high pressure laminates — and we will take further action if necessary.”

*Additional reporting by Judith Evans*

