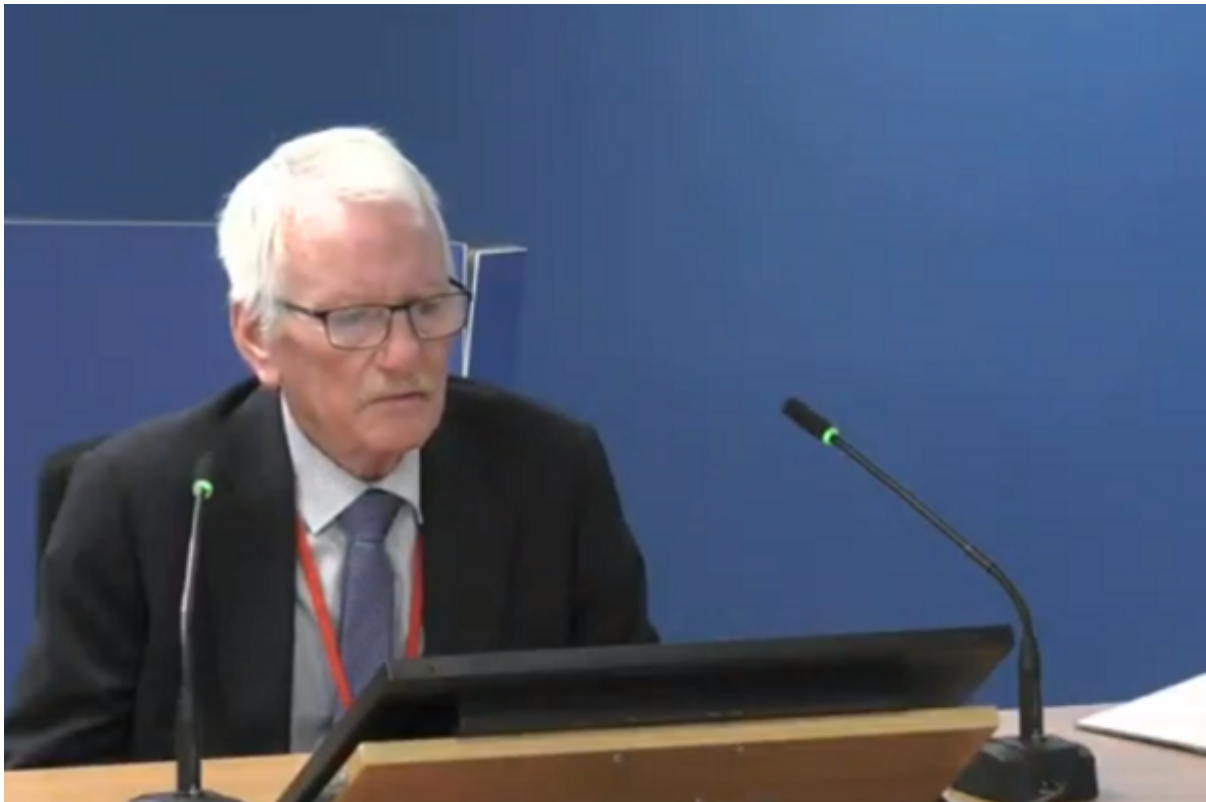


Senior fire engineer accused of ‘abdication of responsibility’ over failure to query Grenfell cladding plans


NEWS 09/07/20 7:00 AM BY PETER APPS

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Terry Ashton, the senior fire engineer who produced the Grenfell refurbishment fire strategies, at the inquiry yesterday

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Terry Ashton, a senior fire engineer for consultancy firm Exova published two editions of an outline fire safety strategy for the project in October 2012 and 2013.

In both he made no reference to the plans to clad the building and advised that the plans would have “no effect on the building in relation to external fire spread” – although he added that this would be “confirmed in a future issue of the report”.

This wording was repeated in both the 2012 and 2013 reports, despite his knowledge that the refurbishment plans included an intention to clad the building.

He said that he was not aware of the precise plans for the cladding system and that he was waiting for the architects, Studio E, to raise it before addressing the fire safety concerns.

Kate Grange QC, counsel to the inquiry, asked him: “I’m going to put this to you directly so you have the chance to respond: would you agree that maintaining this wording without clarifying the position about the cladding and what had and hadn’t been done was an abdication of your responsibilities as the designated fire strategy consultant for the project?”

He responded: “I wouldn’t put it in those strong terms. I don’t think abdication is the right word. I mean, we can only react to what we’re being given to look at.”

It also emerged that he was sent Studio E’s design documents in October 2012, which included drawings and diagrams of the proposed cladding system, but he did not read them. He said there was “nothing asking him to look at [the designs]” in the email they were attached to.

He accepted that he was aware of plans to overclad the building, but did not pursue the architects for details but said he was waiting for the architects to raise it with him in order to offer advice.

“I was aware that there were proposals to overclad the building, but because we didn’t discuss this, I didn’t see fit to say to the design team, ‘We need to have a discussion about what you’re doing with the overcladding’,” Mr Ashton said.

“Now, maybe I should have said that, but it didn’t come from them – they didn’t say, ‘We would like to talk to you about what we’re doing with the

overcladding'. I assumed that that would happen at some point in the future."

He said he was aware that serious cladding fires had occurred worldwide, and that the use of combustible materials in cladding systems could pose a fire safety risk.

"I mean, obviously, as a fire consultancy, we were aware of a number of serious fires that had occurred worldwide because of the use of inappropriate materials on buildings, and some in the UK," he said.

Asked directly what he had learned from his knowledge of several large cladding fires in the UAE, he said: "That combustible cladding shouldn't be used on high-rise buildings."

He also accepted that he was aware of a British Standard document on external wall facades that raised concerns about the way a cladding fire could spread up a building, affecting multiple floors simultaneously.

At the time Mr Ashton produced his reports, the proposed cladding system featured zinc cladding panels and combustible plastic insulation. The latter would not have been permitted under building regulations without a test.

However, Exova's involvement in the project was reduced to answering 'ad hoc' queries from 2014 onwards, because the contractor that took over the work, Rydon, decided not to continue the formal appointment of the fire consultancy.

Asked about the statement in his report that the plans would have no adverse effect with regard to external fire spread, he explained that he was primarily discussing requirements regarding the roof of the building and space separation.

Ms Grange asked him: "Given... the fact that you had been told about the overcladding and had been sent some details of what that might involve, do you agree that this statement was potentially misleading for the readers of it, because they might have thought that the cladding would have no adverse effect?"

Mr Ashton replied: "In theory they might not have had any adverse effect. If we had stopped at 'it is considered that the proposed changes will have no adverse effect on the building in relation to external fire spread', full stop, that could be questioned, in my view.

"But we weren't in a position to say that unequivocally, you know, that there are no implications for external fire spread, which is why we said we would confirm this by a future analysis."

Asked why he did not at least explain the regulatory requirements for a cladding system, he said: "I think that, had we had a specific meeting to

discuss those proposals, which were a fairly significant part of the design, then all of those things would have come out.

“But we never had a dialogue with them... In another project, for example, the architect or the project manager would contact us and would say, ‘We would now like to talk about how we’re going to deal with the external wall construction – or in this case the overcladding – can we have a meeting?’ That never happened.”

The inquiry continues with further cross-examination of Mr Ashton today.