

How apartment block's flammable cladding was missed

Fire wardens are patrolling a Preston development at night and new exits have been hurriedly installed after its combustible cladding slipped under the radar of the taskforce probing the cladding crisis.

Tom Minear, State Political Editor, Sunday Herald Sun

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Authorities have rushed to install new exits to ensure the safety of residents living in an apartment complex covered in [dangerous cladding](#).

Fire wardens are also patrolling the Preston development at night after it slipped under the radar of the task force investigating the state's cladding crisis.

The combustible cladding was discovered in November and prompted urgent action, with residents in the 109 apartments told to remove clothing from their balconies and refrain from using barbecues.

The complex was built by [Hickory Group](#), which the *Sunday Herald Sun* revealed last year was the builder of at least 25 apartment blocks with dangerous cladding.

The building has been added to Cladding Safety Victoria's initial hit list of 15 buildings to be made safe as part of a \$600 million cladding rectification program.

CSV chief Dan O'Brien told the *Sunday Herald Sun*:



Combustible cladding was discovered 100 Plenty Rd, Preston, in November. Picture: Jake Nowakowski

DEVELOPMENTS with dangerous cladding are being regularly inspected to ensure they are safe while the five-year program is rolled out, with management plans to be in place for 450 buildings by the middle of next year.

FUNDING agreements for the 15 buildings will be struck in coming weeks and about 70 per cent will have all cladding removed, while a "performance solution" will be put in place for the remainder, such as partial removal and upgraded fire-safety procedures.

THE new agency is worried about owners selling apartments in affected buildings and failing to inform buyers of the presence of flammable cladding.

THERE is a shortage of compliant cladding available to replace flammable expanded polystyrene used on some buildings, and testing to approve new products could take years.

A STATEWIDE audit of other buildings will continue into 2021, with work expected to be needed on another 50 buildings with dodgy cladding.

BUILDINGS needing a “performance solution” require Building Appeals Board approval, and a fast-track stream could be considered to prevent bureaucratic delays.

Mr O’Brien said he was confident rectification works on the Preston building would be complete “in the coming months” as the new agency worked with the owners corporation on the best long-term solution.

City of Darebin chief executive Sue Wilkinson said an emergency order and extra safety measures had been put in place after owners raised concerns.

A spokeswoman for Hickory Group said the building, completed in 2011, used products which “at the time of use were 100 per cent compliant with the regulations of the day”.

“Hickory greatly empathise with the homeowners situation and believe a solution can be found,” she said.

Mr O’Brien said Cladding Safety Victoria’s taxpayer-funded program would fund the “least-cost solution” for the 450 buildings on its list with cladding issues. Owners corporations can fund the difference if they want to completely remove potentially dangerous cladding.

“We’ve got to protect taxpayers’ funds and make sure the most affordable and cost-effective solution is identified,” he said.

Mr O’Brien’s team has met with owners corporations from about 70 affected buildings so far.

He praised the work of many but said the process was “like trying herd cats”, as he hit out at some building management companies which are “a complete blocker and try to clip the ticket”.

Owners corporations are responsible for finding builders to carry out cladding removal works, and must choose from an approved list which weeds out those with a dodgy past.

Builders who installed non-compliant cladding will be given a chance to repair it themselves, before authorities pursue them to cover the costs of their work.

Mr O’Brien said construction on the first 15 buildings would be underway by the end of the year, although some had other defects which needed to be fixed first.

He said councils and the Victorian Building Authority were making sure homes were safe for residents in the meantime.

Mr O’Brien also called for a national approach to professional indemnity insurance for experts including fire engineers and surveyors, criticising insurers for “vacating the field” to wind back their exposure to cladding risks.

Opposition planning spokesman Tim Smith called on the government to make sure vendors were informing buyers about the presence of flammable cladding.

He said it was “completely unfair” that potential buyers were being left in the dark.

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