

Five years on, Grenfell's shadow falls on every unsafe building



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On the fifth anniversary of the [tragic Grenfell Tower fire](#) that claimed the lives of 72 Londoners, the topic of flammable cladding and building defects in general remains high on the building agenda here in Australia.

The [NSW Cladding Taskforce](#) has named approximately 225 high-risk residential apartment buildings. Parramatta alone has more than 170 high-rise buildings with non-compliant combustibile cladding.

A further 500 buildings have been deemed a low priority, despite their facades potentially posing unacceptable fire risks. A review by NSW Auditor-General Margaret Crawford found the cladding taskforce only had a process for clearing high-risk blocks, putting lower risk buildings in danger of getting left behind. The auditor-general's report also found the ban on flammable cladding has no effective enforcement or compliance strategies.

These findings are in line with a [2021 joint research partnership](#) between Strata Community Association of NSW and the Office of the Building Commissioner that found that more than a third (39 per cent) of new strata buildings have serious defects representing an average cost of approximately \$331,829 per building. Of the buildings that had a serious defect, 16 per cent had non-compliant cladding.

Some change is under way. The NSW government's Project Remediate has been a core driver of the remediating of flammable cladding, with about \$139 million in funding support for impacted owners' corporations. The project is offering interest-free 10-year loans to help fast-track removal across NSW, with the interest for these loans to be paid by the NSW government.

If successful, the three-year program will replace flammable cladding on all 225 high-risk buildings, and it is hoped the program will be extended to capture any medium or low-risk buildings.

Cladding is part of a wider issue around building defects that continues to plague NSW, with waterproofing, fire safety systems, and structure topping the list of major defects in NSW strata buildings.

The current process of defect rectification is causing unnecessary strain and cost to owners, with defect resolution proving a protracted process likely to take 12 months or more. Buyers of affected units have been [left in limbo](#), with the price paid for off-the-plan units being slashed once the building's defects come to light.

The most common barriers to resolving defects were sourcing funds (15 per cent), lack of awareness about rights and responsibilities (14 per cent), and disagreement among the owner's corporation on the approach that should be taken (10 per cent).

The Office of the NSW Building Commissioner seeks to simplify this complexity and is encouraging all apartment owners affected by defects to notify their office so processes can be initiated that will enable defects to be addressed efficiently and cost effectively. But this is only one step in the process.

The devastating collapse of [Champlain Towers South](#) in Florida's Surfside, which killed 98 people, is a gutting reminder of the cost of inaction on repairs.

A 2018 engineering report warned of "major structural damage" and a construction error in the building. Seven months before the collapse, the association board and residents were still arguing over the expensive repairs.

Owners corporations need to take their maintenance obligations seriously by setting realistic capital works fund budgets and establishing proper maintenance regimes for their properties.

Every resident should have confidence that they are living in a high-quality dwelling. They should also have the reassurance that if there is a building defect, it will be resolved quickly and effectively.

Grenfell's shadow falls on every unsafe building in NSW. Every home owner and tenant deserves a safe place to live, and swift action needs to be taken in order to prevent a major tragedy occurring in our own backyard.