

Firefighters 'taken off trucks' to plug gaps in fire safety unit

By [Nigel Gladstone](#)

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NSW firefighters are being taken off trucks to plug gaps in the chronically understaffed fire safety unit, which has been swamped by flammable apartment cladding and other safety issues.

Assistant Commissioner of Community Safety Mark Whybro told a [parliamentary inquiry](#) that Fire and Rescue NSW is "now removing people off the back of trucks to come in and do fire safety work".



The Grenfell Tower cladding catastrophe in London and NSW Minister for Better Regulation Kevin Anderson. AP/AAP

The increasing workload, from bushfires to safety audits, has meant a "massive overtime bill", NSW Fire Brigade Employees Union state secretary Leighton Drury said. "On our data, we're 120 permanent firefighters short - 45 in operational support positions, which include fire safety roles.

"Due to the lack of staff and current staff being seconded to the cladding taskforce, it means a large number of safety concerns are not addressed for months."

Delays for flammable cladding assessment reports stretch beyond six months, and now many councils won't refer new cases, president of Local Government NSW Linda Scott reported to the public accountability committee last month.

"Due to delays in the response time from Fire and Rescue, we understand that many councils have elected not to refer any cladding assessment reports to Fire and Rescue NSW," she said.

Initial fire safety reports, which developers apply for prior to construction, moved from being mandatory in 2015 to dependant on whether the fire safety branch can provide an assessment of plans within 28 days and are now only done on projects posing the greatest risk.

Mr Drury said they are "overwhelmed with requests for these reports to be analysed and scrutinised and, unfortunately, they slip through the cracks ... a lot of the developments are left unscrutinised".

"[The] regulation changed from 'must provide an initial fire safety report' to 'may' and if it is not done [within 28 days] it is just assumed that development can go ahead," he said.

Fire safety is "not as big a priority as it should be".

"The materials that buildings are made out of and the contents that go in them are generally made out of a synthetic material, which burns faster, hotter and with more toxic smoke," said Mr Drury, a firefighter for 20 years.

"At the beginning of my career it might have taken a building with more natural materials 20 minutes to fully catch alight, but we are finding that now within minutes buildings are going up in smoke."

A Fire and Rescue NSW spokesman said the fire safety branch has three full-time vacancies.

"The organisation employs a risk-based approach to building inspections and assigns resources to priority needs since not all incoming work is mandatory or requires FRNSW to be the decision-maker," the spokesman said.

The Minister for Better Regulation and Innovation, Kevin Anderson, declined to comment.

NSW Building Commissioner David Chandler's recommendations on flammable cladding have not been made public despite being delivered to the minister about five months ago.



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