

Hanover Tower cladding – report of Sheffield Green Party

Introduction

In 2012, Hanover Tower was fitted with cladding as part of the “Decent Homes” scheme. Following the Grenfell fire, the cladding was tested and failed to meet Building Regulations standards. The council promised an investigation. At a meeting on 29th June 2017, residents were told, *“The panels are different to the sample the Tenants and Residents Association hold. That’s what we need to investigate. We need to look at every stage of the sign off process for the works. Once we have the information we will take action against the contractor or SCC staff.”*

Over three years later, on Friday 11th September 2020, the council gave its investigation report to residents and ward councillors.

This is Sheffield Greens’ reading of what we now know.

What we now know:

1. In the course of consultations in 2009, residents were given samples of the proposed aluminium cladding. Housing manager Chris Lake, at one of the June 2017 residents’ meetings, accepted that the cladding that was fitted was different to what residents had been consulted about. These samples of solid aluminium panels could not have caused any concern about fire safety.
2. The planning application documents were public. A November 2009 report from the Council’s Design Team stated, *“Externally the block is to be clad in aluminium panels.”* The officer’s report to the planning committee said the tower would be *“overclad with colour coated aluminium panels with insulation behind it.”*
3. Residents raised the fact that no fire risk assessment had been done. Fire safety was under consideration at this time, following deaths in the Lakanal House tower block fire in 2009. A report to the Council’s Cabinet in February 2011 stated,

“Minimising Fire Risk in blocks of flats

This has become a regular item of expenditure following the fire at Lakanal House in July 2009. Sheffield Homes have completed risk assessments for all blocks of flats, and a programme will be funded to deal with all identified risks. In 2010/11 all high risk properties have had an independent fire risk assessments and recommended repairs have been carried out in agreement with the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service.”

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4. Councillors on the planning committee on 25th January 2010 specifically asked officers “to ensure a robust fire risk assessment be undertaken.” Planning permission was granted with a condition that “details of all external materials and finishes” must be approved by officers.
5. There is no record of a fire risk assessment of the proposed design. However, a document by an independent fire expert (Graham Green) was sent to the planning department a few days later. This did not look at the cladding, only “interim measures” of building management that he had inspected in December 2009.
6. The planning meeting was the end of the public consultation.
7. Very shortly after that, in February 2010, evidence shows that officers were referring to “Alucobond.” The first mention of Alucobond appears in three documents issued by the council’s design team before Building Regs approval was applied for.
8. Alucobond is a trade name for Aluminium Composite Material (ACM). ACM consists of two sheets of aluminium with a non-metallic core between them. This core may be manufactured from polyethylene (plastic) or from mineral material which is non-combustible. The type used on Hanover was “2 thin sheets 0.5mm on each side of a plastic core.”
9. In February 2010, the council’s design team applied for Building Regs approval. Their drawings show the cladding was to be designed in detail by Alumat. Building control officers shared the drawings with the Fire Service. Building control approved the plans in May 2010.
10. In March 2010, planning officers attended a site visit with Alumat to view Alucobond panel samples. Building control officers recorded 16 site visits.
11. In July 2010, the council issued its formal specification for the work. The section on the rain screen cladding refers to Alucobond.
12. Lovell’s sub-contractor, McMullen, advised in September 2010 to look at 3mm aluminium instead of 4mm ACM as a potential cost saving. However, Alumat responded to this with, “*On Hanover however, we offered a more economic ACM product (Alucobond/Reynobond etc) because it suited the application better and has strength, flatness, weight and price advantages.*”
13. In December 2011, a council letter specifically refers to “*acceptance*” of drawings by Alumat that refer to the use of Alucobond. This cladding was then installed.
14. Between 2014 and 2017, there were 8 recorded fires in the Council’s tower blocks, 2 of which had occurred in the Hanover Tower.

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15. On 20th June 2017, Alumet confirmed to SCC that “*Hanover Block is clad in 4mm ACM by Alucobond standard grade Class O with Rockwool or Mineral Wool Insulation and Lamatherm firestops all as specified.*”
16. However, on 25th June 2017, the government testing lab confirmed the sample of material from Hanover Tower was “*Category 3 material with no flame retardant properties.*”
17. The following day, the council’s Director of Housing, Janet Sharpe, wrote to residents saying, “*we will not rest in getting to the bottom of this matter and why the external cladding does not meet current standards.*” The investigation was to be led by Jill Hurst, SCC’s Head of Housing Investment and Maintenance.
18. The Cabinet Member at the time was Cllr Jayne Dunn, who told a BBC reporter that “*I can guarantee you that we will not stop until we get to the bottom of it because they took a piece of cladding to the tenants at a consultation and they didn't put that up. That was the cladding that we asked for. That was the cladding that we were told was on the building.*”
19. A meeting was held on 29th June 2017 where residents were told, “*The panels are different to the sample the Tenants and Residents Association hold. That’s what we need to investigate. We need to look at every stage of the sign off process for the works. Once we have the information we will take action against the contractor or SCC staff.*”
20. On 5th December 2018, the Cabinet Member, Cllr Jim Steinke, confirmed in a written answer to Cllr Rob Murphy that there were no plans to reclaim costs from the original installers. Soon afterwards, in early 2019, the Council confirmed to Homes England that there was no legal claim against Lovell. Cllr Steinke confirmed on 6th February 2019 that “*The Council approved the contractor’s proposal.*”
21. It was only after this point, when no legal proceedings against the contractors were being contemplated, that the council appointed external solicitors and commissioned the report from Bart Kavanagh, an independent expert architect.
22. The report was not delivered to residents and ward councillors until 11th September 2020.

Main conclusions

23. The council has finally released the main body of the investigation report but not the supporting documents needed to understand the chain of events fully.

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24. Residents were consulted and shown samples of aluminium cladding. The cladding actually fitted was not solid aluminium but Alucobond. When tested, it was found to be a “Category 3 material with no flame retardant properties.” This cladding does not comply with Building Regs standards.
25. Whatever the reason for the choice of Alucobond instead of solid aluminium, it was not the material that residents had been consulted about.
26. Councillors on the Planning Committee were also told that the material was aluminium, not a composite material. This is important because they specifically discussed fire safety as a concern.
27. The focus of the investigation report is on whether the council has legal claims against the contractors. This is despite the council admitting, as far back as 2018, that there were no legal claims.
28. The report does not address who was responsible for the wrong cladding being fitted. It fails to identify who proposed the use of Alucobond or who finally approved it. It does show that all staff accepted it without further question about its suitability: in housing management, the design team, the architects, building control and planning officers, as well as the fire service and the contractors.
29. The contractors (Lovell, Alumet, and McMullen) may have advised the council, but it is clear that council officers led the design choices.
30. That is why there could be no claims against the contractors: the decision to use Alucobond was the council’s decision from the outset. This was different from what residents and councillors had been told. That decision put residents' lives at risk.
31. External solicitors and experts were only appointed after the council had decided there were no claims against the contractors. This must therefore have been for the benefit of the council alone.

Next steps

32. The report is not yet public, partly at the request of the TARA. It is difficult for residents to meet at present because of the lockdown rules. This is difficult both for the residents and the council officers who promised a meeting with residents.
33. It is important that residents have a chance to ask questions about the report.

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34. It is important that the report and supporting documentation are published openly because of the public interest in knowing how and why residents' lives came to be put at risk.
35. The ward councillors have written to the Cabinet Member to ask for:
 1. proper compensation for tenants and leaseholders for the incredible stress and inconvenience unnecessarily caused by nearly three years of work on the tower block and waiting for a report that was delayed several times.
 2. disciplinary action against relevant officers.
 3. proposals for learning from the apparent failure of officers to perform their roles competently that put residents' lives at risk and which have been exposed in this report.
36. Full council adopted the motion of Cllr Rob Murphy in July 2017 to request a report to the Scrutiny Committee setting out:-
 - (i) the reasons why the Hanover Tower Block came to fail fire safety tests;
 - (ii) the cause of the failures; and
 - (iii) the implications for other work carried out under the Decent Homes improvement scheme and for any other buildings in Sheffield.
37. This has not yet been carried out. Now that the council has produced its report, this issue should come to the Scrutiny Committee for full discussion.