

WSBF roundtable ‘Post-Grenfell: Fire Safety in the Built Environment’ – 16th January 2018

Summary and recommendations

On 16 January, the Westminster Sustainable Business Forum convened a roundtable to examine whether building regulations, and the testing regime for building products, are fit for purpose in keeping the public safe from fire and smoke risks. The discussion was chaired by **Sir David Amess MP** and **Andy Slaughter MP**, Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety & Rescue Group.

► **Discussion summary**

There was a widespread acknowledgement of the scale of systemic failure across the development and construction process in regards to fire safety, in line with the observations made in Dame Judith Hackitt’s recent interim report. Serious concerns spanned the strength of building regulations, the diffuse methods of demonstrating compliance, a lack of enforcement, confusion in the flammability classification system, lack of clearly defined responsibilities, slow pace of progress, and historic failure to respond to warnings across sectors. There are changes that can and should be made as soon as possible.

1. Building regulations and materials classification

Many of the attendees agreed that Approved Document B is not fit for purpose and a review is long overdue – the last being 12 years ago. Regulations for works on existing buildings are particularly weak and unclear. The existence of two flammability classification schemes for building materials (Euroclass/BSI), and the use of the term ‘limited combustibility’, especially for category A2 (which in Scotland and the rest of the EU is ‘non-combustible’) causes confusion. This must be clarified urgently, to make sure mistakes are not continually embedded, and to reassure residents their homes are safe. A complete ban on the use of combustible materials in high-risk (and high occupancy) buildings was advocated by the fire sector, insurers, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the Mineral Wool Insulation Association (MIMA) and the Local Government Association (LGA); but some attendees argued that combustible materials could be made safe if properly protected.

Recommendations:

- Begin the review process for Building Regulations as soon as possible, and ensure they are strengthened, reviewed often and communicated effectively
- Incorporate fire regulations, so Approved Document B is the only point of reference
- Consider introducing with immediate effect a ban on use of combustible materials in high-risk and high occupancy buildings, allowing only A1 or A2 Euroclass rated products
- Consider streamlining classification into one system, and reclassifying ‘limited combustibility’ to ‘non-combustibility’ to align with EU and reduce confusion
- Introduce smoke toxicity testing and classification. These products must then be labelled and regulated accordingly

2. Insulation flammability testing

Attendees agreed on the importance of effective materials testing. The majority shared concerns that the current regime is not fit for purpose, in particular the BS8414 test, and the use of desk top studies. Testing should reflect real world-scenarios, and keep pace with changing building practices. Complaints were made from a number of attendees about the long waiting times for testing houses. It was argued that running the BS 8414 test within a building, rather than in the open air, would always be unrepresentative of the scenario under test.

Recommendations:

- Ensure all materials coming to market have been properly tested in a robust, real life scenario – no more desk-based studies
- Introduce smoke toxicity testing, supported by appropriate labelling, classification and regulation
- Evaluate the present ability of testing laboratories to provide a timely, universal service for all

3. Compliance and enforcement

Numerous examples were brought forward of wider, holistic issues with fire safety in development and construction, beyond the use of combustible materials. Testing can only go so far; if materials are inappropriately installed and construction standards are poor, they can become a serious risk. Bad practice in construction and fire safety is widespread, occurring across all types of tenure, but disproportionately affecting lower income residents.

The group agreed that the prevalence of poor standards is due to failings in building control. Due to fragmentation and privatisation, there are now too many routes to compliance; and the lack of clear responsibility for fire safety means there is no engine to drive change. The weakening and underfunding of local councils has reinforced issues with enforcement, making it difficult for in-house building control to compete with private assessors. Serious concerns were raised about the ability for installers to self-certify compliance to building regulations using Competent Persons Schemes. Many attendees felt it was too susceptible to incompetence, and that the ability for developers and contractors to sign off their own work was wholly inappropriate.

There was general agreement that the responsibility for compliance should be clearly defined early in the development process. Whether this would take the form of a nominated, independent individual, mandated to work in the public interest, or a 'golden thread' of accountability within the development team (as in the Republic of Ireland), was a point of debate. It was pointed out that if the responsibility did fall to LABC, there are issues surrounding their inability to prosecute for their own Local Authority for non-compliance.

Recommendations:

- Clarify and consolidate responsibility for compliance, consider removing the ability for installers to self-certify compliance under Competent Persons Schemes
- Require assignment of a nominated individual in charge of ensuring compliance to building regulations, potentially by statutory instrument
- Evaluate the relative merits of the nominated individual or body being independent, potentially strengthening Local Authority Building Control; versus embedding more responsibility within the development team, with mandatory sign-off stages
- Engage more effectively with the fire sector early in development

4. Engagement

There was a general sense of frustration amongst attendees with the slow pace of progress in implementing solutions, where there is such a widespread acknowledgement of existing problems in the system. Certain stakeholders, particularly the fire sector, feel they have been consistently ignored over many years, despite their awareness and communication of the risks which contributed to the Grenfell disaster. The forthcoming “Summit” on 22 January 2018 arranged by Dame Judith was cited as a notable example of this, being predominantly aimed at and led by the Construction Sector, with the Fire Sector as an ‘afterthought’.

Although the group appreciated the findings from the interim report, there was a feeling that the recommendations should be evaluated to focus on real regulatory and prescriptive change, rather than just a ‘culture change’ in those involved in its implementation. A ‘culture change’ will only happen with prescriptive change to the regulations.

► **Next steps**

Sir David Amess MP and Andy Slaughter MP will reflect on the roundtable report, compiled by Westminster Sustainable Business Forum. Together they will seek to arrange a meeting as soon as possible with the new Minister for Housing, Dominic Raab MP, to deliver the recommendations.

► **ATTENDEES**

Andy Slaughter MP
Sir David Amess MP
Lord Stunnell
Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Local Government Association (LGA)
Mineral Insulation Manufacturers Association (MIMA)
Rockwool
BRE
Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group
APPG on Fire Safety & Rescue
Local Authority Building Control (LABC)
Fire Sector Federation (FSF)
Fire Protection Association (FPA)
Association for Specialist Fire Protection
100 Resilient Cities
Weber Shandwick
Hindwoods
National House-Building Council
HSE Solutions
Deon Lombard Architects
Insulation Manufacturers Association (IMA, formerly BRUFMA)
Peter Rickaby, Energy and Sustainability Consultant
Professor Richard Hull, University of Central Lancashire
Westminster Sustainable Business Forum
Policy Connect

► **The WSBF**

The Westminster Sustainable Business Forum (WSBF) is a high-level coalition of key UK businesses, Parliamentarians, Civil Servants and other organisations, seeking to promote effective sustainability policy in the UK.

The WSBF brings together leading UK businesses who want to maximise business opportunities in the transition to a low-carbon economy and share a belief in the need to operate in an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable way. We publish authoritative research reports; impact on government policy through in-depth round table policy discussions and outputs; and inform the wider sustainability debate by convening Parliamentarians, senior civil servants, business experts and other stakeholders at larger policy events and seminars.

For further information please visit: www.policyconnect.org.uk/wsbf or alternatively please contact the Forum directly at jim.clark@policyconnect.org.uk or on 020 7202 8570.



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