

Fire destroys east London tower block with Grenfell-type flammable cladding

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In the early hours of Monday morning, a fire destroyed the Spectrum Building, a seven-storey block in east London containing several floors of residential flats. It was only due to the action of residents and their neighbours, and the London Fire Brigade (LFB) that no-one was killed at the building on Freshwater Lane in Dagenham.

It soon emerged that the reason for the rapid spread of the fire was that two floors were covered in similar flammable cladding to that which caused the Grenfell Tower inferno in 2017, which took the lives of 72 people in an act of social murder carried out by the authorities.

Eighty people managed to evacuate the Dagenham building, but 20 had to be rescued by the LFB which said it mounted a “significant search-and-rescue operation.” Due to the LFB’s prompt rescue operation, despite the building being engulfed in flames, only two residents required hospital treatment for smoke inhalation.

The fire is understood to have begun in the nursery area of the block, with its cause unknown.

Fire fighters on cranes were still putting out the fire the following afternoon, finally bringing it under control at 12.30 p.m. Monday.

The scale of the inferno required the deployment of 45 fire engines and 225 fire-fighters. Drones and 64-metre-high turntable ladders were deployed.

Spectrum residents, now relocated to the Beacontree Heath Leisure Centre, have recounted the horrifying events. At 2.45 a.m. they were woken by smoke and shouts, with resident angry that the fire alarm system did not work. Frantic calls were made to the fire brigade as residents began escaping the block. They fled, some naked, down crammed stairwells knocking on doors to alert fellow residents.

In houses nearby residents heard “screams” and “shouts.”

Fire engines arrived within six minutes and a rescue operation was launched to extract residents who could not escape.

Cydney Parker, a 26-year-old mother, told *Sky News*, “I’ve looked outside and seen loads of fire engines pull up... I looked through the front door and the whole corridor is

covered in thick black smoke. We had to run and we realised that the [exterior] fire gate had been padlocked shut so we couldn’t get out.

“It felt like I was going to die then and there. The only way out was finding something [we could use] to jump over the fence. As we were on top of the fence, we couldn’t get down, so we were screaming at police officers to come and help us.”

“How can they cut off a fire escape?”

“That block needs to get shut down and we all need to get housed—I hope they are all as angry as me.”

Ms Vassile, a health care assistant, said, “(There was) such a dense smoke all over the apartment. When we wanted to open the window, another smoke hit our face, on the throat and the eyes.

“We didn’t grab anything, we lost everything. The firemen brought us outside, and while I came outside, I saw a big fire come from the building on the ground floor, and when we went further, I saw another big fire on the top.”

“My partner is devastated as well. We try to encourage one another because we lost everything. We are scared, frightened to be on the street starting from zero.”

A spokesperson for London’s Ambulance Service explained, “We sent a large number of resources to the scene, including ambulance crews, incident response officers, an advanced paramedic in critical care, emergency planning officers, a command support vehicle and members of our hazardous area response team (HART). We also dispatched London’s Air Ambulance. We treated four patients at the scene and took two of them to a hospital.”

The cladding on Spectrum was understood to be high pressure laminate (HPL) panels. According to a study by the University of Central Lancashire, published in January 2019, HPL is made of compressed wood fibre that releases heat 25 times faster and burns 115 times hotter than non-combustible products.

The Spectrum Building was covered in scaffolding to remove the “non-compliant cladding”—designated as such as far back as July 2019—more than two years after Grenfell.

Inside Housing magazine noted, “In April 2023, the London Fire Brigade issued an enforcement notice to Block Management UK, the management company for the building, urging it to review its fire risk assessment and emergency plan and implement preventative measures.”

It added, “Planning permission was granted in May 2023 for the removal of cladding on the fifth and sixth floors and its replacement with compliant cladding, as well as the removal of window spandrel panels and balcony privacy screens.”

Inside Housing noted that the replacement of the flammable cladding “had been due to begin in June 2023 and finish in December, but last week cladding manufacturer Valcan wrote on Facebook that work to replace the cladding was ongoing.”

The block, built in 1974, was originally the office of the American chemical company DuPont. It was converted to flats in the 2010s, developed by Chadwell Properties. The current freeholder, Arinium, took over the freehold in January 2020. At the time of the fire, the building consisted of 60 flats, a communal roof terrace, two commercial units and a gym.

In press briefings LFB officials said they were aware of “a number of fire safety issues”. According to *Emergency Services Times*, “The building... was issued a fire enforcement notice in April 2023 which highlighted five issues, including failure to provide and/or maintain adequate and clearly indicated emergency routes and exits.”

Also identified was a serious “failure” to establish an emergency plan, a “failure” to ensure that the building and safety equipment used by the LFB were maintained in an efficient state in working order and in a good state of repair. According to *Inside Housing* “It also appears that residents had highlighted their fears about wooden decking on balconies and ‘broken’ fire doors as far back as 2018.”

In February 2022, the Spectrum Building residents association submitted evidence to the government on post Grenfell safety legislative procedures. Faced with enormous bills for remedial work to remove cladding, the association described “stress on leaseholders living in unsafe, unsellable flats with increasing service charges for well over three years is considerable.”

They stated, “Leaseholders continue to be faced with all the responsibility and none of the rights. We are, and have always been, limited in choices and these choices continue to reduce. Many of the leaseholders in this flat queued for 24 hours outside, overnight in January 2016 to buy their flat. This was the only way we could afford a property in Greater London. The flats are in the cheapest borough in London. We had little choice of which property to purchase then—and we have no choice but to own it now.”

The fire occurred only days before the public inquiry into the Grenfell fire will hand over its second, and final report on September 4. The inquiry has no powers of prosecution and cannot demand its recommendations on fire safety are implemented. The previous Conservative government largely ignored its first phase recommendations, further endangering the lives of hundreds of thousands of social housing residents in Britain who live in unsafe buildings.

This is why the Dagenham tower block could remain inhabited, despite being condemned, and covered in scaffolding seven years after Grenfell. In the aftermath of the Grenfell Fire, 4,600 buildings across Britain were listed as having potentially unsafe cladding. According to official statistics, just 50 percent of these buildings have begun removal or had cladding removed, meaning at least half remain covered in highly dangerous, flammable cladding.

As the Dagenham fire confirms, of those buildings where remedial work has begun—only to be delayed—many remain death traps.

The Metropolitan Police said back in May that it will not even consider any prosecutions over Grenfell until their own investigation concludes—which must wait on them considering the inquiry’s findings. The investigation, which may now only reach its conclusion as long as 10 years after Grenfell, is, as the Socialist Equality Party warned, part of a state cover-up to protect the guilty.



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