

Blow the whistle

As a confidential built environment reporting system highlights safety concerns, the Council for Aluminium in Building says flagging issues is essential to effect cultural change and achieve greater competency across the construction sector writes Nigel Headford, Chief Executive at the Council for Aluminium in Building (CAB)

In the years following the devastating Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, the UK has seen a major shift in attitudes to building safety.

Legislation, including 2021's Fire Safety Act, 2022's Building Safety Act and the creation of the Building Safety Regulator, demands greater accountability, transparency, and competence, as the built environment comes under increasing scrutiny.

But recent information from Collaborative Reporting for Safer Structures UK (CROSS UK), highlights the ongoing battle to deliver safer buildings.

The organisation aims to 'share lessons learned, create positive change, and improve safety' via its anonymous reporting system, which allows those working in the built environment to flag-up fire and structural safety breaches.

CROSS UK shines a spotlight on safety failures within the built environment, and we feel it's very important to help raise awareness of these issues, to reduce the likelihood of them happening again. Cultural change across the construction sector is required to deliver safe and compliant buildings, and as the UK's leading trade association for the architectural aluminium industry, we take our role in effecting this change very seriously.

Areas of concern recently identified by CROSS UK – and disseminated by CAB via its technical newsletter – include hardware failures on reversible windows, as well as fire compartmentation and structural integrity concerns.

Hinge failure dangers

One CROSS UK reporter, working within building control for a local authority, revealed that several retrofitted windows, designed to rotate for cleaning, had fallen from a high-rise building façade after the reversible pivot hinges gave way.

Windows falling from significant height pose a deadly threat to human life below, and we would strongly urge building managers and Accountable Persons to implement inspection regimes, as CROSS UK advises.

As CROSS UK points out, hinges may not always be visible, so targeted inspections and photographic checks are essential. We would also call on designers and specifiers to ensure window systems are appropriate for the building's height and use, allowing for increased wind loads and the potential consequences of component failure.

Fire safety compromised

Elsewhere, an experienced clerk of works has called out the showcasing of poor fire safety practices on social media, reporting the incident to CROSS UK.

According to the reporter, the posted photographs revealed several errors and inadequacies relating to cavity barrier installation, cladding support, and fire barrier integrity, that 'could present a hazard to life and property'.

Among these failings, the cavity barrier appeared to be cut back by more than 100mm from the internal bevel of the window reveal, leaving the window surround insufficiently protected in the event of fire.

In addition, the horizontal rails appeared to be mounted at the face of the cavity barrier, compromising the intended fire stopping function.

Instead of the 'expected' T-profile bracket, a small angle bracket appeared to have been used for cladding support, with just a single screw fixing. Describing this as 'a cause for concern', CROSS UK advises that 'there should always be sufficient redundancy in fixing systems to ensure that if one fails, the load is carried by adjacent fixings and



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there is no collapse'.

Debasing fire safety further, visible cut-outs and missing sections were noted in the fire barrier, significantly reducing its effectiveness.

Incorrect installation, poor fixings and missing or cut-back fire barriers pose serious fire and structural risks that completely undermine safety.

The construction industry has made progress since Grenfell, but poor practice is clearly still an issue, which shows there is much more work to be done. A deeply embedded culture of 'box-ticking' over real-world safety needs to change, and that will not happen overnight.

The fact this questionable workmanship has been proudly showcased online, for marketing purposes, reflects a worrying element of complacency, and a total misunderstanding of fire safety as a life-critical discipline.

With effective construction training and supervision, meticulous inspection and cross-trade awareness critical to the delivery of safe buildings, professional accountability and a willingness to challenge unsatisfactory work both play a key role.

Like CROSS UK, we would encourage those working in the built environment to speak up when they encounter poor practice, whether that's through direct engagement, reporting to professional or trade bodies, or if appropriate, escalating the issue to regulatory authorities.

Ultimately, lives are at stake, and if Grenfell has taught us anything, it's that we absolutely cannot afford to make these kinds of errors, now or in the future. □

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