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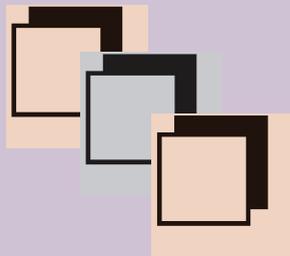
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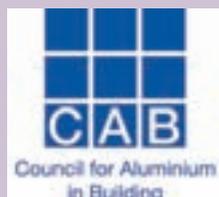
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Comment

This time last year focus was on the issue of Dame Judith Hackitt's enquiry into the Grenfell Tower disaster and the cost cutting policies that had caused the problem. It seemed a matter of urgency to check cladding on similar buildings and, where necessary, to replace it. Nobody could disagree with the need to do this. The issue then became: who should pay? As far as the Housing Secretary was concerned it should be the buildings' owners, the developers and landlords.

Sitting in a suburban house in a nice residential street it is hard – impossible really – to imagine what it must be like to live in a tower block, knowing that it is vulnerable and not knowing what your neighbours are up to. Not knowing whether someone has a faulty fridge or has left a heater on. And night time is always going to feel worse.

The government has, rightly, taken responsibility for the social sector, though even here it is cost averse local authorities that are to blame for the use of unsuitable cladding. However, in the end it is taxpayers' money so whether locally or nationally, we have to pay up.

Rather different in the case of private landlords and developers. Cutting costs is about maximising profit – no problem in principle, a good business practice I hear you say. But when it puts lives at risk it becomes wholly questionable. You might think that building control would have something to say but our building regulations seem to be regulations by committee. When the committee includes 'stakeholders' – or what used to be vested interests – we end up with regulations of convenience, what can be achieved rather than what should be achieved.

So it seems logical that the landlords should pay. Not, apparently, according to the landlords. Not entirely true, some, a few, have born the cost of re-cladding their properties but there are many others that don't feel the need to put their hands in their pockets, just in their tenants pockets. And according to government figures, of the 176 buildings identified with aluminium composite material cladding – the same type used in Grenfell Tower – only a handful have had remedial work carried out leaving 166 waiting for work to start.

In the circumstances the Housing Secretary has decided that the tax payer should pick up the £200m bill.

It does seem the only solution to an urgent problem but the reluctance of property owners to accept responsibility is mind blowing. The private rental sector in the UK has historically had a bad press. Often deservedly where small private landlords are concerned. But it seems that bigger owners are no better. And, just an aside, but I haven't heard anything from the banks in all of this. I can't believe that they have no interest in at least some of these properties via mortgage finance.

As I said earlier, buying an asset cheaply to maximise profit makes good business sense. When this involves putting lives at risk asset holders must take responsibility for their property. I do not have a problem with the government stepping in to take up the social responsibility that should, rightly, be that of the landlords and developers. What I do not think is the tax payers, responsibility is supporting their bottom line.

John Roper