



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith St
LONDON SW1P 3BT

19 November 2019

Dear Gavin

The Government must keep young people safe from fire

We have been raising concerns about fire safety with you and your predecessors for years. For years we have been ignored while your Government allowed its own rules to be flouted. The fire in Bolton was far too close a call. It must mark a turning point.

The record of your Government on fire safety is shameful. Fires in schools in England are far too common. There have been 2,000 in the last five years. Only 3 per cent of those schools were fitted with sprinklers.

Under the Priority Schools Building Programme, only 15 per cent of new schools have been fitted with sprinklers. The situation in newly built Free Schools is even worse.

In response to the routine flouting of the expectation that school buildings should not be clad in flammable materials and new buildings should be fitted with sprinklers, instead of introducing regulations, your Government sought to remove the expectation.

It is two and a half years since the Grenfell fire. Since that terrible night, your Department has failed to act. Your Department has only required that school buildings over 18 metres tall are checked for flammable cladding. The other action of your Department was to launch a consultation on school fire regulations. This closed on 31st May 2019 and you have neither published the evidence submitted nor responded to it.

In the tertiary education sector, the boom in private accommodation for university students has brought concerns that companies chasing profit are not doing all they can to ensure the safety of students.

The Cube in Bolton is owned by Urban Student Life (USL), which was suspended from a list of approved accommodation suppliers by the ANUK/Unipol National Code for large (student) developments in September 2016 for four breaches of a national code, including one breach around fire safety procedures.

Checks on other university buildings were supposed to have been carried out in 2017 following the Grenfell disaster, which killed 72 people. At the time, the Higher Education Funding Council for

England (HEFCE) asked all vice-chancellors to undertake checks. However, it is not clear whether HEFCE or its successor, the Office for Students, followed up on this request, nor whether similar checks were performed in further education colleges.

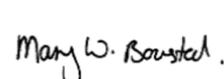
You must now act.

- Will you prohibit the use of flammable cladding on any educational building from now on?
- Will you commit to remove all flammable cladding from all educational buildings of whatever height?
- Will you make the fitting of sprinkler systems mandatory for all new educational buildings and retrofit sprinklers in all existing educational buildings?
- Will you ensure a review of all existing educational buildings to ensure they meet necessary fire safety standards?
- Will you work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to review standards in the private, purpose-built student accommodation sector to ensure these are robust enough?

The record of your Government in removing flammable cladding from residential tower blocks is so poor despite the commitment made in the immediate aftermath of the fire, that we believe it is essential that you set a deadline of no longer than 18 months for all educational buildings to be made safe.

We look forward to your swift response.

Yours sincerely

				
Kevin Courtney and Dr Mary Boustead Joint General Secretaries, NEU	Matt Wrack General Secretary FBU	Eva Crossan Jory Vice President NUS	Jo Grady General Secretary UCU	