

Advice for owners of buildings which include spandrel panels/ window panels/ infill panels

This Advice Note provides advice to building owners¹, their professional advisers, and fire and rescue services regarding spandrel panels/ window panels/ infill panels on external walls.

Although written for those responsible for the safety of residents of high rise (over 18m) residential blocks of flats, the principles of this guidance may, in certain circumstances, be applied to other premises.

Introduction

1. Spandrel panels (also including window panels and infill panels) are part of the external wall of the building. Therefore the requirements of Paragraph B4 of Schedule 1 of the Building Regulations 2010 (as amended) (External Fire Spread) apply.
2. Spandrel panels can be provided for both aesthetic and functional purposes. Like the rest of the external wall, the panels are generally required to meet acoustic, thermal, moisture, and fire performance requirements. Such panels are not normally load bearing but are often designed to account for wind loading.
3. The design and materials of panels varies between buildings; some are made of singular components such as cement particle board, other panels are composite products comprising outer facing materials bonded to an inner core.
4. It is important that building owners check the materials used in the panels to ensure that they do not present a risk of fire spread over the wall. It may not be readily apparent what materials are present, particularly for composite products which can include inner combustible insulating cores.

Review and assessment

5. Building owners can seek information about the panels from design information and building records however it is important to check that a product substitution has not taken place onsite. Where the panel product type can be confirmed on the building (e.g. by labeling), building owners should check the fire performance with the manufacturer by requesting test certification.
6. Where there is no information about the panel or there is uncertainty, it will be necessary to investigate the panel composition by sample testing. Building owners should seek professional advice and take precautions to avoid releasing hazardous materials such as asbestos which may be present.

¹ For the purposes of this document the term 'building owner' means the owner of the building or the person, group, company or other entity on whom duties are imposed or enforcement action could be taken under the following legislation: (i) the Housing Act 2004 in relation certain hazards; or (ii) under by the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 to ensure the safety of occupants of a building from fire (see Articles 3 & 5 of Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005).

7. Following any sampling, care should be taken to remediate any damage to the panels which would otherwise increase the fire risk (e.g. by exposing a combustible core).

Remediation

8. The expert panel's view is that for buildings over 18m, the clearest way to ensure they do not present a risk of fire spread is to confirm that materials are limited combustibility² or better. Where the panels do not meet this classification, the most appropriate means of remediation is to remove and replace the panels, however professional advice should be sought first.
9. The Government is currently undertaking work to assess non ACM risks, and will be considering the risks associated with spandrel panels further in that work. The Government will consider with the Expert Panel whether further advice and guidance should be provided. Notwithstanding this, building owners should not delay the removal of spandrels where they are assessed to be unsafe.

² Materials of limited combustibility would either include a material or product which is at least Class A2-s3, d2 in accordance with BS EN 13501-1:2007; or has achieved a national equivalent classification in accordance with Table A7 of Approved Document B volume 2.