

Grenfell firm stretched truth with fire safety claims, ex-worker says

Inquiry hears insulation maker Kingspan was struggling to get its product to pass tests

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An employee at Kingspan, which made combustible insulation used on Grenfell Tower, complained two years before the disaster that its fire performance claims were “stretching the truth”, the public inquiry into the disaster has heard.

Ivor Meredith, a technical project manager at the company, told the inquiry he was uncomfortable with how its phenolic foam insulation was being marketed and was under pressure to get test results that would prove it was safe.

“We were struggling to get the technology to pass, to justify our lie,” he said in a witness statement.

Meredith was fired for gross misconduct in 2015, and when he appealed against his dismissal he told the company: “I have been put in a situation where I have had to maintain performance that perhaps our products don’t deserve.”

He is the first executive from Kingspan to give evidence to the inquiry’s investigation into the manufacture, testing and marketing of the materials used in the disastrous refurbishment. The 14 June 2017 fire in west [London](#) killed 72 people.

Meredith worked for Kingspan from 1999, having started in the factory, and went on to oversee fire tests of its Kooltherm K15 product, which the inquiry has [already heard](#) did not comply with building regulations. He said he took a “negative view” of the foam and was uncomfortable with declaring to the market that it was “class 0” – which suggested it was safe for use on tall buildings when it was not in all cases.

A 2007 test became a 600C “raging inferno” with the foam insulation “burning under its own steam”, he reported to colleagues. Supervisors had to extinguish it because it risked setting fire to the laboratory.

“I was shocked that the phenolic was burning ferociously,” he said. “I sent a very animated report around to my superiors to make sure they were aware.” He recommended adding fire retardant. But his managers,

criticised him for “not being very positive about Kingspan products”, he said. “I don’t think they were concerned in the same way as me ... I felt I was never heard on issues like this.”

By the time he was fired, K15 had been sold for use on at least 230 high-rise buildings and he felt under pressure to make sure it did not have to be “pulled off the wall” by delivering proof it was safe.

“There was a lot of critical stuff going on that could have resulted in major claims against Kingspan so I had to keep my head above water, and sort it out for Kingspan,” he said, adding that was worried the company would be accused of “misselling”.

In a bid to undermine rivals it produced a leaflet titled: “What’s lurking underneath your facade?” which claimed K15 had been “assessed and approved in accordance with BR135”, a fire performance criteria for cladding systems. But it had to be withdrawn because the Building Research Establishment, which carries out the tests, had not approved the material.

“I am very sorry for what has happened,” Meredith said. “We should perhaps have been clearer in our marketing.”

The K15 foam was not used across the entire building, but it was the market leader. Celotex, which was the major insulation supplier, followed Kingspan’s approach to marketing its product by making similar claims.

Last week a [Celotex executive admitted](#) the company had dishonestly over-engineered a fire test to achieve a pass and produced a slideshow about results that would be “a fraud on the market”.

Executives at Arconic, which made the polyethylene-filled cladding panels that were the main cause of fire spread, knew several years before the disaster its panels would spread fire, [the inquiry has heard](#) . All three firms deny wrongdoing.

Meredith described how Kingspan worked with an organisation called Local Authority Building Control to obtain a certificate for its foam declaring it was of “limited combustibility”. This was wrong and it was later withdrawn, but when asked why Kingspan did not stop that assertion, Meredith said: “We were clutching at anything that would support the use of our products and [were] very busy trying to balance all the needs of the company’s business development.”

Kingspan has previously told the inquiry it did not know K15 was to be used on Grenfell and that the building regulations at the time permitted its use on tall buildings as long as the overall cladding system was compliant.

It has said that “none of the testing, certification or marketing literature which was current at the time of the supply of K15 for use on Grenfell Tower suggested that K15 was non-combustible or of limited combustibility”.

But it has apologised for “process shortcomings during the period of 2005 to 2014” including that “certain statements made in K15 product literature and advice provided to customers, were not sufficiently clear or emphatic in explaining the [testing] limitations”.

The inquiry continues.