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BUILDING TOMORROW'S WORLD NOT TODAY'S QUICK FIX

Barry Holmes, Executive Director of the Traditional Housing Bureau argues for a more holistically sustainable housing policy that offers a practical, realistic and forward thinking approach to build methods and the industry that is expected to build our homes.

The success of any building should be its performance over its estimated lifetime. The majority of homes will be expected to last for at least 100-150 years and of the 170,000 homes that are being built each year approximately 85% are still built using brick and block construction methods, because it is a proven method that stands the test of time in terms of durability and performance.

The OPDM has consistently championed lightweight prefabricated building techniques as modern methods of construction and the future for British housing. This ignores the substantial resources we already have in terms of the manufacturing capabilities, supply chain and trained workforce that already exists for modern concrete masonry construction and the innovation the sector has undergone in terms of proving its efficiency in terms of thermal efficiency, acoustics and build times.

Instead, the overzealous prescription for houses to be built more quickly using untried and untested lightweight prefabricated with which the workforce is unfamiliar, skirts over the concerns of the British Association of Insurers who have also raised doubts about the risks to homes that only have to guarantee a 60 year lifespan.

The Government's argument centres on the desire to build quickly to make up the projected shortfall in housing. Over-hyping the skills shortage, particularly in the wet trades, has exacerbated the call for factory built solutions. This has ignored the fact that build times remain roughly the same, only the place of building is changed. The added pressure placed on the housebuilding industry has done little to improve the skills issue

as workers are now forced to retrain and 'dumb down' with valuable craftsmanship being lost along the way.

The reports of shortages do not look at the industry as a whole instead relying on anecdotal comments usually from householders whose builders have deserted on the job.

According to CITB statistics, there are around 117,800 bricklayers available to lay the three billion bricks produced annually by the UK clay brick industry. A simple calculation shows that this entire annual production could be laid by the available bricklayers in just ten working weeks, assuming each man lays an average of 500 bricks per day. Not forgetting that bricklayers also lay blocks and taking into account weather conditions, the figures hardly add up to a shortage.

A further argument levied against bricklayers is that the so-called 'shortage' has led to longer build times, thereby giving a boost to prefabrication and off-site construction methods. But this is not so, according to the Barker report, which maintains that build times remain roughly the same and which is borne out by NHBC build time statistics.

A good indicator for the industry is that college courses in brickwork and some other trades are over-subscribed and with a large fully trained work force in place, the sustainable approach is to continue to invest and develop the skilled workers in this sector. The Brick Development Association's Director Michael Driver is in favour of investing in British manufacture to create sustainable industries: "The BDA is committed to creating a sustainable workforce to support the industry. This is as much a part of sustainable development as the use of sustainable materials - one is useless without the other."

And building a sustainable world relies on building houses that will be perceived as valuable by their inhabitants, cherished and well maintained. Modern methods of construction should focus on performance and standards and less on prescribing particular methods of construction over others, only then will our housing be truly sustainable for the nation's future.

For further information on the THB and its views on housing construction log on to www.epolitix.com and view its site on The Forum.

Traditional Housing Bureau

60 Charles Street

Leicester

LE1 1FB

Tel: 0116 253 6161

Fax: 0116 251 4568

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