

28 February 2005

THB links Yarl's Wood disaster with government's housing objectives

When the Yarl's Wood Detention Centre burnt rapidly to the ground in February 2002 an inquiry was instigated to find out how such devastation could have been wrecked so quickly. The results of that inquiry, according to housing pressure group the Traditional Housing Bureau, have implications for the Government's policies on building affordable housing.

The report on the inquiry – carried out by Stephen Shaw, CBE, Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (issued November 2004) examined the structure and procurement process used for the facility. It described the modular prefabricated structure as flimsy and observed that: “the only material that could be procured in the timescale proved unfit for purpose.”

Making the building safe since the fire has involved the installation of a sprinkler system and eight sections of the centre have also been demolished and rebuilt in concrete and masonry in order to provide the fire breaks required by insurers.

The conclusion to be drawn from this report is that the construction method and materials greatly exacerbated the consequences of the fire. This lesson should therefore be carefully considered before encouraging the use of similar construction methods in large-scale housing developments – and it is a lesson the government seems to be ignoring.

The ODPM is actively encouraging the use of lightweight modular construction processes to meet the need for high volume housing development while overlooking the drawbacks of such methods, including cost and fire safety.

Further evidence emerges in a report published by Professor Ulrich Schneider in Vienna which analysed the risk of fire in timber frame and masonry-based housing. The results show a direct correlation between the prevalence of timber frame buildings and the number of fire related deaths.

There are a number of reasons for this including the ability of wood to ignite spontaneously at low temperatures and the risk of fire reigniting in structural timbers many hours after a blaze has apparently been extinguished.

An initiative by independent consultant Chiltern International Fire (TF2000) in the UK was set up to test the fire resistance of medium rise timber frame buildings – with particular implications for multi-occupancy dwellings such as student accommodation or nurses' homes.

The procedure observed the reigniting of a blaze several hours after the extinguishing of a test fire by the fire brigade (which had to be recalled). It also reported the ability of timber joists to ignite with relatively little provocation, suggesting that even the heat generated by drilling a hole in a wall could cause timbers to start smouldering, unnoticed, before bursting into flame hours later.

These risks are particularly acute since the structural timbers are likely to be concealed under internal plasterboard walls and interior decoration, making early detection of a fire extremely difficult. Once underway it is the structural supports of the building which are affected, potentially leading to early failure of the whole structure.

“This is just one of the reasons that we question the government's stated preference for particular types of lightweight construction” concludes THB Chairman Martin Clarke. “At first sight it seems incredible that the government should be putting so much emphasis on largely untried construction methods without considering all the implications – and yet this seems to be exactly what it is doing.

“Not only is this unwise, it is also completely unnecessary as there is an established infrastructure, supply chain and trained workforce already in place to provide high quality, durable masonry construction which has a proven life span, costs less than current timber frame models and will not be destroyed by fire.”

The full report into the enquiry is available at <http://www.ppo.gov.uk/othereps.htm>

- ENDS -

For further information please contact Anna Hern or Frances Ross at CIB Public
Relations on 01372 371800

francesr@cibcommunications.co.uk