

PRESS RELEASE

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THB HIGHLIGHTS COST EFFICIENCY TO ODPM

Concerns raised by the Traditional Housing Bureau (THB) about the inefficient use of public money for building in lightweight prefabricated methods have been quoted in the House of Commons' ODPM Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee report: "The Role and Effectiveness of the Housing Corporation".

The report goes on to question the Housing Corporation's championing of modern methods of construction over traditional build types as the best option for meeting the housing shortage for the social and key worker sectors.

Barry Holmes, Executive Director of THB warned: "It has been proved by the industry, by Kate Barker's independent review and now by the House of Commons' own select committee that lightweight prefabricated methods do not provide the best economical short or long term solution for the nation's housing needs. The Housing Corporation should be listening to the industry not forcing them to adopt unproven and unpopular methods of construction"

Evidence to the Committee raised concerns that: "The previous experience of new methods of construction and prefabrication has not produced durable homes and that the lessons of previous programmes had not been learned." The Committee went on to advise: "The Housing Corporation [...] needs to set out clearly its requirements in terms of whole lifetime costs and adaptability. Where possible, it should ensure that homes meet lifetime homes standards."

The THB has long been campaigning against the widespread use of lightweight prefabricated and modular structures as unproven and untested build methods believing that modern masonry construction provides a far better long term efficient, durable and sustainable solution for the nation's homes.

Barry Holmes said: "There is no evidence that off-site manufacturing is any more cost effective than traditional methods – in fact it is 12% more expensive than traditional methods and build times are roughly the same. Where the two differ is that masonry is far more durable, performs better over the lifetime of the building lasting for at least 150 years as opposed to BRE's recommended 60 year lifespan for modular systems, is more adaptable for changing requirements and offers a more holistically sustainable solution."

The often used argument that factory built systems are more precise and utilise the available workforce more effectively does not bear weight either with John Rouse the Chief Executive of the Housing Corporation admitting that there is "poor vertical integration [...] which means that [prefabricated dwellings] are more expensive than traditional labour and we are losing out in terms of the time gains we should be having because labour on site is not finishing off those prefabricated dwellings as sufficiently quickly and defect free as they should be doing."

"In fact," argues Barry Holmes, "the Housing Corporation should be encouraging the utilisation of our existing highly skilled workforce and trades which have been building successfully for centuries and allow for greater tolerances in these systems which currently demand exact finishing in what is an inexact environment. Building sustainable solutions must surely involve the effective utilisation of existing resources and that must include the existing workforce and building techniques."

Other contributors to the Committee raised concerns about the financial prudence of off-site construction methods. Andrew Heywood, Senior Policy Advisor at the Council for Mortgage Lenders warned that previous generations of modular and lightweight prefabricated buildings were “unmortgagable due to defects of one sort or another” and that there is “significant association between previous generation of modern methods of construction and low demand.”

Barry Holmes concludes: “The nation expects the Government to use public money efficiently and wisely, acting on behalf of its current and future interests. At present there is little evidence of this and if left unchecked the future generations will be left with a worthless legacy of expensive, low quality housing. ”

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For further press information please contact Corinne Barwood or Emma Marsh at CIB Communications on Tel: 01372 371800 Fax: 01372 371801
Email: corinneb@cibcommunications.co.uk