

# Subject: Investigation into Fire Safety in Tall and Timber Framed Buildings in London

Report Number: 4

Report to: **Planning and Housing Committee**

Date: **16 March 2010**

Report of: **Executive Director of Secretariat**

## 1. Recommendations

- 1.1 **That the Committee note this report as a background to discussing with invited experts a range of matters relevant to fire safety in London's tall and timber framed buildings.**
- 1.2 **That the Committee notes the terms of reference for this meeting (as set out at paragraph 2.3) that were agreed under delegated authority by the Chair, in consultation with the Deputy Chair and the other party group lead Members of the Committee**

## 2. Background

2.1 On 13 January 2010 the London Assembly agreed the following motion:

*The Assembly is mindful of the recent fire in Peckham, which is the latest major fire involving a timber-frame or tall building in London. The fires include the Colindale fire in 2006 during which a six storey timber-framed building burned to the ground in less than nine minutes.*

*In light of these concerns, the Assembly calls upon the Assembly Planning and Housing Committee to set up a scrutiny investigation into issues around fire safety in buildings, with a particular focus on timber frame structures and tall buildings, and to make recommendations to the Mayor of London with regards to the London Plan and to Her Majesty's Government with regard to building regulations<sup>1</sup>.*

2.2 At its last meeting on 14 January 2010 the Committee agreed to undertake an investigation into fire safety in tall and timber framed buildings in London and delegated authority to the Chair to agree the terms of reference and scope of the investigation in consultation with Members.

2.3 The terms of reference for the investigation into fire safety in tall and timber framed buildings in London are:

- To identify existing planning policies and guidance as well as current regulations<sup>2</sup> applicable to tall and timber framed buildings in London, for buildings under construction and subsequent occupation.

<sup>1</sup> Report to London Assembly (Mayor's Question Time) 13.01.2010  
[www.london.gov.uk/assembly/assemmtgs/2010/plenaryjan13/item08.rtf](http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/assemmtgs/2010/plenaryjan13/item08.rtf)

<sup>2</sup> i.e. building regulations and fire safety regulations, code of construction/practice and risk assessments

- To determine how effective building and fire safety regulations, together with the London Plan and other guidance, are in reducing the risk of and number of fire incidents in tall and timber framed buildings in London.
- To establish what the Mayor and Government can do through the London Plan and other guidance to address the issues and if amendments to current London-wide and national regulations are required.

2.4 Through this investigation the Committee will seek to make recommendations to the Mayor for incorporation into the revision of the London Plan and where appropriate, it will include recommendations to local government, housing authorities and social landlords. It will also seek to provide recommendations to national government and other bodies in relation to existing building and fire safety regulations. These recommendations could help ensure that the risks and the occurrence of fires in tall and timber framed buildings in London, both during construction and after completion, are reduced.

2.5 A consultation letter seeking evidence on a number of points was sent to a range of stakeholders at the beginning of February. Questions were tailored to the groups of recipients which included:

- All London Boroughs (Directorates for Housing and Planning/Building Control)
- Housing associations and registered social landlords (RSLs)
- Private housebuilders and developers
- Representatives of the construction industry
- Architects and surveyors
- Department for Communities and Local Government (Building regulations and Fire research teams)
- Building Control and Building Research bodies
- London Fire Brigade/LFPA and fire research experts
- Insures
- Academics from faculties for architecture and engineering

### **3. Issues for Consideration**

#### **Focus of the investigation**

- 3.1 While the general fire safety issues involved in the design and construction of all types of buildings (office, industrial, social and community use) will be covered, to enable a sufficient level of detail it has been agreed that this investigation will primarily focus on residential buildings. References to tall buildings include those buildings with five or more storeys or more than 15 metres above ground level. Timber framed buildings refer to buildings where the main structural frame is made from timber.
- 3.2 Both tall buildings (specifically those already built and occupied) and timber-framed buildings (with particular reference to those under construction but also occupied buildings) have caused some concern among commentators after the recent fires in London and the UK. They can be at risk for very different reasons.
- 3.3 In tall buildings, many dating from the 1960s, continued compliance with current building and fire regulations is the main point of investigation. In relation to timber-framed buildings under

construction, the construction methods and site safety including the potential of fire spread to adjacent buildings are being examined. In completed and occupied timber-framed buildings, later structural alterations and modifications to plaster and cladding may also have effects on the levels of fire safety of these buildings.

### **The likelihood of increasing numbers of tall and timber framed buildings in London**

- 3.4 The requirement for increasing numbers of new homes in London (33,400 additional homes each year for the next ten years), the Mayor's commitment to accommodate London's growth within its current boundaries and the Mayor's commitment to reduce London's carbon dioxide emissions by 2025 all lead to the inevitability that there will be an increasing number of timber framed and tall buildings constructed in London.

### **Recent fires that are under investigation**

- 3.5 It is likely that recent fires that have taken place in tall or timber framed buildings will not form a specific part of this investigation. On-going investigations will prohibit expert witness contribution to the investigation. For this reason the issues of fire safety in general will be the main focus of the investigation. Only where investigations have been closed will details be considered in the Committee's report.

### **Strategic implications**

- 3.6 The London Plan has policies that provide a strategic imperative for building more tall and timber framed buildings, however this investigation is also relevant to other Mayoral strategies, guidance and Functional Bodies.
- 3.7 The London Development Agency current draft Housing Design guidance only mentions fire briefly in relation to escape routes and does not give any specific advice for designing timber framed or tall buildings. The draft London Housing Strategy asks for a consistent approach in designing new housing developments, using common sense design principles alongside other measures such as improved fire safety.
- 3.8 In response to the initial proposals for the Mayor's review of the London Plan in April 2009, the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) has stated that it wishes to see the inclusion of the need to build extra-statutory fire safety features into specified classes of development (i.e. schools, some categories of special needs housing, etc) and in domestic properties. The Authority believes that the London Plan has the potential to introduce or promote procedures and criteria, which would cause a practical response from developers. LFEPA also stresses that density, building quality and design are all factors that can affect aspects of fire safety regulation and response.<sup>3</sup>
- 3.9 The current draft London plan refers to fire safety at paragraph 7.38:  
*"New development should incorporate fire safety solutions and represent best practice in fire safety planning in both design and management. The London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) should be consulted early in the design process to ensure major projects and venues have solutions to fire engineering built-in".<sup>4</sup>*

### **Main areas for discussion**

- 3.10 Following the agreed terms of reference the Committee may wish to consider that the main areas for discussion at this meeting might cover:

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<sup>3</sup> LFEPA, 25 June 2009: "A New Plan for London", proposals for the Mayor's London Plan – consultation; Ref FEP 1376

<sup>4</sup> GLA (2009): The London Plan. Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London - Consultation draft replacement plan

- What are the specific risks associated with timber framed buildings under construction and for fire safety in completed and occupied tall and timber framed buildings?
- What is the impact of different building designs, materials used, construction techniques, requirements to update building fire safety codes and how amendments to compliant buildings can compromise fire safety?
- What are the future implications for fire safety measures in London's tall and timber framed buildings?
- What new guidance on tall or timber framed buildings and fire safety has been produced by a number of bodies over the past three years and what impact it made if any?
- What the outstanding actions and opportunities are in order to reduce the risk of and number of fire incidents in tall and timber framed buildings in London?

### **Invited guests**

#### **London Fire Brigade (LFB): Ron Dobson QFSM, MIFireE, Commissioner LFEPA**

3.11 The London Fire Brigade (LFB) is the largest fire and rescue service in the UK the third largest firefighting organisation in the world, protecting people and property from fire within the 1587 square kilometres of Greater London. The London Fire Brigade (LFB) is part of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and is run by the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA).

3.12 Ron Dobson became London Fire Commissioner in 2007 having risen through the ranks since joining the Brigade in 1979.

#### **UK Timber Frame Association (UKTFA): Geoff Arnold, Chairman**

3.13 The UK Timber Frame Association (UKTFA) is the trade association representing over 85% of UK timber frame manufacturers and also the sector's key suppliers. Established in 2002, they explain timber frame to the construction industry, policy makers and the general public and provide guidance, both technical and consumer, promote higher standards and offer training services.

3.14 Geoff Arnold is managing director of Pinewood Structures Ltd, one of the UK's largest manufacturers of timber frame structures, and has been chairman of the UK Timber Frame Association since 2009.

#### **Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA): Sam Webb, Architect, RIBA Council**

3.15 The Royal Institute of British Architects is the UK body for architecture and the architectural profession. They provide support for around 40,500 members worldwide in the form of training, technical services, publications and events, and set standards for the education of architects.

3.16 Sam Webb is a Chartered Architect on the RIBA Council and a former lecturer at the Kent Institute of Art & Design Canterbury. He is considered a housing safety specialist who has studied the safety of post-war social housing since the 1960s.

#### **Local Authority Building Control (LABC): Paul Everall, Chief Executive**

3.17 LABC (formerly known as the District Surveyors Association) was formed in 2005 and represents the views of the building control departments within the local authorities of England and Wales. LABC's mission is to ensure that buildings are healthy, safe, sustainable and accessible for all users and tenants whether domestic, commercial or public service, for example by coordinating the technical application of the Building Regulations.

3.18 Paul Overall is Chief Executive of LABC and has in the past been involved in changes to Building Regulations, including new requirements for fire safety.

**Construction Industry Council (CIC): Ciaran Molloy, Policy and Public Affairs Executive (Health and safety Committee)**

3.19 The Construction Industry Council (CIC) was established in 1988 and today occupies a unique role within the UK construction industry. Its members represent over 500,000 professionals working for, and in association with, the construction industry and more than 25,000 construction firms. It is the representative forum for the industry's professional bodies, research organisations and specialist trade associations.

3.20 Ciaran Molloy is responsible for managing and co-ordinating CIC policy lines within various committees and task groups, including those in relation to health and safety and design quality.

#### **4. Strategy Implications**

4.1 This report may have implications for the Mayor's London Housing Design Guide, which was published for consultation in July 2009, as it relates to building standards and regulations.

4.2 The investigation is relevant to the London Plan (Review), the Strategic Plan 2009 and 'Planning for a Better London' (2008) as well as the LFB London Safety Plan 2008/2011

4.3 The final report will make recommendations to the Mayor for incorporation into the revision of the London Plan and where appropriate, it will include recommendations to local government, housing authorities and social landlords. It will also seek to provide recommendations to national government and other bodies in relation to existing building and fire safety regulations.

#### **5. Legal Implications**

5.1 The Committee has the power to do what it recommended in the report.

#### **6. Financial Implications**

6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

#### **Background Papers:**

Motion, London Assembly Plenary, 13 January 2010

Member Delegate Authority Form number 353

*Fire and Rescue Service Practitioners' Forum (2009): The dangers of fires in timber-framed construction*

*LACORS (2008): Housing – Fire Safety*

Building (Inner London) Regulations 1985

*London District Surveyors Association (1997): Fire Safety Guide 1 – Fire Safety in Section 20 Buildings*

Building Regulations (England and Wales) 2000 – Approved Document B (2006 Edition)

*Department for Communities and Local Government (2007): Building a Greener Future.*

*Department for Communities and Local Government (2008): Innovative construction products and techniques.*

*Fire Protection Association (FPA) (2004): Design Guide for the Fire Protection of Buildings; a development from the 2000 Loss Prevention Council Design Guide for the Fire Protection of Buildings.*

*London Fire Brigade (LFB): London Safety Plan 2008/2011*

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