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Legislation Committee No.1

Response to the consultation on the Proposed Domestic Fire Safety (Wales) Measure

Bovis Homes Group PLC

Ref MAB/VJG

Clare Griffiths
Deputy Committee Clerk
Legislation Office
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

26 August 2010

Dear Ms Griffiths

Re Consultation - Domestic Fire Safety (Wales) Measure

Please find our response to the consultation reference above.

Bovis Homes is one of the UK's most successful housebuilders, creating communities and new homes throughout England and Wales. We have established an enviable reputation for building high quality and sustainable homes from one and two bedroom apartments, through to five and six bedroom detached family homes.

We have significant in-house resources, covering a range of specialist services and professionalism's, from Architecture to Customer Services.

Following the questions contained in Annex A, we would provide our response thus:

Q1. Bovis Homes fully supports the aim of reducing death and injury from fires in all homes in Wales. The measure current proposed, however, applies solely to new residences built in Wales, which we understand to be of the order of around 8000 homes per annum, whilst there are over one million existing homes.

The consultation notes the incidence of an average 18 fatalities per year due to fire in dwellings. We can find no evidence in the consultation that suggests that these deaths occur in new dwellings, which incidently benefit from fire safety measures introduced over the last 20 years or so, or whether these incidents occur in older properties.

Since the Building Regulations changed in 1992, all new homes built have had a requirement to have smoke detectors fitted, as well as having fire doors fitted and protected escape routes.

The consultation does not make this important distinction and as such, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that if the measure was to be introduced to solely new dwellings, the incidence rate and fatalities would be reduced.

Paragraph 8.11 is therefore extremely misleading, as there is no, or limited, evidence that the incidence of death and injury from fires is prevalent in new homes, to the extent that the proposal suggests elsewhere.

Without establishing whether these deaths and fire related incidents occur in newly built homes or existing stock, then the measure risks missing the purpose, could be ineffectual and will not contribute to reducing the risk it aims to address.

Of equal concern to us, in that there appears to be no examination of the effectiveness of the existing fire safety precautions incorporated into new homes, as required by Building Regulations since 1992.

One is bound to ask if the measure proposed implicitly suggests that these current requirements, required by Building Regulations, are ineffective. If this

is the case, then a full examination of the current Part B Building Regulations is surely called for.

- Q2. As outlined in our response in Q1, without a proper analysis of where these fire incidents occur – either newly built dwellings or the existing housing stock, it is difficult to comment on whether the key provisions within the proposed measure will achieve the aim.

A simple equation, however, reveals that with an existing housing stock of over one million homes and a nett addition of c.8000 new homes per annum, the proposed measure will take an incredibly long period to see any conceivable result. At current build rates, it would take over 150 years to replace the current housing stock with newly built dwellings. If the figures for fire related deaths and incidents, contained within the consultation are equally spread across all (new and existing) housing stock, then the impact of this measure is incredibly small. There is no evidence in the measure that suggests otherwise.

- Q3. There are a number of practical implications of the proposed measure aside from the costs, which we will address in our response to Q4:

- The consultation suggests that automatic fire suppression systems can be connected directly to the main water supplies. Our research reveals this to be simplistic and over optimistic. In discussions with members belonging to the Fire Sprinkler Association, it is evident that to be effective, the system relies on a known pressure and guaranteed flow rate. We are rarely able to rely upon the Utility providers guaranteeing pressure and as such, we are recommended to allow for storage tanks and pumps.

As well as the additional costs associated with these facilities, there is the additional cost of providing space to house these requirements, together with strengthening floors and roof trusses to house tanks.

Such requirements require on-going maintenance, which places additional cost onto the home owner.

- We know from experience that many owners of homes fail to have important equipment and plant, such as gas boilers and fires, regularly checked and serviced, despite there being a requirement to do so annually.

If there is resistance or reluctance to do so in the case of gas boilers despite substantial information and campaigns, there must be concern that automatic fire suppression systems will equally remain un-maintained and be susceptible to malfunction or a failure to operate when needed.

The costs of annual maintenance have been quoted to us at a minimum of £110 plus VAT per visit. The consultation underestimates this and we believe that any Insurance Policy that recognises the benefit of such systems will be subject to annual maintenance. Consequently, the benefit in Home Insurance premiums will be significantly absorbed by higher maintenance costs.

- As an industry, we are facing unprecedented demands and impacts on viability from a range of regulatory requirements. This measure will further add to such regulatory burden and this is likely to limit the supply of new sites coming forward and thus the delivery of much needed new homes. In particular, we feel this measure will impact significantly on the availability and delivery of affordable homes, given the significant policy and legislative requirements already in place.
- Whilst the consultation suggests that homes built with these systems will have an increased resale value, we would beg to differ. Our experience shows that rarely are we able to command a higher sale price for a new home, than the price of an equivalent secondhand, existing stock home of equal size and layout. Moreover, even if we were able to market at a higher price, rarely will valuers acknowledge any premium in new homes fitted with such systems.

Q4. The financial implications of the proposed measure are considerable and the RIA significantly underestimates this in our opinion and experience.

We have had designs and specifications produced by BAFSA members for 2 bed apartments and 2/3 bed houses. The lowest estimate, based on designs produced, was £2700 plus VAT for the smallest unit, rising to over £3500 plus VAT for a 3 bed 3 storey house with a 9 head sprinkler system, meeting the requirements of BS 9251. These costs do not include a tank and pump, which would add approximately £1000 per installation, nor the ancillary costs of strengthening floors and roof trusses, making good to

the sprinkler heads or infrastructure costs of additional pipe work in common areas of apartment blocks.

As a minimum, therefore, we believe this measure would add over £3000 per dwelling, almost three times the figures suggested by the RIA.

To conclude, whilst we fully support the aim of reducing fires related deaths and incidents, we are concerned that the proposed measure is deficient in a number of areas.

There is a real need to identify where the problems exists, whether in newly built dwellings or the existing housing stock. Failure to address this need inevitably means that the success of the measure cannot be guaranteed. Moreover, it will entirely miss the opportunity to address potential fire incidents in over one million existing homes. The measure proposes no advice as to how this significant proportion of homes will be addressed.

The costs included within the consultation are grossly underestimated and as such, the Regulatory Impact Assessment must be called into question. It is interesting to note that whilst all of the lower installation costs provided in the RIA are estimates, the only real data of an actual installation for nine bungalows (and therefore equivalent to a small apartment) put those real costs at £3000 per dwelling allowing for a deduction of c£2000 for the incoming water main. These costs closely match those we have experienced. There are assumptions made in the RIA that are unsubstantiated such as maintenance and resale values.

We believe that more work and detailed evidence is sought to establish accurately the costs of introducing this measure.

We trust our responses and evidence will be of use to you in considering the proposed measure and we are more than willing to work with the National Assembly for Wales on this measure.

Yours sincerely

Michael Black
Group Development Director