

Chief Officers



21 July 2009

Dear Chief Officer

DEAR CHIEF OFFICER (SCOTLAND) LETTER 9/2009

TIMBER FRAMED BUILDINGS

1. This letter brings to the attention of Fire and Rescue Services, the hazards and risks associated with fires in timber framed buildings. The letter also identifies control measures that seek to reduce risk to firefighters and the wider community.
2. In recent years there has been an increase in significant fires in the UK involving large timber framed buildings, especially during the construction phase, which has highlighted the potential for rapid fire growth and fire spread.
3. At incidents involving timber framed buildings, particularly during the construction phase, fire spread is likely to be extremely rapid mainly because of the large fire load and the fact that the fire safety measures planned for the finished building are not in place. The unprotected structure is liable to early collapse. High levels of radiated heat are also likely, constituting a hazard to firefighting personnel with the possibility of offsite fire spread to adjacent structures. Evidence relating to a number of fires in large timber framed buildings under construction indicates that once the fire is established, firefighting tactics are likely to be in the defensive mode.
4. A project to produce operational guidance on firefighting in timber frame buildings has been initiated within the CLG Operational Guidance Programme. In the meantime it is considered appropriate to provide interim information to assist FRSs in assessing the potential risks associated with this type of construction within their areas, together with information on operational planning and firefighter safety.

5. FRSs should make use of information for operational planning gained from visits under Section 9(2)(d) and Section 27 of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 and by fire safety staff during fire safety audits. FRSs will also wish to consider using their normal consultation and liaison arrangements with Building Control to gain information about proposed large scale timber framed developments.
6. Where a timber framed building is a construction site occupied solely by a workforce engaged in the construction process, general fire safety enforcement sits with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) using Part 3 of the 2005 Act, the Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006 and the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007. Where a building under construction is also occupied by other people not involved in construction activities (otherwise occupied premises), the enforcing authority for general fire safety is determined by reference to the building use and by reference to section 61 of the 2005 Act.
7. Fire and Rescue Services may wish to use their legislative powers, where they are the fire safety enforcer, in respect of the safety of building or site occupants; and equally work closely with the HSE in relation to premises which fall within HSE's legislative enforcement responsibility.
8. Guidance on fire safety can be found in both the recently updated 'Joint Code of Practice: Fire Prevention on Construction Sites 7th edition' jointly published by the Fire Protection Association and the Construction Federation; and in the HSE's guidance, 'HSG 168 Fire Safety in Construction Work'. The joint Code of Practice specifically draws attention to the need to carry out a risk assessment on high risk sites where fire raising is considered to be a threat.
9. Fires that occur within a timber framed building should be recorded normally within the Incident Recording System (IRS) and should not, in themselves, be recorded as a fire of special interest. However, if there are unusual aspects to the fire behaviour or building performance, this should be reported to SFRAU using the standard 'Fires and Incidents of Special Interest' (FOSI) procedure. The FOSI procedure is contained in Dear Firemaster letter 2/2004.

Yours faithfully



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Head of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit