

Our reference: FIR/74 422/8/40

Your reference:

42346

The Chief Fire Officer

19 January 1979

Dear Chief Officer

1. Following the report of the Committee of Inquiry set up by the Humberside County Council into the fire which occurred at Wensley Lodge Home for the Elderly at Hessle, near Kingston-upon-Hull, during the night of 5 January 1977, it has been thought desirable to supplement the previous guidance on fire precautions in old persons' homes which was contained in the Home Office Fire Prevention Note No. 2/1964 and the Appendix to my previous letter of 27 May 1976 (No. 36/76).

Consolidation of Guidance

2. The Committee of Inquiry expressed the view in paragraph 130 of its report that the existing advice to local authorities was adequate but that it "would benefit from being consolidated in one document which would remove any apparent inconsistencies". As I indicated in an earlier letter of 24 July 1975 (37/75), the Departments concerned already have in hand the preparation of comprehensive guidance on fire precautions for residential homes generally. Although this work is now well advanced it is not yet possible to say when, and in what form, comprehensive guidance will be issued. Until it is available, existing guidance will continue to be amended or amplified by "Dear Chief Fire Officer" letters as necessary.

Physical precautions against fire

3. In paragraphs 145-160 of the report the Committee of Inquiry advanced conclusions from its study of the physical precautions at Wensley Lodge which, together with the more detailed comments in chapter 4, will be of interest to fire brigades generally. None of the conclusions is inconsistent with, or calls for amendment of, previous guidance relating to the matters in question. It may, however, be helpful to draw attention to some of the conclusions of general application which may call for some emphasis or elaboration of existing guidance.

Fire containment

4. Paragraph 145 of the report draws attention to the inadequacy of the ceiling material used at Wensley Lodge for purposes of fire containment. (In chapter 4 there are observations about the limitations of other elements of the structure in this respect. Existing guidance on standards of structural precautions, particularly that relating to the need to have regard to economic considerations in this context, should be born in mind. As regards precautions in existing buildings, one important lesson of the Inquiry is that attention needs to be paid not only to the main elements of the structure (eg ceilings and walls) but also to subsidiary elements. For example, duct

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passing through walls, particularly if they are fire separating walls, should normally be fire stopped. When new construction, or reconstruction, is undertaken care should be taken to ensure that materials used, particularly for partitions protecting escape routes, offer the appropriate degree of fire resistance and are not likely to contribute to the spread of flame. Generally these should be of a standard which complies with the current building regulations.

High risk areas

5. In both existing and new buildings, particular attention should be given to the fire resistance of walls and ceilings separating high risk areas such as boiler rooms from the remainder of the building. Managers should be encouraged to consult the fire brigade at an early stage when structural or quasi-structural changes affecting high risk areas of existing buildings are contemplated, so that current fire safety standards can be taken into account.

Fire alarms

6. Paragraph 146 of the report records the Inquiry's conclusion that "it should be accepted practice for (alarm) systems to comply with the standards which may be current at the time of installation". It is equally important to ensure that equipment is installed in accordance with the current code of practice.

Obstruction of escape routes

7. Paragraph 147 acknowledges that it is the responsibility of management to ensure that corridors and escape routes generally are kept clear of furniture and other materials which would be likely to interfere with evacuation of the premises in the event of fire or to give rise to a fire hazard in themselves. It is nevertheless advisable that inspecting officers, particularly when they encounter such breaches of good housekeeping, should do all they can to encourage management to require high standards in this respect.

Fire detectors

8. Paragraph 149 refers to the undertaking given in paragraph 12 of the Annex to my letter No 36/76 to issue guidance on the performance and siting of smoke detectors in the light of work being undertaken by the Fire Research Station. Guidance on this subject was issued in my letter of 13 October 1978 (No. 59/78).

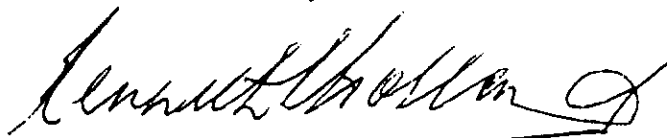
Fire lifts

9. In paragraph 150 of the report the Committee refers to the fact that the Home Office Fire Research Programme for 1977/78 contains a project to consider the adaptations required to make traditional lift systems a safe means of escape for the disabled and to assess to what extent these requirements are met by fire lift systems in current use. The Committee expresses the hope that the project will be given high priority in the programme.
10. Priority is being given to this project within the limits of the resources that are available. The problem is more complex than a straightforward adaptation of the fire lift system, and there is little prospect of general guidance on this subject being issued in the short-term.

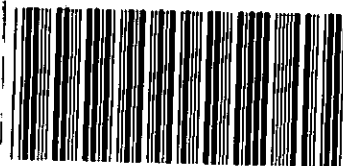
Management and communications

11. In chapter 5 of its report and paragraphs 161-171 of its conclusions chapter, the Committee of Inquiry makes a number of comments and recommendations which, although primarily of more direct concern to social services authorities and managers of homes, have implications for the fire prevention policies of fire brigades and the administrative procedures of fire authorities. It may be appropriate, for example, to consider in the light of the Committee's findings what aspects of good management practice can most usefully form the subject of advice to management during inspections and other visits. One aspect (obstruction of escape routes) has already been mentioned, but there are a number of others. For example, too much stress cannot be laid on the value of clearly written instructions, tailored specifically to the layout and other features of individual premises, about the procedures to be followed (by staff and residents) in the event of fire. The responsibility of management to ensure that fire and communication procedures are clearly understood and observed, by staff in particular, should be emphasised where circumstances suggest this to be necessary. Bearing in mind the circumstances in which the Wensley Lodge fire started, it may be thought advisable to alert management to the need to ensure that affected parts of the premises are thoroughly inspected immediately after work involving the use of blow lamps and other flame producing equipment has been carried out.

Yours sincerely



**The Fire Service
College**



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