

Primetime Investigates Fire in the Home

by Brian Ó Murchú

‘This is my home, it has always been my home, but it will never again be home sweet home.’ These are the emotive words of one of the contributors to the recent Primetime Investigates Fire in the Home programme. This recent programme followed a previous Primetime ‘special investigation’ on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Stardust tragedy. Based substantially on investigations by fire consultant Noel C. Manning, the programme set out to investigate if any lessons have been learned from the Stardust Tribunal and if the Tribunal findings have been implemented.

The Stardust Tribunal highlighted serious inadequacies in our fire and emergency services at the time of the Stardust tragedy, and the lack of mandatory Building and Fire Regulations. Despite the eventual granting of mandatory status to the 1992 Building and Fire Regulations, the Primetime programme aired on the 9th of May clearly demonstrated that little has changed. Effectively, there is no implementation of the legislation. The lack

of accountability due to non-enforcement was palatable as was highlighted at Shangan development, Ballymun, Dublin.

The Primetime programme concentrated mainly on problems in four residential developments:

- Oldcourt estate in Bray Co. Wicklow
- Apartments in Bride st. Dublin
- Shangan Apartments in Ballymun Dublin
- Apartments in Tallaght Co. Dublin

In the Oldcourt and Bride st. developments, a number of fire deaths have occurred which the authors of the programme suggest are directly related to poor fire design and inadequate resources. Although no deaths occurred to date in the Shangan development, residents recalled the horror of trying to escape through a hallway filled with black smoke, because there was no alternative escape. Investors in some of these buildings, suggested that there investments were virtually worthless, due to inadequate fire provision and or compliance with regulations. In the case of the Shangan

apartments, Dublin County Council issued a Fire Safety Notice to residents, to evacuate the premises in the circumstance where the Council itself was the original owner of the site and the principal party behind the Ballymun Regeneration Development and the responsible authority for the issuing of fire certificates.

The programme featured interviews with distraught relatives who had lost family and friends in fires. In all cases, those who had lost loved ones placed the blame on the local authority and professional ineptitude.

Primetime also interviewed a number of senior people in the fire service and heard many contradictory views from consultants in relation to problems. Many of the senior people in the fire service admitted to major flaws in the service in relation to implementation and policing of legislation.

All independent contributions including ex-fire chiefs and private consultants were at one with regards to the issues at hand. In contrast, it appeared that state employees were completely at loss in relation to their roles and responsibilities.