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David Sugden, Chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation, offers his assessment of the recent changes to Approved Document B

### AD B: Where to Next for Fire Regulations?

The new version of Approved Document B (AD B) which regulates fire safety in buildings has just come into force and contains a number of significant changes. Broadly speaking there is much in the new document to be welcomed and overall it represents a positive step on the road towards improved fire safety. The problem with AD B is not what it says; it's what it doesn't say. However, before we look at its shortcomings, let's first look at the positive side of the new document.

#### Joined up Regulations

For the first time, the new version of AD B makes reference to The Regulatory Reform Order, Fire Safety (RRO), which came into force in October 2006. RRO requires all businesses in the UK to nominate one person with specific responsibility for all aspects of fire safety. This individual must conduct a thorough risk assessment of the business' premises - including an appraisal of passive fire protection measures. The cross referencing of AD B and RRO in this way gives architects, specifiers, builders, owners and occupiers a new platform from which to consider the importance of fire safety when designing, constructing and occupying a building. Specifically, the new version of AD B now requires developers to pass on information regarding the fire safety strategy, and products used, to the owner/occupier, the details of which are set out in a new Appendix G. A good deal of ink has been used up in describing the advantages of "joined up" regulations - this is a good example of the idea in practice and the benefits it can bring.

The greater importance AD B now gives to Third Party Accreditation is also to be welcomed. To this end the General Introduction of AD B (0.15) states: "when products supplied and installed by companies that are members of Third Party Certification schemes the Building Control Body (BCB) may accept such Certification as evidence of compliance with the regulations." Recognising the role third party accreditation can

play is an important and positive step in the right direction. However, it is also a good example of the basic problem with AD B as it currently stands and how, while moving in the right direction, the latest revisions to the guidance simply don't go far enough.

### **What's missing from AD B?**

In respect to Third Party Certificated products and installers the guidance states: "a Building Control Body will wish to establish, in advance of the work, that any such scheme is adequate for the purposes of the Regulations". It goes on to say that, "many certification bodies that approve such schemes are accredited by UKAS". Crucially, however, AD B fails to say that Building Control Bodies should seek such accreditation for the scheme *before* accepting the certification. As a result Building Control Bodies are left to take decisions on the suitability of Third Party Schemes based upon essentially subjective criteria. This is clearly a wasted opportunity.

A similar failure to set objective standards and benchmarks also undermines the guidance on risk assessments in much the same way. The approach, which is set out in "Fire Safety Engineering" (General Introduction 0.30 - 0.34), does not outline any qualifications that would establish a level of competence in the individuals responsible for conducting these assessments. Instead decisions and judgements are, once again, left to subjective criteria. The effect is to water-down the potentially significant benefits of another good idea.

### **A fundamental problem in constructing a fire safe building**

At the heart of all this is the fundamental problem with the UK style of building regulation - particularly where Fire Safety is concerned. Guidance at present is just that: guidance. Much of AD B is concerned with setting out ultimate goals rather than describing, in concrete and prescriptive terms, what must be done to make these goals achievable. Consequently while requiring developers to construct a "fire safe building", AD B frequently overlooks the details of how this should be done.

Let me give an example which I hope will illustrate this point. Regulation 8.27 demands that: "any deflection of a steel beam that is coincident with a compartment wall must be so designed that the deflection expected does not destroy the integrity

of the compartment wall". The PFPF sees the need for and welcomes this requirement, however with no detailed guidance on how this may be achieved it again becomes a matter of a Fire Safety Engineers opinion and his ability to convince the regulator as to the viability of his proposals.

Finally, no article on AD B would be complete without mentioning what is perhaps the single most significant omission. As things stand, the guidance for the construction of a building 31m in height and one which stands 331m is the same. Yet clearly buildings of very different heights represent very different propositions - particularly in the event of a fire.

AD B in its various forms has done much to advance the cause of fire safety and the latest version offers further improvements. However, I believe the guidance has gone about as far as it can in its present form. Instead of revising and re-revising AD B, the government should now undertake a fundamental review. We need to re-examine the foundations on which many of the existing regulations are based. To do this we must have an open debate on the future of fire safety and the successor to AD B. I believe the time for this debate has now come.

**ENDS**

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**Editors notes:** The Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF - [www.pfpf.org](http://www.pfpf.org)) is dedicated to growing awareness and giving advice on fire protection, and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (RRO). Our members include the Chief Fire Officers Association, the Department of Communities and Local Government (previously the ODPM), the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and the Building Research Establishment. Our website carries advice on what to check and best practice in all passive fire protection measures