

David Sugden, Chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF), sizes up the latest significant revisions to Approved Document B

Approved Document B gives clarity to fire safety requirements

The latest version of Approved Document B (AD B) which regulates fire safety in buildings is now in force and contains significant changes to its predecessor. Overall it represents a positive step on the road towards improved fire safety. There is now a totally separate volume of AD B covering dwelling places. Splitting the document like this is a massive help to developers as they no longer have to wade through the complex requirements of commercial and industrial buildings.

Joined up Regulations

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. 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 requires developers to pass on information regarding the fire safety strategy, and products used, to the owner/occupier.

A fire door is only a fire door when it is closed

Fire doors are now required in places such as escape routes from loft conversions and when garages have intergrated access to the dwelling place. However AD B has now removed the need for self closing devices on fire doors because homeowners were found to remove them, or to wedge doors open. This brings into question the very nature of fire door functionality. A fire door is only a fire door when closed. This also applies to any door whether fire rated or not. All doors when closed will slow the spread of smoke and fire and the Department for Communities and Local Government

said they would run public service advertising to emphasise the importance of closing doors at night.

I would also stress that any fire door should be regarded as a complete assembly of the door and frame with the correct fittings¹. FD20 doors and FD30 doors are both mentioned in AD B and in most cases are the same thing. Manufacturers will not make both as there is so little difference in effective construction and when seeking an FD20 door little will be saved if you find one with that specific rating. I would suggest buying a FD30 door.

Fire spread through poor separation

Fire separation between dwellings is not a new requirement, but it does need pointing out as it is often either badly done in terrace type housing and apartments or more alarmingly missed altogether. I have seen fires where spread was worse because of this. All fire separation must go through to the underside of the roof as smoke and flames can pass through the smallest of gaps. Many recent domestic fires have spread through roof voids and it is important to continue separation up to the roof, to seal gaps and also ensure that all penetrations of the ceiling into the void are properly sealed so that fire cannot spread from the living accommodation to the void.

One of the current trends is to include sprinklers in domestic premises and I welcome this. But, sprinklers are at their most efficient when used holistically with passive fire protection methods such as compartmentation, to provide an enclosed space. While AD B does not make it a general requirement to fit sprinklers, it does make exceptions in cases such as care homes.

Third Party Certification: who judges the experts?

Many modern constructions offer commercial and non commercial usage. In such cases developers will still need to use both sections of AD B to ensure that the commercial areas are properly sealed off from dwelling places. This is particularly important at night when commercial areas are not occupied. All work should be done using Third

¹ The PFPF website <http://www.pfpf.org> shows members bodies who have advice on fire doors and hardware .
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Party Certificated (TPC) Passive Fire Protection products, installed by firms carrying TPC accreditation. This applies to all sectors of the construction industry and is called for in both volumes of AD B.

The importance AD B now gives to Third Party Accreditation is to be welcomed, but it is also a good example of the basic problem with AD B. While moving in the right direction, the latest revisions to the guidance simply don't go far enough. The Passive Fire Protection Federation believes five key areas need to be addressed with TPC, and has set out the following proposals for doing so:

- 1) Independence: the certification body must be independent so that it cannot be influenced by buyers, sellers or manufacturers, thus avoiding any conflict of interest.
- 2) Experience: the certification body must have demonstrable experience of product testing and evaluation, with access to appropriate and independent test facilities, and be able to show that it understands the products and installation requirements it evaluates.
- 3) Accreditation: the certification body must itself be accredited to deal with the product or service in question by a recognised international body, such as UKAS, to the applicable standards.
- 4) Publication: the technical requirements for certification and their method of evaluation must be published and publicly available.
- 5) Endorsement: the certification scheme and its technical requirements should reflect accepted industry principles and practice and, for passive fire safety systems, be endorsed by the Passive Fire Protection Federation as the passive fire industry's representative body.

A fundamental problem in constructing a fire safe building

At the heart of AD B 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.

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 wholesale review. We need to challenge the preconceptions on which much 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.

1096 words

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Editors notes: The Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF - 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