

Closed door leads to fire safety

David Sugden, Chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF), writes on the importance of compartmentation.

I read with interest the story reported in the last issue about the deaf woman rescued by the Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service. Apparently she was asleep upstairs when a fire started in the lounge. Although the smoke alarms sounded and there was also a special vibrating one suitable for the deaf, she didn't wake up until fire fighters had extinguished the fire, searched the ground floor and then gone upstairs to find her. What caught my attention was the comment from the station manager, Chris Spencer: "Thankfully, the tenant had closed the door at the bottom of the stairs, which prevented the fire from spreading and the smoke from getting into the stairwell and rising upstairs."

You couldn't find a better illustration of why passive (built-in) fire protection is so important. The closed door gave fire fighters time to put out the fire before it broke through to the upper floor. It's compartmentation in action.

Compartmentation forms the basis of all fire safety. It applies to all premises; domestic, multiple occupancy, offices, tower blocks, schools and hospitals all need adequate passive fire protection (PFP). It's about confining fire to its point of origin, preserving exit routes and allowing occupants to leave and the fire service to get in safely, tackle the fire and get out again.

There's a tendency to look at fire safety measures - sprinklers where fitted, fire exits and signs, alarms - and, if they're OK, to assume everything is fine. But there's more to it. Of course active measures are important - if the smoke alarms hadn't gone off in the situation in Gloucestershire the neighbours wouldn't have raised the alarm - but if fire spreads unchecked there may be no opportunity to use them. In order for sprinklers to work the structure must be sound and the water supply uninterrupted. Burnt smoke alarms can't make a sound. Exit signs are useless if they direct you to another burning area. Active and passive fire protection measures must work together to help save lives.

Fire fighters know about compartmentation but the same can't be said for the general public. The fire service is in an ideal position to help spread the word. In a domestic situation the message to close the doors and tidy up before going to bed is fairly

widespread, and the word 'compartmentation' needn't be mentioned, but it's different when dealing with buildings covered by the RRFSO. We've seen tragedies like the fire at Lakanal House, which killed 6 people and injured 15, including a fire fighter. Although the full investigation is not yet complete, it is thought the passive fire protection was virtually non-existent. Standard practice in a tower block fire is to evacuate the areas adjacent to the fire but leave people in supposed safety on other floors. With good compartmentation this is effective but without it, there is no safe place.

Fire fighters need to know whether the building they are called to has adequate passive fire protection. Risk assessments should be in place covering passive as well as active measures, and should be updated regularly, so, if consulted by the fire service they always contain the best available information.

For more information and guidance on best practice visit our website, www.pfpf.org

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