

Poor understanding of fire protection endangers fire fighters

David Sugden, Chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF), writes on the importance of built-in fire protection.

Inadequate risk assessments and poorly installed and maintained fire protection pose a growing risk to fire-fighters and to the public. Fire-fighters need accurate information about the structures they are trying to protect, but often that information is incomplete, out of date or simply wrong. Fire-fighters are naturally concerned that their job is made more hazardous and the public put in danger because our built environment is not up to standard.

A valid risk assessment is now a legal requirement, so it may be tempting for fire-fighters called to an incident to assume that the relevant checks have been carried out and the building meets the necessary fire protection standard. But not all buildings have an up-to-date risk assessment, and many Risk Assessors don't know what to look for, or how to maintain built-in fire protection measures. Although the existing regulations and guidance are robust, compliance is poor. Simply put, ignorance of fire safety is endangering fire-fighters' lives and it is probably safest to assume that no checks have been made.

Under the Fire Safety Order both the company and the individual responsible for the RA are criminally liable for breaches in regulations. But too often legal action comes as the result of a tragedy such as the 2009 Lakanal House fire, where lives were lost in part because the fire service did not have access to the building plans. The fire-fighter needs to know that unbreached compartmentation is in place before entering a building. At Pacific Wharf in Rotherhithe the lack of built-in fire protection was discovered during maintenance work and the problems were rectified, but in different circumstances the results could have been disastrous. Both buildings had seriously compromised passive fire protection and nobody realised because it isn't easy to see.

Nick Coombe, speaking recently for the Chief Fire Officers Association noted that one of the main problems with Risk Assessors is a failure to understand passive fire

protection, often mistakenly thinking that putting in a fire alarm compensates for other inadequacies. Fire-fighters too, in stressing the importance of active fire-fighting tools, can forget the importance of maintaining the built-in protection which is so vital for escape of the occupants and safe access for the fire service.

Fire fighters should also be aware that during construction, built-in fire protection can be compromised by the substitution of components. It might not seem important when alterations are made to an original building specification, but modifications can compromise fire safety. Substituting components can have far reaching and unintended consequences - any changes can weaken passive fire protection. Manufacturers and installers should use Third Party Certification in all elements of fire protection and Risk Assessors must be trained to recognise the hidden risks associated with alterations to the original specification.

The risk assessment must be high quality, carried out by someone with an in-depth knowledge of fire safety, and be made available to fire-fighters. The Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF) is currently liaising with Communities and Local Government (CLG) to establish official qualifications for Risk Assessors, helping the government to establish valid qualifications, which should sort the wheat from the chaff. Making risk assessors aware of the issues will help make our public and commercial buildings fire-safe, and hopefully make fire-fighters' job simpler and safer.

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