

Dear Sir

A number of major fires have made the headlines in the last week, the most memorable obliterating Weston-super-Mare's Grand Pier on Monday morning. Last Sunday a Wyevale garden centre was completely destroyed; on Tuesday an Essex branch of DIY shed Wickes suffered; on Friday a blaze burnt an historic brewery in Bolton and this morning a former church in Shepherd's Bush went up in flames. The causes of the fires have yet to be identified but there are some common themes.

Within minutes the fires at each of these locations spread from their point of origin and rapidly developed, destroying the properties. In some, the structures collapsed, leaving little hope for restoration of the building or the businesses. A lack of sprinklers was remarked upon in two or three cases - but no mention of the passive, or built-in fire protection that could have played a major part in saving these buildings.

Few people have even heard of passive fire protection, or its key principle of compartmentation, where a building is designed with fire secure compartments to stop the spread of fire and maintain structural stability.

Already some consultants are asking if the fire assessments now required by legislation were adequate in these recent cases. Do the owners or those responsible for a building consider passive fire protection in their risk assessment? It's unlikely.

Yet passive fire protection provides the backbone to a building and the first line of defence in preventing the spread of fire.

Complacency is the greatest threat. Luckily, no lives were lost in these fires - but many lives and communities have been destroyed. What will the ongoing cost be to Weston now that its number one attraction is gone? We should be trying to save buildings and businesses as well as lives.

Many in the media and fire rescue services are guilty of focusing on the 'active' elements such as sprinklers and alarms. But fire protection should be based on integrating active and built-in, passive measures such as structural protection and compartmentation.

It's up to the fire industry, from engineers and construction companies to the rescue services to make sure everyone gets the message.

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