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Health and safety legislation - a necessary burden?

Two devastating factory fires in Lahore and Karachi which resulted in over 300 deaths served to highlight the apparent scant regard paid to workers' health and safety by businesses in Pakistan. But, asks Passive Fire Protection Federation Chairman David Sugden, with the Government pushing for greater health and safety deregulation in the UK, could such a tragedy occur here?



The Government believes that economic growth in the UK has been held back by excessive regulation and, barely a day goes by, without one Minister or another suggesting that removing red tape for businesses might help to boost the UK economy. So it was no surprise that, on 23 July, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) launched a 6-week review of regulatory enforcement relating to the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Nor was there any astonishment at the Department's 10 September announcement that it intends to introduce new rules to exempt thousands of businesses from "burdensome" regular health and safety inspections.

Speaking at the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) annual conference on 20 September, newly appointed Fire Minister Brandon Lewis MP, reinforced the Government's view on deregulation:

"I firmly believe that businesses have the right to expect that those enforcing regulatory compliance do so in accordance with the fundamental principles of better regulation. I know that CFOA are keen to address shortcomings in this area and to lead work at the local level to develop fire safety audit and enforcement responsibilities to reflect more closely the aspirations that businesses have."

But can businesses be trusted to take fire safety seriously?

The latest *Fire and Rescue - Operational Statistics Bulletin for England 2011-12*, shows that fire and rescue authorities conducted 82,000 fire safety audits in 2011-12, representing some 6% of all premises known to the authorities. Of those premises audited, only 59% were deemed to have satisfactory fire safety measures in place. These audits resulted in 25,000 informal notifications, 3,300 enforcement notices, 600 prohibition notices, 95 alteration notices and 68 prosecutions.

Premises were most commonly found to be failing with regard to risk assessment; emergency routes and exits; and maintenance. With fire safety legislation focused on saving lives, it is of great concern that over 13,000 of the audited businesses did not comply with the legislative requirements for emergency routes and exits and almost 1,500 of these were factories and warehouses.

One would hope that these non-compliances were not as serious as those reported in Pakistan. The garment factory in which 289 people died allegedly had no emergency exit, and doors were either locked, or blocked with piles of clothes. But can we guarantee that what the Government and UK businesses might consider to be minor contraventions of "burdensome" legislation could not result in a similar tragedy?

ENDS

466 WORDS

Notes to Editors

1. The PFPF (www.pfpf.org) is the body for the built-in fire protection industry, and is dedicated to growing awareness of fire protection and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Membership includes the Chief Fire Officers Association, the DCLG, Local Authority Building Control and the Fire Test Study Group (UK) Ltd.
2. *Government red tape blitz to boost business growth*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills announcement: <http://news.bis.gov.uk/Press-Releases/Government-red-tape-blitz-to-boost-business-growth-67fc9.aspx>
3. *Focus on Enforcement*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; <http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/focusonenforcement/>
4. Fire Minister Brandon Lewis MP delivered a speech at the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) annual conference on 20 September. To view visit: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/newsroom/2222614>
5. *Fire and Rescue Service: Operational Statistics Bulletin for England 2011-12* focuses on personnel, health and safety and fire safety for the period 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012. It can be downloaded from <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/frsoperationalstats2011-12>



Image available:

PFPF Chairman David Sugden asks: "With the Government pushing for greater health and safety deregulation in the UK, could such a tragedy occur here?"

For further information:

Reader enquiries:

David Sugden, Passive Fire Protection Federation

Kingsley House, Ganders Business Park, Kingsley, Bordon GU35 9LU.

Tel: 01420 471621; **Website:** www.pfpf.org; **Email:** admin@pfpf.org

Press enquiries:

For further information please contact:

Anna Hayes, Initial Contacts, 14 Helen Road, Oxford OX2 0DE

Tel/Fax: 01865 723600; **Mob:** 07944 684586; **Email:** initialcontacts@btinternet.com

Please arrange for a copy of any published item to be sent to:

Initial Contacts, 14 Helen Road, Oxford OX2 0DE