

David Sugden, Chairman of the PFPF looks at hidden switching and a specifier's duty of care to ensure that fire protection products and measures are followed through.

Is what you specify what you get?

The construction industry has been hit hard by the recession. We will see cost cuttings and material substitution in response to need, but there is a huge difference in the consequences of most cost savings, (eg appearance or durability), and what happens when you cut corners with fire protection. Every specifier should ensure that what he specifies is what he gets. You may be told by your main contractor that you can have the same thing at a lower price if you agree to some changes (or at worst, changes will be made without your knowledge). But the consequences of switching to lower specification products can be far reaching, as can be seen in the recent case of Pacific Wharf.

Pacific Wharf, which contained 70 luxury flats overlooking the Thames, was found to lack even the most basic fire protection, making it a death trap for people living there. Although the regulatory organisation's inspectors had passed the flats as having been constructed properly, there was no fire compartmentalisation, which could have brought the whole building down with no chance of escape. The original specification should have included fire stopping, steel fire protection and full compartmentation but this was not what was built.

Specifiers cannot walk away from this issue. Many assume that built-in, or passive fire protection measures are put in correctly because it says so in Approved Document B (AD B). Fire-safe construction should not under any circumstances be taken as a 'given', like water or electricity. Adequate fire protection requires the right materials in the right place with the required fire resistance performance. But hidden switching is a real temptation now when even the inspectors may find themselves too stretched or are pressured to cut corners.

The situation becomes more complicated if a building design involves Fire Engineering, for instance, and doesn't exactly follow the guidance given in AD B. The architect or specifier has a duty to ensure that the Responsible Person understands that this

decision has been taken. The designer also has a duty to ensure the requirements of his specification are met by both the contractor and the performance of the products used.

Passive fire protection is essential for the fire safety of occupants and for the protection of the building. This should include a variety of measures to prevent fire movement and growth. For example, the list of precautions includes fire stopping, penetration seals, fire doors and their hardware, fire-resistant glass, protection of structure steelwork, partitions, emergency lighting, ductwork and dampers. In all cases, the most important guidance is only to specify and install properly approved fire-resistant systems.

Specifiers must be confident that what they are designing can be built and will provide the necessary level of fire safety. The products specified must then be installed correctly, which is where Third Party Certification (of products and installers) comes in. A failure to properly select products and installers would be a failure in the duty of care. It's advisable to keep fitness for purpose in mind and to note that one of the most significant changes introduced with the last edition of AD B is the requirement to hand on fire safety information - such as the fire protection design and its accompanying specification - so that there can be a link with the obligatory risk assessment of the available fire safety measures actually in place (reference Regulation 16B).

The Passive Fire Protection Federation has published a free guide covering all aspects of product conformity and installer certification. It sets out what all those involved need to know in order to select schemes that will help them ensure that the products used in, and contractors doing the installation of fire protection measures will meet the requirements of the legislation. *The Guide for Product and Installer Certification* is available from www.pfpf.org.

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