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Why tall buildings fall short on fire safety

Fire-fighters still rely on 19th Century techniques to fight fires in 21st century buildings. This was the view of senior fire-fighters who survived the devastating blaze that engulfed the Twin Towers following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. However, six years after the catastrophic collapse of the World Trade Center, little has changed.

Despite the serious problems associated with fire-safety in tall buildings, developers' appetite for building big is as great as ever. London Mayor, Ken Livingston is anticipating the construction of at least 20 very tall buildings in the Capital over the course of the next decade. However, under current guidelines, the regulations relating to fire-safety in the construction of a building 31m high and one which stand 331m are the same. There is no specific provision for very tall buildings. David Sugden, chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation, believes this is unacceptable and is calling for an urgent review of fire safety regulations.

"The traditional image of a fireman up a ladder bears no resemblance to the reality of fighting a fire in a tall building," Sugden explains. "These structures are, in effect, vertical towns and consequently they pose unique challenges. In the event of a fire, fire-fighters have no choice but to fight the blaze from within the burning building. Special attention

must therefore be paid not only to the layout and design of escape and access routes but also to the fire resilience of the building's structure and its ability to withstand and contain fire. The current system of regulations is no longer fit for purpose and by continuing to ignore the problem we are sleepwalking towards disaster. It's time to wake up and deal with the problem - that's why the PFPF calling for a fundamental review of existing regulations."

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Editors' notes: The Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF - www.pfpf.org) is dedicated to growing awareness and giving advice on fire protection, and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (RRO). Our members include the Chief Fire Officers Association, the Department of Communities and Local Government (previously the ODPM), the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and the Building Research Establishment among others. Our website carries advice on what to check and best practice in all passive fire protection measures