

Sprinklers – update from the Fire Suppression and Sustainable Buildings Task Group

Summary

1. Members are asked to note the update on the work of the Fire Suppression and Sustainable Buildings task group and the proposed next steps. Cllr Michael Murphy will provide a verbal report at the Fire Forum meeting and Bernadette Hartley will give a presentation about the work of the wider sprinkler lobby.

Background

2. In July 2006 the Safer Communities Board agreed that an intervention on sprinklers, and sustainable buildings more broadly should be taken forward with a three stage approach:

- **Stage 1 – focus on fire suppression systems in schools.** This would allow us to make the best of the opportunity offered by DfES's Building Schools for the Future programme, and to utilise the support of the broad coalition of groups currently campaigning on this issue;
- **Stage 2 – broader work to look at fire suppression in other buildings where vulnerable people are likely to be accommodated.** This might include Houses in Multiple Occupation, residential care homes, sheltered housing etc.
- **Stage 3 – looking at sustainable buildings.** This might consider, for example, the role of Building Regulations and any trade-off between environmentally friendly building materials and fire safety.

A task group, chaired by Cllr Michael Murphy has been established to progress this work. Lee Phillpots, Group Manager with the London Fire Brigade has been working with the member task group and LGA officers on this work programme on a 1 day a week basis.

Fire Suppression Systems in schools

3. Stage 1 of the task group's work focused on fire suppression systems in schools. Fires in schools are a major issue. Some key facts:

- on average, one school per week is lost to fire;
- each year, more than 2,000 schools in the UK suffer from fires large enough to need action by local fire brigades;
- over 70 per cent of school fires are started deliberately;
- the proportion of all school arson fires taking place in school time increased from 13 per cent in 1994 to nearly a third in 2004. With the drive for people-centred public services, and with extended schools being used increasingly as community facilities, the risk profile is only likely to increase.

4. Aside from the obvious financial costs, fires in schools also have an impact on school and community life which is less easy to quantify: disrupting pupils' education, delaying other works, causing psychological damage to pupils and staff, and depriving the community of a resource often used by a range of local groups.

5. Working in partnership with the wider sprinkler lobby, significant progress has been made and the Government has adopted a new policy stance on this issue. There is now an expectation that the majority of new build and major refurbished schools will be fitted with sprinklers/fire suppression systems.

6. At a private sprinkler seminar at the House of Commons on 26 February, the Minister for Schools, Jim Knight MP announced a change in the Government's position on sprinklers in schools. In his speech the Minister said that "the Government had introduced a new policy regarding the fitting of sprinklers in schools. New schools or those which undergo a major refurbishment using public funds will have to complete an analysis using a risk assessment tool to determine whether they should be fitted with a sprinkler system." He stated that "it is the Government's expectation that in the majority of cases this process will lead to sprinklers being fitted. The Government has begun a programme to replace or refurbish all secondary (for children aged 11 and older) schools, at a cost of £45 billion over 15 years. Most of these schools will now be sprinklered. Combined with other fire safety measures, British schools will be as safe from fire as is reasonably practical".

7. On 26 March the Minister formally announced, through a Parliamentary Written Answer, that it is now the Government's expectation that all new schools will have fire sprinklers installed, and that the new risk assessment and cost benefit analysis tool being prepared by the DfES should be used in decision-making on this issue.

8. This announcement followed LGA lobbying of the Minister and DfES officials about the provision of sprinklers in schools. The LGA welcomed this as a major step forward for fire safety in schools and offered any assistance to the DfES in communicating the new policy to local authority officers and members. Although the announcement itself does not go as far as the task group's stated objective, "that all new and major refurbished schools should have sprinklers", it defers to a risk assessment methodology, it is a good start. The task group believes that a rigorous risk analysis, looking at the true benefits of preventing such fires, would support the installation of sprinklers in every school building.

Research

9. The task group will be monitoring closely the impact of this tool on the number of new and refurbished schools that have sprinklers installed; and the LGA is conducting its own research to seek to quantify the wider socio-economic costs of fires in schools. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been commissioned to conduct a research study into the broader social and economic costs of fire in schools. A survey of Local Authorities and Fire and Rescue Services will identify attitudes and barriers to the provision of sprinklers in schools. The preliminary results of the research will be launched at a London Fire Brigade hosted sprinkler event on 7 November, to which lead members for and Directors of Children's Services from across the country have been invited.

Next Steps

10. At the outset of the project, there was an intention that a successful campaign on sprinklers in schools could provide an effective springboard to call for the installation of fire suppression systems in other buildings where people are vulnerable to the threat of fire.

11. A paper is going to the Safer Communities Board recommending that the task group undertakes a second stage of work, to promote the use of fire suppression systems according to risk, in residential accommodation for vulnerable people. This would include:

- *Encouraging member authorities to consider the broader benefits of fire suppression as an option to assist in strategic planning. This will include promoting the inclusion of fire suppression systems in local authority plans for new build housing schemes, particularly those associated with the Government's affordable housing strategy.*
- *Targeting new and major refurbishment residential care homes, sheltered housing and HMOs in a similar way to that suggested for social housing.*
- *Encouraging support for initiatives that help to identify individual vulnerable people who might benefit from residential fire suppression systems.*
- *Lobbying Central Government for changes in Building Regulations and planning rules in the longer term.*

12. The LGA has the potential to add significant value to the campaign for the wider application of fire suppression systems based on the development and application of a robust risk assessment tool. The LGA is in a position to promote the natural linkages between strategic local planning, sustainability and environmental protection, and local Fire and Rescue Services Integrated Risk Management plans. It could also play a key role in lobbying the government to strengthen regulation where necessary.

Contact Officer: Emma Varley, tel. 020 7664 3237, email emma.varley@ga.gov.uk