

Fire Suppression and Sustainable Buildings Task Group Final Report

Summary

1. This paper reviews the achievements of the fire suppression and sustainable buildings task group since its commencement in January 2007. The task group concluded its work at a final meeting in July 2008.

Background

2. At the July 2006 meeting of the Safer Communities Board, members agreed that a work stream on sprinklers and sustainable buildings more broadly, should be progressed in 2007/08 and the fire suppression and sustainable buildings task group, chaired by Cllr Michael Murphy was established.
3. The task group agreed to implement a 3 staged approach to the work to promote the use of sprinklers and explore issues around sustainable buildings;
 - Stage 1 – focus on fire suppression systems in schools to maximise the opportunities offered by the then Department for Education and Skills (DFES) Building Schools for the Future programme, and to utilise the support of the broad coalition of groups campaigning on this issue.
 - Stage 2 – broaden work to look at fire suppression in other buildings where vulnerable people are likely to be accommodated, for example Houses in Multiple Occupation, residential care homes and sheltered housing.
 - Stage 3 – looking at sustainability in buildings, exploring any trade-off between environmentally friendly building materials and fire safety.
4. Membership of the task group reflected the cross party balance of the LGA, and included representatives from the Children and Young People Board, the Safer Communities Board and Fire Forum, to ensure a coordinated approach across the LGA.

Stage 1 -fire suppression systems in schools

5. Much of the task group's activity focused on Stage 1 of the initial work plan. This was largely a result of the extended time frame over which the DfES (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) took to implement a policy change on

the installation of sprinklers in schools, and to publish its new guidance in the form of Building Bulletin 100 (BB100).

6. The LGA wrote to the Jim Knight MP, the Schools Minister in January 2007, inviting him to recognise the need for fire suppression systems to be included in plans for new and major refurbished schools.
7. On 26 February 2008, Jim Knight announced to a sprinkler seminar in the House of Commons that the government would introduce a new policy regarding the fitting of sprinklers in schools. New schools or those which undergo a major refurbishment using public funds would have to complete an analysis using a risk assessment tool to determine whether the installation of a sprinkler system is necessary. He stated that it was the government's expectation that in the majority of cases this process would lead to sprinklers being fitted.
8. The task group successfully lobbied the minister and engaged with the DfES Architects Department to influence the development of a robust risk assessment toolkit that provides a mechanism to determine whether the installation of fire suppression systems in new build or major refurbishment school projects is necessary.

Research on the wider economic and social impacts of school fires

9. In partnership with BAFSA and their agents Elements PR, the LGA identified that although information existed about the direct financial costs of fires in schools, far less information was available about the broader social and economic impact that serious school fires can have on communities. In order to drive the debate forward, the LGA and BAFSA commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out a study on their behalf.
10. ***The impact of school fires: a study of the wider economic and social impacts on schools and the local community*** was published in November 2007. The study explored the impact of school fires on schools (staff, pupils, parents and infrastructure) and on the wider community. The report found that despite a downward trend in the number of malicious and accidental school fires, there remain a substantial number of fires in schools each year and that they have a significant impact on the social and emotional experiences of pupils, staff and the wider community and on teaching and learning in the affected schools. Overall, the evidence suggests that there are two key challenges for the future:
 - persuading all stakeholders of the importance of addressing the issue of schools fires whether or not they have had or are likely to have a direct experience of fire;
 - ensuring that school leaders and local authority decision makers are equipped with accurate and relevant guidance about fire prevention and management in order that they can make informed decisions.

11. The report can be downloaded from:

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/downloadable/LFWreport.pdf>

Its release coincided with the publication of the long awaited DCSF guidance document BB100 and associated risk assessment tools, and was marked by a seminar held at City Hall in London in November 2007. Speakers included Cllr Michael Murphy and Mukund Patel (DCSF Chief Architect) and the event which was attended by over 100 delegates helped raise awareness of the NFER report and the new guidance of sprinklers in schools.

Highlighting the benefits of sprinklers and fire suppression systems

12. The task group has supported LGA members with responsibility for Children's Services by highlighting the changes in government policy on sprinklers in schools and setting out how they should implement the new guidance.
13. A short guide that sets out the benefits of sprinklers and fire suppression systems has been produced for councillors. It has been designed as a concise, easy to read document specifically for elected members who are new to the issues, and copies have been distributed to all councils.

Fire sprinklers and schools survey

14. In partnership with BAFSA, the LGA commissioned a survey of local authority Children's Services departments and Fire and Rescue Services, to identify existing practice and the barriers – both real and perceived – to the installation of fire suppression systems in schools. The survey, carried out by the Local Government Analysis and Research Unit at the LGA, is also designed to highlight the level of awareness and application of the new DCSF guidance. The report can be downloaded from <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelid=814303>

Stage 2 - fire suppression in buildings accommodating vulnerable people

Building regulations

15. Officers engaged with the LGA's advisors on Building Control to identify opportunities that may exist to influence future requirements relating to fire suppression systems and sustainable buildings issues. These links will continue to be utilised now the task group has finished its work. Officers submitted comments on the issues relating to fire suppression systems to inform the LGA response to the CLG consultation on the future of building control earlier this year.

16. Members decided that informing decision makers in local government of the benefits of various fire suppression systems (water misting, sprinklers and integrated domestic plumbing systems) was the most appropriate way of influencing a wider audience of elected members, and that the short guide for councillors will contribute to this.

Stage 3 - sustainability in buildings

17. As the task group's work has progressed, it has become apparent that the issue of sustainability in building construction is integral to the arguments that need to be put forward in support of the inclusion of fire suppression systems in buildings. Traditional arguments about life safety and property protection alone will not be sufficient to change attitudes to sprinklers.
18. Heightened public awareness of environmental issues and the need to conserve natural resources means that environmental and sustainability arguments for the provision of automatic fire suppression systems will be increasingly important.
19. A workshop on the environmental benefits of sprinklers was held at the LGA fire conference in March 2008.

Future LGA involvement in the fire suppression and sustainable buildings agenda

20. Although fire suppression and sustainable buildings will not continue as a distinct work stream for the LGA in 2008/09, issues can be raised and discussed at the Fire Services Forum. Cllr Murphy will continue to act as a 'champion' on issues relating to sprinklers and fire suppression systems.
21. The short guide to fire suppression systems for councillors has now been sent to all councils. The guide will also be distributed at the LGA national children and adult services conference in October to reach a wider audience. An article in the magazine *First* is planned for later this year. Further copies of the guide are available from LG Connect, the LGA Information Centre by emailing info@lga.gov.uk

Conclusion

22. The work of the task group has built on and contributed to the work of others in the pro-sprinkler lobby. It has enabled the LGA to use its unique position as a lobbying organisation, representing councils and fire and rescue authorities in England, to help persuade central and local government of the benefits of fire suppression systems, particularly in schools.
23. The legacy of the task group is a range of information that can be used by the LGA and others in the future to promote the wider application of fire suppression systems – to save lives, protect property and safeguard assets, and to help prevent damage to the environment.

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