

Proposed intervention – Fire Suppression Systems and Sustainable Buildings

Summary

1. *At July's meeting of the Safer Communities Board, members agreed that an intervention on sprinklers, and sustainable buildings more broadly, should be taken forward in 2006-07, and that a task group of members should be set up to consider the issues.*
2. *This note provides further detail and suggests a three stage approach for the work of the task group:*
 - **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 – broaden 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.*
3. *More information on each of the proposed stages is set out below, with stage 1 considered in most detail. It is proposed that the task group agree clear objectives for each stage of the work. They would then take a view on the appropriate point at which to move to the next stage, based on the delivery of those objectives.*

Consideration

Stage 1: Fire suppression in schools

Impact of school fires

4. *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.*
5. *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.

Opportunities for action

- 6. DfES's Building Schools for the Future programme will invest some £25bn of public money in new and refurbished schools over the next 10-15 years. In addition, some £200m has been announced for capital investment in primary schools. As such, this is the best opportunity for a generation to take action to safeguard both the government's massive investment (supporting the commitment set out in People and Places for services that achieve the best value for money for the tax payer) and the lives of children and teachers. With Jim Knight, the former sponsor MP for the National Fire Sprinkler Network now Minister for Schools and 14-19 Learners, we can expect a more sympathetic response at Ministerial level than may have been the case in the past.*
- 7. DCLG's publication of the revised Part B of the Building Regulations and its associated Approved Document is expected in the autumn. Revision to these documents would be needed, for example, to make fire suppression systems mandatory in new build schools. Informal soundings suggest that DCLG at present have no plans to change their approach.*
- 8. There is a broad coalition of interested groups lobbying on the issue, with opportunities to build on and link with their work:*
 - the British Automatic Fire Suppression Association have engaged Elements, a PR company, to undertake an awareness raising campaign on the benefits of fire suppression systems in schools. Elements are keen to involve the LGA, including in conducting a survey of local authorities on current approaches to fire suppression;*
 - the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority are also conducting an awareness raising campaign focussed on sprinklers in schools;*
 - the National Governors' Association are involved in ongoing work to raise awareness of fire risk assessment among head teachers and governors;*
 - political interest remains high (Early Day Motions on sprinklers continue to be tabled, with the most recent by Celia Barlow MP collecting 160 signatures so far).*

Results for the LGA

- 9. While central government could force the provision of fire suppression systems in schools if they were minded to do so, delivery could be achieved now if local government spoke with a single voice. We must understand the barriers that are currently preventing education and planning authorities from taking a positive approach to sprinklers and other forms of fire suppression, and consider what can be done to address those barriers. Doing so successfully could deliver real, measurable change in the level of protection afforded to schools.*
- 10. Action by the LGA would enable the campaigns by Elements, LFEPA and others to be seen in the context of local government working collectively and constructively on the issue. In doing so, we will be able to demonstrate that joined-up local*

government can take forward an issue on which leadership from central government has arguably been lacking, saving lives and supporting the objectives of *People and Places* by safeguarding public investment and protecting people-centred services.

Stage 2: Fire suppression in other buildings used by vulnerable people

11. One of the most often-repeated arguments against expenditure on sprinklers in schools has been that evacuation procedures are so good that, even when a fire takes place while the school is in use, the risk of death or injury is very low. Such arguments clearly do not hold for a range of other types of building used by vulnerable people and where there is clear evidence of an increased threat of fire - HMOs, residential care homes and sheltered housing are obvious examples.
12. While calls for fire suppression systems in such buildings are currently not as loud as those for sprinklers in schools, there would nevertheless be a range of allies in taking forward work. The sprinkler associations and fire services would clearly be supporters, but a recent article by a housing renewal manager calling for sprinklers in HMOs ("Simple measures save lives," *Environmental Health News*, 14 July) shows the potential for other partnerships.
13. 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. As with schools, there should be abundant evidence of the economic and societal costs of fires in such buildings, broad based support among a range of partners, and clear outcomes both for the safety of local communities and the reputation of local government.

Stage 3: Sustainable buildings

14. Broadening work still further, perhaps to incorporate input from other Boards, the task group may wish to consider the question of what is a truly sustainable building, looking at the balance between environmental sustainability and safety. How could Building Regulations contribute to more sustainable buildings? What impact, for example, might the use of more environmentally sustainable building materials have on fire safety? Do modern methods of building construction present challenges to safety?
15. With major challenges in the provision of housing over the coming decade, such work has the potential to make a lasting impact on the future of communities.

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