

Fire suppression and sustainable buildings update - Decisions and Actions Required

Decisions

1. *To note progress by the task group on fire suppression and sustainable buildings. Members are particularly requested to consider the approach of the task group to build on the Minister for Schools' recent announcement of a requirement for a risk-assessed approach to sprinkler installation in schools (paragraphs 10 and 11).*

Actions Required

2. *Any comments will inform the further development of the work programme of the task group.*

Action by: *Lee Phillpotts, secretary to the task group*

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Fire Suppression and sustainable buildings

Summary

1. *This paper sets out the objectives and work programme agreed by the task group on fire suppression and sustainable buildings.*
2. *Members may particularly wish to note work underway on stage 1 of the task group's work programme, which focuses on the installation of fire suppression systems in new schools and major refurbishments of school buildings. This includes:*
 - *a survey of fire and rescue authorities and local education authorities to identify both examples of good practice and barriers to sprinkler installation;*
 - *research to examine the broader socio-economic impact of school fires, to support a more rigorous cost-benefit analysis of sprinkler installation.*
3. *There are early signs that the work being undertaken by the LGA and other stakeholders is having a positive impact on the approach taken by the Department for Education and Skills. Further details are set out below.*

Background

4. *The Safer Communities Board agreed towards the end of 2006 to set up a task group to look at the issue of fire suppression and sustainable buildings. It was also agreed that the work of this group should be taken forward in three distinct stages:*
 - i. *Fire suppression in schools – aiming to seize the opportunity offered by the capital investment in new and refurbished schools through the Building Schools for the Future programme to address the current serious situation where the direct cost of school fires is almost £100million a year;*
 - ii. *Fire suppression in other buildings where vulnerable people are likely to be accommodated. Houses in Multiple Occupation, social housing in deprived areas, and sheltered housing/residential care homes are likely candidates for this work;*
 - iii. *Fire safety and sustainable buildings more broadly – considering, for example, any trade-off between the use of environmentally sustainable building materials and the risk and impact of fire.*
5. *The group was established at the beginning of the year, and has made good progress at its first two meetings. It is chaired by Cllr Mike Murphy, Chair of East Sussex Fire and Rescue Authority and includes representatives of the Children and Young People Board as well as the Safer Communities Board (Cllr Caroline Seymour, who is also the Deputy Chair of the group) and the Fire Services Management Committee.*

6. *Work is now well underway on the first stage. The task group's agreed objectives are designed to influence both central and local government. They are:*
 - *to promote the development of Local Education Authority policies for the inclusion of fire suppression systems in plans for all new build and major refurbishments of schools;*
 - *to persuade DfES to amend the funding criteria for the Building Schools for the Future programme to include a requirement for fire suppression systems to be included in the design;*
 - *to influence Local Authority Building Control Departments and Fire and Rescue Authorities to recommend the inclusion of fire suppression systems in plans for all new build and refurbished schools on which they are consulted;*
 - *to lobby CLG to include a requirement in Building Regulations for all new build and major school refurbishments to include fire suppression systems; and*
 - *to raise awareness of this issue with the general public and key stakeholders*
7. *A number of partners are already doing excellent work in this arena, and the task group has sought opportunities to build on this work to maximise the LGA's impact. A copy of the outline work programme is attached at appendix 1. Members may particularly wish to note the following pieces of work:*
 - *The task group is working with Elements, a PR firm engaged by the British Automatic Fire Suppression Association, to commission research on the broader socio-economic impact of school fires, to support a more rigorous analysis of the balance between costs and benefits of sprinkler installation. We hope that this work will get underway in April.*
 - *The LGA and Elements will also shortly be surveying local authorities to identify both good practice and the barriers – both real and perceived – to the installation of fire suppression systems in schools. The results of this survey should provide a sound basis to focus activity over the coming months*
8. *In addition, the task group will be seeking to take every opportunity to raise the profile of this issue with the broader public. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people are entirely unaware that sprinklers are not already mandatory in school buildings. When this knowledge is combined with an understanding of the number and frequency of school fires, the public pressure for action is likely to be considerable. An article highlighting the work of the task group has recently been provided to the Government and Public Sector Journal, and we will be building on this work in the coming weeks*
9. *Early indications are that the Department for Education and Skills are keen to respond positively to the calls for action. Members may recall that Jim Knight, currently Minister for Schools and 14-19 Learners, was a former sponsor MP of the National Fire Sprinkler Network. He has been invited to attend the meeting of the Central Local Partnership sub-group on fire and rescue, due to take place on 22 March, to discuss the issue of sprinklers in schools with lead fire members, and a meeting between the task group and DfES officials is scheduled for 19 March.*

10. *A Parliamentary seminar took place at the House of Commons on the 26 January 2007, entitled "Sustainable communities - the role for fire sprinklers in protecting both lives and assets". Speakers included the LGA's Chair of the Safer Communities Board, Cllr. Hazel Harding, and Jim Knight. During his speech the Minister announced that new schools or those which undergo a major refurbishment using public funds will now be required 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.*
11. *It will be important to be satisfied that the risk assessment tool is sufficiently robust, and reflects the full impact of school fires; and that it is used appropriately. The task group will be considering how the planned research on the socio-economic costs of school fires might be used to influence the future development of the tool; and will be seeking monitoring information from DfES on the impact of this tool on the provision of sprinklers in school buildings.*

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