

## LWF PROFESSIONAL BULLETIN

### **Fire Safety Management Bulletin (Issue 2)**

#### **Fire Safety Management – a Continuous Process**

There has been a tendency in the past toward reliance on the issue of a fire certificate by the local fire authority. This document once received often sat on the shelf and was rarely consulted. In a way we could describe the process as static although with the requirement to report changes to the conditions of the certificate to the fire authority, they may argue and quite rightly, that it was only static because some premises managers were unaware of requirements to notify under the Fire Precautions Act 1971 as amended. In any event the reporting and consultation process could be long winded with consequential risk exposure.

The Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations on the other hand have introduced the concept of 'risk management' to fire safety. This concept is intended as a cultural change to the working environment. The Regulations make it quite clear that the onus of responsibility for fire safety is with the person or persons who create the risk (the employer). So now fire safety and general health and safety are based on equal concepts of employer responsibility through the recognition of risks and hazards and the preparation of a plan to offset and deal with the identified defects.

One of the questions associated with fire safety that we are most frequently asked is "how often do I undertake my fire risk assessments?" The simple answer is that there is no definitive requirement in terms of frequency for re-inspection. Fire risk assessments are live documents. They are intended to reflect current risk and the requirement is therefore that any change in risk at any time should be evaluated through the risk management process and addressed. This is where the issue of 'safety culture' comes in. For an organisation to respond proactively to the issue of fire safety it needs to push awareness down through all levels of management such that consideration of risk becomes second nature to all who may influence or change risk parameters.

Now, instead of the fire certificate on the shelf, we have the continuous maintenance and management issue. This will affect some organisations more dramatically than others. All occupied buildings are dynamic, some more so than others. A building occupied by a single organisation is likely to be more manageable than multiple occupancy. Similarly, a standard office use is likely to be subject to less change than an industrial site etc.

We discussed in our first bulletin on this subject the need for a strategic approach to fire safety. Here you can see that to maintain responsibility down through an organisation, a clear statement of responsibility and delegated authority is essential. Having delegated responsibility it could be considered negligent if support were not given in the form of training and resources to meet the challenges faced. Any individual who is asked to take on the mantle of fire safety at any level would be quite right to refuse if the support at least in the form of training were not given.

Having delegated responsibility in an organisation, basic and appropriate fire safety standards need to be applied and used as a benchmark against which to measure on-going issues. This is the role of the fire risk assessment (FRA). If the FRA is produced in a 'user friendly' format it forms the central tool on which fire safety management can be based. The other advantage is that it should consider the whole of fire safety as an integrated process – passive, active and management fire precautions.

#### **Fire Safety Management in Practice**

Previously we have discussed fire precautions consisting of passive, active and management issues. Here we take the opportunity to look at typical occurrences under each topic in turn and what appropriate responses might be.

#### **Passive Fire Precautions**

Once the basic means of escape is defined, and the associated compartmentation strategy and formation of protected routes established, the Facilities Manager needs only to ensure on-going maintenance. This said, common causes for failure on this front relate to lack of communication between those planning and causing physical change within buildings and those charged with maintaining fire safety. The fire safety strategy should form an undeniable link between all persons within an organisation with the potential to initiate change and those with the responsibility to manage fire safety and risk. A procedure should be established that allows for updating and indeed, the inclusion of the fire risk assessment in the planning of any change or refurbishment. The integration of physical building works and the fire risk assessment process is important for two reasons. Firstly, the proposal is likely to impact on the final fire risk assessment and it will need to reflect changes and secondly, the construction or installation itself is likely to pose a risk to the building occupancy if staff and visitors are left in situ during the progress of the works. For example, if one floor or floor



area is being upgraded, what effect does the upheaval to this area have on the safety of those working adjacent to the space and those who would need to evacuate the building in an emergency using a route adjacent to the works?

Passive fire precautions are also affected by abuse of systems and installations, and general wear and tear. The most common building feature to suffer is the 'fire door'. Where this is installed on heavily trafficked routes the door itself may be subject to impact by trolleys or general wear to self-closing devices. Other common passive fire precautions defects include fire signage obstruction, breaches to fire walls in the form of building services routes and changes to building finishes and furnishings which in themselves may affect the fire risk for the area.

How are such physical issues managed? The most common method is the delegation of inspection duties to staff. The staff member undertakes regular inspections of the premises to identify any problems and then reports issues through a procedure that has priority and senior management support, with funding made available.

### Active Fire Precautions

The fire alarm system is often the most critical fire safety facility in a building. It is the means for raising the alarm and signalling evacuation, and if Automatic Fire Detection forms part of the system, the detection of fire is part of the process. Problems with the fire alarm system are often caused through a lack of understanding of system function. Regular testing on a weekly basis and beyond is the recommendation of the British Standard. This needs to be undertaken either in-house or the service bought in. The weekly, monthly and three monthly testing can be done with training in-house, but most organisations look to external service contracts to maintain systems beyond the normal visual and system activation testing.

It is here that the Facilities Manager faces another potential minefield. What maintenance and servicing contract is appropriate for the installed system? How do you tender for such a service and then how do you compare one price with another? It is almost certain that the various offers will contain options differing from each other. On what basis should a contract be let and under whose conditions? If under the contractor's conditions, do these disadvantage you the client and what recourse do you have? What is the life expectancy of the existing system? Is it worth on-going investment or might it be more cost effective to replace the existing with new? Once the contract is let, is it being properly executed, are you getting value for money, are the recommendations of the British Standard being met?

The same issues apply to some extent to the emergency lighting and fire suppression systems included as part of the fire safety package of a building. All of these systems must interact to be effective. The specification of one may have implications on the specification of another. Questions must be faced such as, is the specification for a new installation (fire alarm, emergency lighting, sprinkler

system etc.) what you need or what the supplier wants to sell you?

All or some of these issues may be relevant to you so how do you manage the active fire precautions in your building? When looking to install a new system it is recommended that you seek professional Consultancy advice to set a standard performance and materials specification. From this a tender package can be issued to appropriate contractors who can then bid on a level playing field with each other. The result gives a basis for direct financial comparison and ensures you get what you need, not what is required to make up the contractors quarterly sales quota.

When letting service and maintenance contracts it is advisable to follow a similar procedure to that for new installations. In the same way, you will be able to compare service with cost and judge value for money. What you spend on a consultant, should be saved in the short and longer term.

### Management Precautions

No matter how sophisticated the fire precautions and alarm systems are, if staff are not trained to react to its signal, all is wasted. As mentioned earlier, training forms the backbone of fire safety, from the safety culture message to response to alarm signals. All staff must be aware of their response requirement for their own safety and for the safety of others.

Fire certification maintenance (whilst duality of legislation applies to certain use buildings), fire systems log maintenance, staff training (management procedures and responsibilities / staff evacuation) corporate governance, strategic risk management, procedure writing and maintenance, liaison with local fire authorities, fire drills and response to issues raised by the fire drill process are all matters that contribute to the management of fire safety in buildings.

Fire safety management can be made more complicated by split responsibility in multiple let premises. In contrast to the fire certificate, which is the responsibility of the building occupier, or in the case of a leased building, the head lessee, the 'Workplace Regulations' and the fire risk assessment process are the responsibility of the employer. It then becomes apparent that a Landlord may have responsibility for fire risk in 'common parts' of the building but the tenanted demises remain the responsibility of the tenant. What a confused situation! In practice it has been our recommendation to premises portfolio managers to risk assess only those parts of the buildings for which they are responsible. To undertake an assessment of a tenant's area may by default place you in a responsible position if something should go wrong. Our recommendation is to advise tenants of their legal obligations and to insist on sight of their fire risk assessments. The Landlord's assessments should then include reference to the tenants in terms of completeness and apparent competency of their assessments, and a judgement made relating to contributory risk of the tenant's demise on the whole building occupancy.

Some multiple let building managers question the need to undertake fire risk assessments in the 'common parts'. Our response has always been to explain that the issues of safe passage from demises and safe working conditions for cleaners and workers on the common areas makes the assessment imperative. Further, the whole of the evacuation management of the building is usually triggered through common building systems (fire alarm) and therefore building evacuation is often managed by security staff or others employed by the Landlord.

Where does the Facilities Manager start with fire safety management? It is key that a clear strategy and fire safety policy is in place; that delegated responsibilities are made clear and that support and resources are made available. It is essential that a full audit trail is maintained of all systems and processes and that regular training and drills are practised.

### **What Options Exist in the Management of Fire Safety?**

The first and primary option is to self administer the fire safety system. The main advantage of this approach is the 'safety culture' promotion and consolidation within the organisation. Where it is the practice to 'out-source' non-core activities, a comprehensive service can be provided by external companies. Some providers are independent of any fire trade associations and can provide a truly impartial service. The service provider should look to form a partnership with the Client to maintain the 'culture' issues. The responsibility for fire safety in law cannot be passed onto the service provider; he can only help to administer your responsibilities.

When choosing the outsourcing route a decision may have to be made on whether it is prudent to go to an organisation that approaches the issue from the strategic management end of the service provision, or from the position of equipment supply specialist. Internal resource availability and cost will also have a bearing on decisions made in this respect. An option is always to approach a consulting engineer to set a service level agreement for the service provision which can then be issued for competitive pricing and benefit assessment.

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