PFPF article for *KBB Installer Magazine* June 2011

David Sugden, Chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation, on built-in fire protection and how to preserve it.

Built in fire protection? What's that got to do with me?

When installing kitchens, bathrooms and even bedrooms, most installers will be aware of fire safety. All kinds of electrical, heating, cooling and air extraction equipment must be installed to operate safely and meet the relevant regulations, and the installer has to leave the job safe and legal. Smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, exit signs and lights in commercial premises – they are all fire safety measures. But perhaps the most important aspect of fire safety is the one you can't see and may not even be aware of – passive, or built in fire protection (PFP). Whether you are working on public buildings – offices, local authority buildings, apartments, B&Bs, hotels - or domestic premises, you need to be aware of the built-in fire protection.

The basic principle of PFP is compartmentation which confines fire to its point of origin and stops the spread of smoke, heat and flames through the building. By the use of fire separating elements such as fire doors, seals, fire-resistant glass, partitions and ducting, fire is separated from people and property, escape routes are kept clear and the fire service can get in to fight the fire and get out safely.

"So what's that got to do with me? I'm an installer, not a builder!" True, and with a simple installation the subject doesn't arise. But as soon as a hole is made in a compartment that fire safety element is breached. Kitchens need steam and fume extraction ducts, bathrooms need extractor fans and pipe-work, bedrooms need lighting fixtures, they all need electric wiring. And all pipes, wires, ducts, new doors, and light fittings can provide a way for smoke, heat and flames to spread through a building and break out in seemingly unrelated areas. Make no mistake, it happens. At Lakanal House in Camberwell tragedy ensued when what should have been a small fire in one flat spread through the walls and stairwell and broke out several floors above where the fire started. Six people died and many more were injured. It turned out that the built-in fire protection had been compromised over the years - new heating,

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new electrics, holes drilled in the walls, doors replaced – all minor tasks at the time but all contributing to the breaches in compartmentation.

Smoke and fumes will penetrate the smallest opening and once they escape they can reappear in unexpected places seemingly far removed from the source. So it is vital that whenever your work penetrates a fire safety compartment you restore the barrier to its original level of protection. Or, put more simply, if you make a hole, fill it! But make sure you fill it with the right stuff – it's not enough to squirt in some D.I.Y foam and trust to luck. Is the foam fire retardant? Is it suitable for use *in that location with those materials*? Remember, what is labelled 'fire-resistant' is for use in certain conditions and situations – so the foam you use to fill the gap made by the new extractor fan might be fine in the bathroom but no good in the kitchen.

What's the legal situation?

There is no direct responsibility laid on the installer for fire safety – that is the function of the 'responsible person' nominated by the owner or occupier of the building. "So that's alright then, I can stop reading now….." Well, better not. The first prosecutions under the latest regulations (the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005) have handed down heavy fines and even prison sentences where blatant breaches have taken place. It seems to me only a matter of time before those who have been prosecuted start to ask awkward questions of the people who have worked on the building and look for compensation. It's always better to be confident your work is safe as well as sound. You might not have to face the law but your reputation will suffer if your customer starts a costly civil action.

But I'm not a fire safety expert…

You aren't expected to be an expert, but it does help to be aware of the basic principles, and to know where to turn for advice. The Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF) exists to raise awareness of built in fire safety and the current regulations. The website (www.pfpf.org) provides guidance on best practice written by experts in their field. All the associations in PFPF are committed to third party certification, so you can be sure the advice comes from genuinely expert and

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proficient fire safety specialists. The website also provides a very useful register of Third Party Certification schemes – invaluable when buying products which will form part of a fire safety compartment. Check that your product is certified by one of the listed schemes and you can be confident, if it's correctly installed, it will perform correctly under pressure. You may not be an expert, but, through the PFPF, you know a man who is.

END

843 Words

Caption

1: It's not enough to use any old filler

2: Fire can break out in unexpected places

3: Every penetration of fire safety compartment must be sealed correctly

4: Interior, burning building

5: David Sugden, Chairman of PFPF

Editors' notes: The PFPF (www.pfpf.org) is the body for the built-in fire protection industry, and is dedicated to growing awareness on fire protection, and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Membership includes the Chief Fire Officers Association, the DCLG, Local Authority Building Control and the Fire Test Study Group (UK) Ltd.

The PFPF Strategy Group includes members who were involved professionally in previous disasters such as the Summerlands Leisure Centre, Kings Cross, write for the trade and fire service media and recently appeared on television commenting on the Channel Tunnel fire and the tragic fire at Lakanal House. **For informed, unbiased and professional comment please contact Jane Evans at MRA Marketing on jane@521621.com who will put you in touch with the relevant person.**

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