PFPF article for *PH&P Installer October* 2011

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

Fire protection? Isn't that someone else's job?

Professional heating and plumbing installers are aware of fire safety. All those working with gas must be on the Gas Safe register and those who aren't are at least aware that heating and plumbing must be installed to operate safely and meet the relevant regulations, and the installer has to leave the job safe and legal. But there is more to it than ensuring the equipment you've installed isn't going to catch fire or leak combustible materials. Everyone is familiar with smoke alarms, fire extinguishers and sprinklers – they are all fire safety measures and have nothing to do with the average heating or plumbing installation. But what is very relevant to your work is perhaps the most important aspect of fire safety, one you can't easily 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 and of your responsibility for maintaining it.

Responsible? Who, me?

A major 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 glazing, partitions and ducting, fire is confined to a compartment, 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 sometimes the subject won't arise. But as soon as a hole is made in a compartment that fire safety element is breached, and the nature of pipe and duct work is that it makes holes. And all pipes, ducts and wires 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

started as a small fire in one flat spread through the building and broke out several floors above. Six people died and many more were injured. It is thought that a series of jobs carried out over the years - new heating, new electrics, holes drilled in the walls, doors replaced – had compromised the built-in fire protection.

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 shower 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', usually 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. The Fire Safety Enforcement Authority has the power to prosecute negligent contractors so it seems to me only a matter of time before awkward questions are asked of the people who have worked on the building. You already have to meet exacting safety standards, and have legal obligations to meet when working with gas. Maybe you won't have to face the law governing built-in fire protection, but you wouldn't want your work to be associated with a Lakanal House-type disaster.

But I'm not a fire safety expert…

You aren't expected to be an expert, but you must 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 (TPC), so you can be sure the advice comes from genuinely expert and proficient fire safety specialists.

You may not be an expert, but, through the PFPF, you know a man who is.

Third Party Certification Register

The PFPF website contains a register of Third Party Certification bodies. It lists all the relevant organisations licensed to provide an independent assessment of fire-safety products, services and installers.

Simply look for the category you are interested in and links to the relevant certification bodies are displayed. Follow the links to the scheme's website to find all relevant information including a list of accredited companies.

It's also useful if you are looking for accreditation yourself, so check it out – one of the listed certification bodies will be able to help you.

See www.pfpf.org

END

807 Words (main text)

97 Words (box)

Caption

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

2: Fire spreads unchecked

3: Aftermath of domestic fire

4: 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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