

Saving lives in care homes

TRADA Regulations Consultant
Rupert Scott discusses new guidance in Part B of the Building Regulations regarding fire safety for care homes



There was a tragic case of a fire in a care home in Buckinghamshire earlier this year, when an 87-year-old resident died in the blaze because the self-closing devices on more than half the fire doors in the home had been removed. A discarded cigarette was the cause, setting a chair alight in another resident's flat; an accident that has been all too common in the past.

While investigations into the fire are ongoing, it is telling to note the Coroner's comments at the inquest: "It's impossible to avoid the information about

the missing shutting devices. It's true that some can be very hard for elderly people to open, but for more than half in one block to be missing, it seems there was a problem."

It is more than likely that because heavy door closers are difficult for elderly people to manage, they may well be disengaged in other care homes and sheltered housing around the country. Yet this prevents fire doors fulfilling one of their main functions, to save lives.

The revised guidance in Part B, however, offers new, improved advice. It accepts that door closers are difficult to use day to day – and is

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able to make good use of new generation door closers which have advanced features, in particular 'free-swing', which are linked to the fire alarm and operate as a normal door at all times, except when the fire alarm is activated.

More good news is that the new design guidance is fairly short, concise and practical.

By their very definition, care homes accommodate people with special needs – the elderly, physically and mentally handicapped and children. Heavy door closers are an issue for all of them.

The new guidance centres on Progressive Horizontal Evacuation (PHE) as a principal which should be used for care homes for the elderly - and TRADA agrees with the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG)'s view, that other types of residential homes would do well to adopt it too. This technique does not require all the residents to be evacuated to the outside of the building, which can be difficult and distressing.

Instead, by providing enhanced fire compartmentation, it is possible to evacuate residents in the area of the fire to an adjoining protected area and, if necessary, to another area. Compartmentation includes specifying fire resistant ceilings/floors, walls and fire doors as an integral part of the design.

Other key features recommended for care homes are:

- Three protected areas on each storey
- Two exit routes for every protected area, with limits



Accidents caused by discarded cigarettes have been all too common.



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on travel distances

- Number of beds should be based on a risk assessment, which takes into account the number of staff available to assist with evacuation. There should never be more than 10 beds in any one protected area.

Guidance on how to achieve this is set out in Part B (pages 44 & 45). Please visit http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/uploads/br/BR_App_Doc_B_v2.pdf.

In addition, Regulation 16B now requires that fire safety information is given to a 'responsible person' on completion of the project. Also, in the 'Use of Guidance' section, designers are

encouraged to produce a fire risk assessment or fire safety management plan at initial Building Regulations submission stage. We believe that this is vital, since the overall design of the building is significantly affected by the plans for escape in the event of fire. It is, in our view, totally foolhardy to create a fire safety management plan after designing a building of this nature and risk.

On fire door closers, the guidance specifically recommends:

- Free-swing closers to bedroom doors and closers with hold-open devices for circulation spaces.
- If sprinkler systems are

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fitted throughout the bedrooms, then the fire doors need not have door closers fitted, but management systems must be in place to close all bedroom doors at night, when the risk is greatest.

Where fire is concerned building owners and managers cannot take risks with people's lives.

The new guidance makes sense and it would make sense to embrace it wholeheartedly.

For further information, visit www.trada.co.uk/standards, or for fire safety guidance, visit www.chilternfire.co.uk.

Full scale fire test included in Chiltern training days



Chiltern International Fire and sister company BM TRADA Certification will continue to include a full-scale fire door test in their popular 'Timber Fire Doors Explained' days in 2008. The dates set are: February 6, May 7, June 29, September 25 and November 20.

The 'explained days' are aimed at fire door manufacturers, installers, property managers, specifiers and Approved Inspectors. The course will cover glazed timber fire door construction and installation; how fire doors are tested, assessed and certified; how to install a fire door correctly; and the design and detailing issues which make the difference between pass and fail.

"Delegates appreciate that fire doors save lives as well as protecting property. It's essential that they are manufactured, specified, installed and inspected correctly in every circumstance," said organiser Emma Peters.

The courses will take place at Chiltern International Fire's Hughenden Valley test laboratory. The cost is £260 + VAT for TRADA members and £295 + VAT for non-members. To book telephone 01494 569620 or email training@chilternfire.co.uk. For further information on Chiltern Fire's services, telephone 01494 569800 or email: cif@chilternfire.co.uk.