

# A timely wake up call



Writing from personal experience, Wilf Butcher, Chief Executive Officer, Association for Specialist Fire Protection, highlights the significance of fit for purpose fire protection measures in hotels

**T**he sound of a distant alarm drifts into the conscious mind, and as you begin to recognise its not so dulcet tones, you realise that a new day is about to welcome you.

Your alarm (now at full volume) is telling you that it is 6.30am and time to start the day. The natural reaction of course, is to hit the snooze button and gain that all important extra five minutes. But as you gently fall back into slumber the alarm repeats its message all over again, only this time the volume appears almost deafening. A few seconds later the reality dawns; this is no wake-up call, it's a fire alarm and its message is a clear one! And

so it was that I recently found myself in a hotel in the North of England one bright and sunny morning.

For those of us who travel extensively for a living, the first thought to run through one's head is: where am I?

My next thought, perhaps for peace of mind, was that this was almost certainly going to be a false alarm, this having not been the first occasion I have had to vacate a hotel for the same reason! So, why rush?

The reason is simple. Having spent more than 30 years in the fire protection industry, I am only too aware of the reality of smoke and fire spread and just how those first few minutes in the early life of a fire are important in a

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real fire scenario to vacate the building. So common sense took charge and I very quickly dressed and vacated the room.

On my journey along the corridor to the stairs I was greeted by other hotel guests; some confused, some angry but no one unduly concerned.

All gathered at their hotel room doors debating with each other whether it was a false alarm and what they should do. In my most authoritative tone, I announced to all concerned that they should vacate the building straight away down the nearest fire exit stairs and not to use the lift.

To my bewilderment, each man, woman and child ceased debating the matter and in true Pied Piper of Hamelin fashion followed me down the stairs and out (via the clear direction of the hotel staff) to the muster point in the car park. The fire brigade was on the scene in a matter of minutes and the hotel set about the task of marrying names with hotel rooms.

As the minutes ticked by, people somewhat apathetically continued to appear in the car park and I began to ask myself the question; at what point might they have got into difficulties had this in fact been a real fire? 10 minutes? 20 minutes?

The Building Regulations are specifically designed to ensure that any fire protection measure installed in a building will ensure the safe evacuation of those within in a timely fashion. But what happens when, for whatever reason, people are physically unable or simply decide that there is





◀ no rush to leave the building? In the event of an actual fire the answer is all too clear. They run a real risk of becoming a victim.

It therefore falls upon the shoulders of all those responsible the design and construction of a building to ensure that the fire protective measures, products and systems installed are fit for purpose and those responsible for the onward maintenance of the building that all fire protective measures remain continuously fit for purpose .

In the case of many elements that go to make up the fire protective measures within a building, a false alarm can quite clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the measure involved, for example the automatic closure of a fire door. However, many fire protective measures cannot be tested by a false alarm – the fire stopping measures installed between adjacent compartments of the building, or the structural fire protection installed or applied to the buildings structural framework, are just two examples.

Such passive fire protective measures are absolutely essential to the control of a

fire, but no matter how many false alarms a building may be subjected to, it is only when there is an actual fire that the effectiveness of such fire protective measures can be determined.

Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, introduced October 2006, all hotels along with other business premises are required to carry out fire risk assessments to ensure that all their procedures are effective in the event of a fire and that the fabric of the building is adequately protected to ensure safe evacuation.

Within the lifetime of a building many changes can take place. Openings in compartment walls may be required to make way for new cabling, piping or ducting to pass through, walls moved and extensions added. In all of these cases, appropriate measures must be taken by those with the essential expertise to ensure that any existing passive fire protection measures are maintained and all new measures installed are in accord with the required regulations and standards.

In the case of many fire protection measures, there can be no practice runs. It has

**“IN THE CASE OF MANY FIRE PROTECTION MEASURES, THERE CAN BE NO PRACTICE RUNS. IT HAS TO BE RIGHT FIRST TIME, IRRESPECTIVE OF WHEN”**

to be right first time, irrespective of when. It therefore follows that all those involved in the design, construction and onward maintenance of a building must ensure:

- The products, systems and materials chosen do comply with the relevant standard and are appropriate to the situation at hand
- Such fire protective measures are applied or installed by third party certificated installation companies
- Any risk assessment takes account of all the fire protective measures within a building.

The ability, or willingness, of any individual to vacate a building in a timely fashion can never be guaranteed.

Statements such as “I must send this email, it’s important,” “I just need to finish this phone call,” “It’s bound to be a false alarm,” are not uncommon.

After all, for the majority of us, we see smoke and fire as something we view from a safe distance rather than becoming an unfortunate part of. It is only when placed in such catastrophic circumstances that the realisation of the potential seriousness of the situation focuses the mind and the need to vacate the building becomes paramount.

Sadly, since this timely wake up call, there have been a number of hotel fires resulting in the tragic loss of life. When it comes to real fires there is never a happy ending.

