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RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL SPRINKLERS

Issue

1. How to respond to the letter to Iain Wright and you from Bernadette Hartley of the National Fire Sprinkler Network and the EU Fire Sprinkler Forum, asking for separate meetings. The meeting with the National Fire Sprinkler Network will be to discuss: sprinklers, fire policy, sustainability issues and building regulations. The meeting with the EU Fire Sprinkler Forum will be to discuss the economic costs of fire to modern economies and the unnecessary damage inflicted on business and the workforce.

Recommendation

2. That you agree in principle to both meet the National Fire Sprinkler Network and the EU Fire Sprinkler Network in separate meetings. An acceptance letter is at Annex A.

Timing

3. Routine.

Background

4. The National Fire Sprinkler Network (NFSN) campaigns for the increase in the application of fire sprinkler technology. It was established in 1998 by Peter Holland (now CFO Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service), Tess Kingham (former MP for Gloucester), and Bernadette Hartley (a political researcher for Tess Kingham). The television presenter, Nick Ross, is also part of the Network and first proposed the concept of lower-cost sprinklers. We expect Mr Ross to attend this meeting.

5. Bernadette Hartley also has links with The European Fire Sprinkler Network (EFSN), a lobby group set up in 2002 to encourage the greater use of fire sprinklers and to argue the case that the use of sprinklers in the USA can be successfully repeated in Europe. Its members include European insurance companies, the British Automatic Sprinkler Association, CFOA and Merseyside FRS.

Background

6. The lobby for sprinklers in schools, new build properties and existing private rented sector and social housing, and hospitals is a long-standing one. However, the sprinkler situation is quite complex. For example:

- Dept for Children, Schools and Families has the policy lead for design standards in schools, including the installation of sprinklers in places of education;
- Sustainable Buildings are responsible for fire safety in new build;
- Housing Directorate has responsibility for fire safety in the existing private rented sector and social housing stock.
- Department of Health is responsible for fire safety for hospitals and health accommodation
- FRD is facilitating the development of a design specification for lower-cost systems.

7. The CLG policy view is that sprinklers have a role to play, particularly where their provision is targeted at buildings where the occupants are most at risk from fire. However, they are not a panacea and it is important they form part of a package of measures, both active (e.g. smoke alarms) and passive (fire resistant construction materials and compartmentation) and effective building management.

8. Our current regulatory approach on the provision of sprinkler protection in both domestic and non-domestic premises is a proportionate one, based on robust evidence and an assessment of the risk to life safety. We believe it remains open for property owners and developers, in conjunction with their insurers, to install sprinklers or other additional protective measures if they consider them to be an effective means to address fire risk.

Consideration

9. There is strong support for much greater use of sprinkler systems, particularly amongst the Fire and Rescue Services and insurance industry. In essence, the sprinkler lobby is looking to Government to regulate to require sprinklers in new build dwellings and in the private rented sector and local housing stock. We therefore need to maintain a dialogue with lobby groups such as NFSN and EFSN to help manage their expectations.

Building Regulations

10. Sustainable Buildings Division has just completed a major review of the fire safety aspects of the Building Regulations and Approved Document B (ADB). As part of the revision process, Buildings Division commissioned a research project with the Building Research Establishment (BRE) in 2001, to provide sufficient sound, objective information on the effectiveness of residential and domestic sprinkler systems. At the same time they also commissioned BRE to prepare a draft Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA). The work was completed in January 2004, having considered the risk of death and injury from fire in a range of residential and domestic premises and assessing the effectiveness of sprinklers developed in accordance with BS 9251 in reducing these risks. The research found that while sprinklers would appear to be effective in reducing casualties, overall they would not be cost effective from a life safety perspective in most types of dwellings, only those housing the most vulnerable. The revised Building Regulations ADB therefore came

into force on 6 April, with a requirement for sprinklers in residential care homes and tall blocks of flats over 30m, but not all new dwellings.

Lower-Cost Sprinklers

11. Our attention – and that of the sprinkler lobby – has since turned to the potential for the development of lower-cost sprinkler systems, costing around £500 per installation compared with BS 9251 compliant systems which cost on average between £2,500 and £4,000 to install (depending on size of property). So far the findings of the research on lower cost sprinklers are encouraging but there is a need to conduct more research to determine the robustness of the present design of the lower cost sprinkler system in a real housing environment. There are a number of issues to resolve associated with water pressure problems and water meters. CFA are leading on a pilot scheme to see how the sprinklers would work in practice and determine actual installation costs etc so that we can take this forward on a fully informed and robust evidential basis.

12. Even if lower cost sprinklers were to be fitted in all dwellings subject to the Building Regulations (i.e. new and materially altered properties), this would only impact on less than 1% of the building stock each year. Furthermore, evidence shows that the majority of the fire deaths each year (approx 350 p.a. in England and Wales, of which approximately 170 occur in dwellings a lower-cost system would be suitable for) are in existing buildings and are often influenced by socio-economic factors. While sprinkler systems would reduce this number, they would not prevent all of these fire deaths.

Private rented sector and social housing

13. There have also been calls for the retro-fitting of sprinkler systems in existing private rented sector and social housing. This could be extremely costly and we believe that Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) would press CLG for funding. Even the lower-cost systems would be prohibitively expensive. For example, there are over 2000 RSLs in England, owning or managing over 2 million homes – at £500 per lower-cost installation, the cost would be in the region of £1 billion.

14. RSLs are already carrying out improvements to meet the decent home standard. However, with the introduction of the Home Health Safety Rating System (HHSRS), this means they will now start to consider whether their stock is free of serious hazards, including fire hazards. RSLs therefore now have the scope to consider the introduction of sprinklers in their stock.

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