

## Access crisis deepens fire alarm

Large sections of kitchen extract ductwork are a health and fire risk because they are never properly cleaned, says **Gary Nicholls\***.

Kitchen extract systems are becoming a growing source of concern for insurance companies and fire safety officers. Far too many of these systems cannot be properly cleaned because cleaning access is not sufficient. This increases the chances of fire breaking out and puts insurance cover at risk.

Only about five per cent of the extract systems fitted in the past 10 years have had adequate access doors installed prior to cleaning. It is a safe bet that if adequate cleaning access has not been provided, or in many cases proves impossible due to building fabric obstructions, the system has never been properly cleaned.

However, many clients will be in the dark about this. In fact, many who think their maintenance contractors are cleaning their systems are in for a shock. If they don't have proper evidence that a comprehensive clean has taken place, their insurance company may well not pay out in the event of a fire because having the system cleaned regularly is usually a condition stated in their policies.

And this is not an historic problem as our surveyors are regularly coming across new kitchen extract systems that do not include a sufficient number of cleaning access doors.

According to the industry's main guidance on the topic – *TR/19 Guide to Good Practice* produced by the Heating and Ventilating Contractors' Association (HVCA) – access doors should be fitted at least every three metres along a run of ductwork to ensure hygiene firms can reach each part of the system. However, in the vast majority of cases this basic rule is being ignored, either due to lack of awareness or in order to save money at installation.

Kitchen extract systems in heavy use i.e. 12 to 16 hours a day as in commercial kitchens should be thoroughly cleaned every three months. Medium use systems – 6 to 12 hours per day – should be cleaned every six months and lighter use – 2 to 6 hours – once a year.

The new fire regulations [Regulatory Reform (fire safety) Order 2005] put a heavy responsibility on landlords and managing agents to ensure risk assessments are carried out in their buildings. Failure to do so could lead to hefty fines and possible prison sentences.

They must identify potential ignition sources and take action to minimise the risk. Grease extract ductwork can be a source of fire as well as a route for the fire to spread. Despite the current economic climate, these duties will not go away and people must not be tempted into cutting corners to save money. The eventual price could be much higher if there is a fire.

Also fitting access doors retrospectively once the system is in operation is far more expensive and disruptive to the building users.

A lot of the access problems are created at design stage, which should be covered by the CDM regulations. However, too often these seem not to have been enforced. And, it appears, we are not learning from our mistakes. There have been a number of high profile incidents in recent years that have highlighted the problems. For example, the fire at the Heathrow Airport Burger King restaurant, which caused an entire terminal building to be evacuated, has led to a long-running legal dispute. Its extract system had been cleaned two days before the fire, but the main riser was not accessible due to a decorative addition.

Apart from the perennial problem of a lack of access doors, another regular problem is the doors being placed too far apart and ductwork being installed in solid ceiling voids so that maintenance staff cannot reach them. We also find that ductwork is regularly placed close to combustible materials, rather than being isolated from the main fabric of the building, so increasing the chances of them catching fire.

Often cooker hoods and other visible parts of the system are gleaming and clearly these are regularly cleaned, but the hidden parts of the system contain all sorts of out-of-sight-out-of-mind horrors. Fans and flow control dampers inside the system are covered in grease so are not able to function properly and attenuators cease to tackle noise effectively because they are so clogged.

End users need to take urgent steps to protect the building occupants and to cover themselves legally. A good start is to make sure there is some sort of schematic in place so the hygiene contractor can assess how to gain access to the system and whether specialist access equipment will be needed.

If not subjected to a regular cleaning regime, systems must be inspected at least annually and the filters cleaned every week. It is important that building operators understand the terms of their buildings insurance in relation to kitchen grease extract system cleaning/inspection and that they adhere to these requirements. If the building operator has no proof that this has been done, then they could effectively be uninsured and liable in the

event of a fire. Consequential losses can be crippling and in a number of cases businesses have gone to the wall as a result.

Fire safety officers are not going to accept the current economic situation as an excuse for not going the right things and minimising the risks.

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