

Fire brigade sounds the alarm on RRO

by Ewen Rose

Many small businesses remain unaware of their responsibilities for fire safety, despite the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order (RRO) in 2006.

The London Fire Brigade said there were 166 fires in restaurants, including cafes and takeaways, in the capital during 2007-8.

Cooking appliances are a regular ignition source, with fire often spreading rapidly through uncleaned ductwork. Spencer Sutcliff, the brigade's fire safety inspecting officer, explained. He urged owners and operators of such premises to become aware of the Fire Safety Order; undertake the mandatory risk assessment, act upon its findings and establish an emergency plan.

"The risk assessment should cover any ductwork in the premises, the need for it to be maintained and cleaned on a regular basis and also look at whether it may contribute to the spread of fire," said Mr Sutcliff.



There were 166 fires in cafes and restaurants in London last year

Ventilation hygiene companies report increased demand for their services but many remain concerned at ignorance among building owners about the need for on-going ductwork maintenance.

"Catering facilities in all types of premises are a real worry," said Richard Norman, deputy chairman of the HVCA's Ventilation Hygiene Group. "It is estimated that over 80 per cent of kitchen extract ducts in the UK are never cleaned and are, therefore, in a hazardous state."

Almost a quarter of the 24,000 accidental fires in non-domestic buildings each year are attributed to cooking appliances, said Mr Norman.

He added: "Cleaning of the grease extract system is often overlooked because it runs behind false ceilings or walls in areas that no one feels responsible for."

Fire inspectors said larger national companies and major restaurant chains were more aware of their RRO responsibilities and were better at carrying out risk assessments. But where there is poor compliance, it is largely due to lack of awareness rather than disinterest on the part of building operators.

Under the RRO, every building must have a designated 'responsible person' who undertakes to ensure the risk assessment is carried out

and relevant safety precautions taken. But fire inspectors often find that this person is not in place.

"In our experience some people tend not to understand the concept of the term 'responsible person'," said Mr Sutcliff. "They think the responsibility is something they can delegate to others without fully understanding the legal implications."

Many companies are also risking their insurance cover by not complying with the regulations, according to Gary Nicholls of hygiene specialists Swiftclean.

"Many building managers do seem to have recognised the RRO, but have not made the connection with kitchen extract cleaning," he said. "They are taking steps, but not necessarily in the areas of greatest hazard."

Mr Nicholls, who has carried out expert witness work in the aftermath of serious fires, said many building owners did not realise they were effectively uninsured.