



Catering for safety

Gary Nicholls highlights the need for commercial catering facilities – including restaurants and cafés – to assess and manage the potential risks from kitchen extract systems

FIRE INSPECTORS are reporting that, although the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order was introduced in England and Wales in late 2006, many small independent businesses still appear to be unaware of their responsibilities regarding fire safety. Inspectors have found that it is the larger national companies – including major restaurant chains – which are more aware of the duties the Order places on building owners and operators, and are better at carrying out fire risk assessments.

Where poor compliance exists, it is largely due to a lack of awareness and understanding, rather than a lack of interest on the part of building operators. Yet, in theory, awareness of the Order and its requirements ought to be improving. It is generally considered that the legislation was better advertised by the Government than previous fire safety laws, and some fire authorities have held seminars to help educate and inform businesses.

Kitchen concerns

One particular area of concern is commercial catering facilities, such as cafés and takeaway food shops. London Fire Brigade's fire safety inspecting officer, Spencer Sutcliff, explained: 'Catering facilities attract a degree of priority

within our audit programme because they have ignition sources, flammable materials, members of the public on the premises, and often sleeping accommodation above them, which in combination can increase the life safety risk.'

According to the Brigade, 166 fires occurred in the capital's restaurants (including cafés and takeaways) during the 2007-08 financial year, and the sources of ignition in the vast majority of these cases were cooking appliances in commercial kitchen areas. In particular, extract installations in kitchens can be a source of high fire risk, if grease and other residue are allowed to build up within them. However, this risk can be managed by regular maintenance and cleaning of such installations and ducting.

Similarly, the Heating and Ventilation Contractors' Association (HVCA) has reported that almost a quarter of the 24,000 accidental fires in non-domestic buildings in the UK each year are attributed to cooking appliances.

Ventilation hygiene companies are experiencing increased demand for their services, but many are disturbed at the level of ignorance among building owners about the need for proper planning and continuing maintenance of kitchen extract systems and ventilation ductwork.