

The HVCA estimates that over 80% of kitchen extract ducts in the UK are never cleaned, and are therefore in a hazardous state. A number of fires at high profile venues in London, such as the River Café, the Hard Rock Café and Heathrow Airport, have been traced back to grease extract ducts.

Extract systems

Kitchen extract ventilation systems draw grease-laden air through the cooker hood directly from the areas above cookers, grills and fryers, and discharge it to the atmosphere. While the filters typically found above the fryers are designed to trap grease particles, they can never be 100% efficient, and a significant number of particles pass into the extract system. However, if the extract ducts are not properly cleaned, the grease deposits can form a potentially flammable coating on the inside of the canopy/extract plenum, in the ductwork and on the fan blades. This coating could be ignited by a small flash fire on or in the fryer, hob or grill, leading to a larger fire that could endanger lives and cause damage.

‘The cleaning of the grease extract system is frequently overlooked, often because it runs behind false ceilings or walls, and therefore tends to be in areas that no one feels responsible for – but the Fire Safety Order should be changing that,’ explained the deputy chairman of the HVCA’s Ventilation Hygiene Group, Richard Norman. ‘Grease can build up to a dangerous level inside the ventilation ductwork behind cooker hoods, which might appear outwardly clean. If a fire starts on a cooker or in a deep fat fryer, it can spread very quickly through grease-laden ducts.’

The HVCA has produced *Guide to Good Practice: Internal Cleanliness of Ventilation Systems* (TR/19), which provides comprehensive information about the cleaning of grease extract systems, and how to set up a planned hygiene maintenance programme to reduce the risk of fire.

Risk assessment

Under the Fire Safety Order, virtually all commercial premises must now have a designated ‘responsible person’, who undertakes to ensure that a risk assessment is carried out and relevant safety precautions taken. However, fire inspectors often find that this person is not in place, due more to a lack of understanding than interest.

The term ‘responsible person’ is not always clearly understood – for instance, some people think that they can delegate to others, without fully understanding the legal implications. In addition, more than one person can be responsible for fire safety under the Order, which often has to be explained before roles and responsibilities are fully understood.

All owners and operators of premises are urged to familiarise themselves with the Order and undertake a (now mandatory) fire safety risk assessment. They should then act upon its findings and put an emergency plan in place. The risk assessment should, among other things, cover any ductwork



Grease in a kitchen extract system caused a fire at these premises

in the premises, the need for it to be maintained and cleaned on a regular basis, and also look at whether it could potentially contribute to the spread of fire.

Insurance implications

Furthermore, companies are risking their insurance cover by not complying. Many building managers appear to recognise the Order, but without making the connection to kitchen extract cleaning. So, although they are taking steps, these are not necessarily in the areas of greatest hazard.

‘Expert witness’ work carried out in the aftermath of building fires has revealed that many building owners fail to realise that they are effectively uninsured. Most insurance firms insert conditions or warranties into their policies which means that, if the ductwork has not been adequately cleaned, they will not pay out in the event of fire.

The cost of having a full risk assessment carried out, followed by remedial work and then an annual or six-monthly clean and/or inspection, is minimal compared to the potential cost of a fire. Apart from the risk to life and property, for companies that fail to comply, there could also be penalties under the Fire Safety Order or even the new Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007 ■

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More information about ventilation system hygiene and sources of technical advice – including the Guide to Good Practice: Internal Cleanliness of Ventilation Systems – are available from: www.hvca.org.uk

The Government guide, Fire Safety Risk Assessment in Small and Medium Places of Assembly, produced to help building owners and operators comply with the Fire Safety Order, is available free from: www.firesafetyguides.co.uk