

IFSA RESPONSE TO LAKANAL INQUEST

The members and the staff of the Secretariat of the Intumescent Fire Seals Association (IFSA) wish to put on record their sympathy and condolences in respect of the victims and their families that perished in the Lakanal House fire on 3 July 2009. The fire and the subsequent Inquest which finished on the Thursday before Easter (2013), identified the vulnerability of all of us to the effects of a fire, but it is even more poignant when it occurs in the home environment where we have the right to feel fairly impregnable to external influences.

When it comes to deaths in any disaster, there are many factors that come into play and rarely can any particular factor be identified as the cause of injury or death.

However, in the narrative accompanying the Coroner's report on a number of the victims, two of the four points specifically referred to were.....

(b) there were no fire seals on the front door of the flat [in which they died], and

(c) there was a lack of firestopping on internal pipework from previous renovations

IFSA has striven for over 30 years to promote the life safety benefits of fire door seals (both for fire and smoke containment) and properly designed and installed service penetration and linear gap seals. The Association has recorded some successes in this area as there is definitely a growth in the installation of fire door seals and penetration seals in modern buildings.

It has undoubtedly been more challenging to implement this enhanced technology in existing building stock, both commercial and domestic. Unfortunately, the 1971 Fire Precautions Act actively frustrated the upgrading of existing building stock by stating that if a product was suitable for purpose when it was originally installed, it continued to perform that function in perpetuity, regardless of any increase in knowledge and/or the development of new, safer, technologies.

Intumescent sealing products, which revolutionised the effectiveness of fire doors and our ability to seal up holes provided for services, did not come into common use until the late 1970's, hence, their benefits were denied to those refurbishing buildings after 1971 and, indeed, right up to 2006. At this time, the Fire Precautions Act was repealed in favour of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order which required all buildings (except private dwelling houses) to be subject to a bespoke fire risk assessment by a competent person. Such a fire risk assessment has no product exclusions and it is up to the competent person to decide whether a building remained safe for the occupants without the adoption of modern improved fire sealing products.

IFSA realised that in a construction industry not familiar with the installation of these 'new' technologies, a fire risk assessor required help in assessing what the fire risk was, if fire door seals or intumescent based service penetration seals were not upgraded. The Association commissioned and published guidance for use by fire risk assessors to enable them to reduce the risk to life safety of inadequately sealed fire doors and apertures within buildings. These are available for free download on the IFSA website (www.ifsa.org.uk) under the Good Practice Guides:

- Guidance in Respect of the Use of Intumescent Door Seals
- Guidance in Respect of the Use of Intumescent Penetration Seals
- Guidance in Respect of the Use of Intumescent Glazing Seals in Timber Doors and Screens

Unfortunately, without the power of legislation, IFSA cannot enforce the adoption of the recommendations contained within these documents and patently the information did not reach the eyes or ears of those responsible for the fire that resulted in this particular tragedy. Hopefully, however, the public reactions to the Lakanal disaster will mean that residents in other dwellings may now benefit from the recommendations that IFSA has made in these guides.

Fortunately, the IFSA recommendations are not expensive to adopt and are generally simple to install, unlike fire suppression systems and so significant improvements in fire containment and its associated life safety benefits can be achieved quickly and in a cost effective manner.

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