



Make your move

Wilf Butcher outlines a new national training programme that aims to improve standards of passive fire protection specification, inspection and installation within the construction sector

WE LIVE in a world of acronyms, buzzwords and text speak, which is great if you know what they mean, but really quite annoying if you don't, often resulting in them being ignored or disregarded. Much of the time not knowing is arguably unimportant, although it can prove awkward if you use a term without fully understanding its true meaning.

Within the fire sector world, one of the most common buzzwords you are likely to hear now is the word 'competency' or a derivative of it. The dictionary offers a range of explanations to define the meaning of competency, for example:

- skills or knowledge that lead to superior performance
- the characteristics of a manager that lead to the demonstration

- of skills and abilities, which result in effective performance within an organisational area
- sufficiency of knowledge and skills that enable someone to act in a wide variety of situations
- capacity to testify in a court of law

Cradle to grave process

In relation to fire, the last of these definitions is the more sobering, as without doubt the penalty for proven 'incompetence' can be very severe. One only has to be aware of the number of severe fines and indeed custodial sentences brought about through incompetent fire risk assessments under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 [FSO], to understand the importance

of competency in achieving a given objective.

As regards fire safety within the built environment, competency is not something that can be readily purchased. In reality, it can only be assured by a combination of education, training and experience. The process starts with the design concept and progresses through specification, the main contractor tendering process, installation, inspection and finally onward management for the life of a building.

In other words, fire protection is a cradle to grave process that is specified, installed and managed by many different professions, all of whom should have, in varying degrees, an appropriate knowledge and understanding of the functionality of the fire protection measure installed and its surrounding structure.

Improving competency

Over the last 20 years, the Association for Specialist Fire Protection (ASFP) has promoted both product and installer third party certification as a vital means of demonstrating competency in the quality of product selection and the installation of appropriate fire protection systems.

Third party certification can only be awarded via a certification body, which in turn is accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS), and in so doing can demonstrate:

- supporting evidence of the quality of the product or service for the architect, specifier, contractor, building control authority, end user, responsible person and any other stakeholders
- assurance of the quality of the product or service independently of the supplier

Third party certification is encouraged by authorities such as the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Scottish government, Local Authority Building Control, the fire services and many other key bodies, and is encouraged by all fire protection trade associations. In fact, it is mandatory for all ASFP contracting members to hold and maintain third party certification.

While a third party certification approach is now widespread within the 'specialist installer' sector of the fire community, the ASFP has long been aware that a considerable element of the workforce currently installing passive fire protection is doing so as a secondary activity, which may be outside of its core construction competencies. These contractors therefore cannot be considered as specialist operators. As a result, there is an identifiable underskilling of essential elements of the construction industry workforce, all of which would benefit from having an appropriate understanding of passive fire protection.



Just over a decade ago, the ASFP participated in a joint Partners in Innovation (Pii) project with DCLG to investigate the standards of passive fire protection within the built environment. This project uncovered post-construction issues with fire compartmentation, demonstrating that a significant number of buildings surveyed had defects, rendering them not fit for purpose. The project identified the need to improve the overall capability of the installation process to meet the required standards in order to comply with the current Building Regulations.

ASFP's subsequent educational activities, including comprehensive technical guidance documentation, seminars and CPD awareness training, have led to a significant improvement in awareness. However, it is clear that much more needs to be done, in particular given that the methodologies for the design and construction of new buildings is rapidly changing, which only serves to highlight the importance of correctly specified and installed passive fire protection measures.

Industry wide training

The ASFP has now taken the next important step. Working in partnership with the Fire Protection Association (FPA) and part funded by the Construction

Industry Training Board (CITB), the ASFP has now developed an industry wide training scheme that encapsulates in one syllabus the necessary awareness training to help improve capabilities during the installation process. This comprehensive awareness training programme is offered in two parts:

Core module

A two-day core module introduces attendees to essential fire safety concepts, explaining the need for a holistic approach to fire safety in which all types of fire protection systems – both passive and active – have a role to play. This module:

- outlines the legal, standard and other code-driven requirements for passive fire protection installations
- identifies the role of passive protection to ensure the safety of buildings and their occupants
- develops an understanding of the responsibilities of those involved in the process including the designer, specifier, distributor, installer and end user
- presents some of the common problems and issues caused by building alterations and potential solutions
- explains the principles of fire science and the role of fire engineering



Pathway modules

For those wishing to progress their understanding of the passive fire protection process in more detail, the ASFP and FPA have developed a number of specific pathway modules in each of the passive fire protection disciplines. These include one-day pathway modules covering:

- fire stopping
- structural steel protection
- fire doors
- partitions, floors and ceilings
- fire resisting ducts and dampers
- fire resisting glazing

Each of the above modules combines both theoretical and practical application to reinforce the required awareness for the installation of passive fire protection, and can act as a springboard to assist in the process of onward development to an NVQ in passive fire protection.

A wider audience

This new training scheme has been designed to significantly improve overall standards of passive fire protection specification, inspection and installation within the construction sector. In the process, it will enable an upskilling of the existing workforce by creating a recognised and measurable industry benchmark.

The programme offers an appropriate solution for training within the following occupational groups across the sector:

Specialist contractors

Upskilling new entrants, that is those persons who have no experience of the sector and who are employed by fire protection installation specialist companies, as a platform to go on to gain qualification at NVQ Level 2 in passive fire protection.

Allied trades/supply chain

It is evident that there are a number of trades within the construction community that, while not directly involved in the passive fire protection process, nonetheless maintain a workforce that on occasion will advise on or undertake such work. These include, but are not limited to:

- allied specialist trades such as joiners, dry liners and electricians, or those that may need to interface with fire protection systems and therefore require some form of short duration awareness training
- those involved in the distribution supply chain process, eg building supplier sales personnel who regularly advise on the appropriate

use of such materials and systems, particularly those who supply directly to the allied trades

Other groups

Further analysis of the passive fire protection sector has identified a number of other groups that should be better advised and trained in appropriate passive fire protection awareness. They include, but are not limited to: site supervisors; inspectors of fire systems, eg the fire services; approved inspectors and building control officers; and fire risk assessors.

It is essential that adequate knowledge is communicated throughout the industry to ensure necessary upskilling of the existing workforce, and to reach those within the process who are not familiar with passive fire protection practice, to enable them to achieve a minimum level of competency.

Competency as it applies to fire safety is not a buzzword to be lightly ignored, since the penalty for proven incompetence can be very severe and could ultimately result in heavy fines, a custodial sentence or at worst loss of life.

The ASFP's Passive Fire Protection Awareness Training Programme is a first step in an important process, which aims to raise levels of competency throughout the construction sector and improve standards of passive fire protection specification, inspection and installation. Ignore it at your peril ■

Wilf Butcher is chief executive officer of the Association for Specialist Fire Protection. For more information, view page 5

Further information on ASFP training, seminars and technical guidance is available at www.asfp.org.uk. To book a place on the core module, please visit www.thefpa.co.uk/training/training-courses_detail.introduction-to-passive-fire-protection.html