

With so many competing demands on property managers, the challenge of continuing to focus on maintaining, and where needed, enhancing fire safety arrangements is ever increasing. Adding to these existing challenges is the introduction of new fire safety legislation starting this year.

To help maintain focus, it is worth reminding ourselves that a little over a year ago there was a significant fire at The Cube student accommodation block linked to the University of Bolton, where a significant fire broke out which saw 200 firefighters and 40 fire engines tackling the fire. Thankfully all occupants were safely evacuated.



The Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) subsequently published their Incident Report and describes how the fire rapidly tore through the building's high-pressure laminate (HPL) cladding and spread through the roof, with flaming debris falling to the ground and starting further ignition points all around the perimeter.

The GMFRS report covers in detail the impact of the flammable cladding on the severity of the fire, in a sadly familiar echo of Grenfell.

It's intense and unpredictable nature is described, with the conclusion that the building failed to perform adequately under fire conditions. The report finds that the fire was most likely started by a cigarette discarded on a balcony. That a simple cigarette butt can ignite a fire of this scale and intensity is a horrifying thought, but it's a scene repeated many times the length and breadth of the UK.

New Fire Safety Legislation

This year will see the introduction of amended fire safety legislation. The Fire Safety Bill will amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (RRO) and is expected to result in greater clarity over the responsibility for fire safety in buildings containing more than one home.

Following the Grenfell Fire in 2017, the Government has taken a number of steps around fire safety, and this Bill forms part of that response. It is part of a series of changes by the Government to both fire safety and building safety more generally, with further primary and secondary legislation to follow.

The RRO consolidated a number of different pieces of fire legislation and applies to all non-domestic premises, including communal areas of residential buildings with multiple homes. It designates those in control of premises as the responsible person for fire safety and they have a duty to undertake assessments and manage risks.

The Fire Safety Bill clarifies that for any building containing two or more sets of domestic premises the RRO applies to the building's structure and external walls and any common parts, including the front doors of residential parts. It also clarifies that external walls in the order include "doors or windows in those walls" and "anything attached to the exterior of those walls (including balconies)." These amendments are expected to provide for increased enforcement action in these areas, particularly where remediation of aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding is not taking place.

The Fire Safety Bill extends and applies to England and Wales with separate fire safety legislation in place in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

It is also important to be aware of the Draft Building Safety Bill which, although is not anticipated to become law until 2022/23, will also have a significant impact on how high-rise buildings are managed in future.

Preparing for these new requirements

From what we already know, it is clear that the introduction of these two Bills will require a significantly greater amount of compliance documentation to be made readily available digitally, in relation to high rise buildings. Property owners and managers should therefore be planning ahead and reviewing how they intend to ensure they hold their compliance documentation in a centralised, readily accessible and auditable format.

Meridian, William Martin Compliance's market leading health and safety management platform, which, as a result of these new requirements, is being further developed to support those responsible for managing fire safety arrangements across all types of property.

Our fire safety module within Meridian will support property managers to demonstrate compliance with current and future fire safety legislation through the ability to digitally host, track, share and manage specific high rise building document sets.

Furthermore, William Martin Compliance is also able to support property managers in complying with all their fire safety compliance requirements via a suite of fire related services including:

- fire risk assessments
- fire strategies
- external facade inspections
- compartmentation inspections
- fire engineering consultancy
- fire safety training

For more information, please visit www.wmcompliance.co.uk



A need for change

In starting 2021 with a renewed focus on fire safety management, it is sometimes helpful to remind ourselves of previous events, as historically there is a tendency for the immediate impact of these events to be less felt over time. Inevitably, in time, people forget the principal drivers for amending legislation and instead see changes as sometimes presenting unreasonable burdens on businesses.

The new fire legislation being introduced this year, and in future years, appears to be placing reasonable and pragmatic demands on those responsible for maintaining fire safety standards across high-rise residential buildings. These must be considered as essential changes, necessary to reduce the risk and prevent further major fire safety disasters. All of us should continue to constructively challenge anyone who may take an alternative view.

Phil Jones CMIOSH
Technical Director
phil.jones@wmcompliance.co.uk