Avoiding Fire Hazards

One of the first things that you will do when you purchase a home or a business is take out an insurance policy. Whist nobody wants to waste money, there is always the hope that the insurance premiums paid are 'dead money' i.e. nobody wants to make a claim because nobody want to suffer loss.

In the world of food and drink, the businesses that operate in the market, have a very different set of criteria in terms of what they need from their insurers. One of the things that they invest heavily in is cover for fire damage. They pay a premium for this as fires are far more likely to occur in a food business than in the home.

Fires within a food business can be devastating. They can result in closure, injury and even death and can affect both the reputation of a business and the ability to operate. It is for this reason that avoiding workplace fires and spotting the hazards are very important.

With all this in mind we decided that we would speak to some of the leading authorities on fire safety both for the industry and for foodservice operators.

On the panel this month we have:
Doug Agnew – Abbot Fire Group
Stephen Adams - BAFE
Keith Sillitoe - British Safety Council
Ian Bartle – Nobel Fire Systems

Why is a full fire assessment essential for any business?

Undertaking a full fire assessment is essential for any business and there are a number of legal commitments that operators must conform. In a bid to protect their business, reputation and the safety of staff and customers conforming to regulations is a must. Speaking to QuickBite our panel all agreed that fire safety issues must not be ignored. Keith Sillitoe from the British Safety Council told us that The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 is now a statutory requirement for all places of work. He also added that fire risk assessment is the recommended methodology for compliance. It offers the effective control of fire risks and can ensure the safety of all building occupants.

Highlighting the legal angle of implementing a fire assessment, Doug Agnew said: "Fire risk assessments are a legal obligation, this is required as part of fire safety legislation under the regulatory reform (fire safety) order.

"It's a requirement for all premises which have five or more employees to have a fire risk assessment carried out. A risk assessment identifies if current fire precautions are adequate and highlights any areas which might be missing or are not covered by suitable fire precautions.

"The key to this is finding a competent risk assessor, not just based on qualifications, experience is key."

Keeping staff safe is just one of the priorities for a business and making sure you are covered for all individuals no matter how brief their visit is essential. Stephen Adams backed this point up saying: "A fire risk assessment is the vital first step in ensuring you have produced a quality fire safety policy for any non-domestic premises.

"It is mandatory by law and ensures all eventualities for the use of the building have been looked at to protect the building, staff, visitors and its contents from fire. The key next step is to ensure that it is kept up to date!" Nobel Fire who look after the installation and maintenance of fire suppression systems constantly promote the need for a better understanding of the damage that can occur if you ignore the assessment process. Ian Bartle spoke honestly about the importance of an assessment and safeguarding your business when he said: "In simple terms, fire kills and can put businesses out of business!

"A good, professionally carried out Fire Risk Assessment is essential and will do far more than just identify potential fire hazards and resolve safe exit routes for people within the building.

"Done correctly it will identify those things that could put your entire operation at risk, or even wipe out your business completely. In essence a Fire Risk Assessment will identify the fire hazards, identify the people at risk and evaluate,

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reduce or remove the risks. Recording, reviewing and updating the assessment then helps 'manage' the risks going forward."

What are the main dangers when it comes to fire safety?

Many of the dangers surrounding fires and the causes of them are easy to spot, the hidden dangers are the real problem in the industry. Too often businesses ignore simple little things yet the impact they can have are enormous.

Keith Sillitoe highlighted the current top fire risks as:
-Arson
-Cooking Appliances left on and unattended
-Overloading of electrical circuits
-Poor control of hot cutting and welding equipment
-Poor storage arrangements for combustibles i.e. shredded paper and wood dust in close proximity to ignition sources.

Whist some of these things are unavoidable, it is not the actual fire that is the sole purpose of assessments. Should an accidental or deliberate (arson) fire ignite it is important that you have the correct systems and equipment in place to stop the spread and limit the damage. Stephen Adams supported this by saying: "The main dangers of fire in a non-domestic property is having an insufficient fire safety policy and poor systems in place.

"In the event of fire if you do not have the correct precautions in place the end result could be fatal. You have a duty to protect customers, staff and premises and fire losses are often far greater than just the immediate damage, with consequential loss of business and reputation."

In terms of the foodservice side of the market, Ian Bartle told us that first of all there has to be an acceptance that in any commercial kitchen the danger of fire is a real and ever present danger. Naked flames, gas lines, cooking fats, the build-up of grease in ventilation ducts and of course the catering equipment itself such as fryers, griddles and ranges can all

cause workplace fire.

He added: "A big danger is that food businesses ignore the question of fire safety on their premises leading to the disasters we hear about far too often. "So my advice is to always speak to an industry expert, get them to carry out a complete fire safety evaluation and then act on the advice given. Don't just leave things to chance, the biggest danger is complacency."

Of course all of the aforementioned components are the cause of workplace fires but there has to be a certain amount accountability by the staff and owners. Doug Agnew highlighted this saying: "The main dangers when it comes to fire safety tend to be human orientated, the natural instinct is to panic.

"Inadequate training both in basic fire awareness and evacuation training is the number one cause of panic.

"The second cause is inadequate fire risk assessments which are carried out by incompetent/non-qualified individuals.

"The third cause is inadequate fire protection equipment not being maintained by competent people, whether that is internally on monthly/weekly inspections or by a non-competent engineer."

What equipment should all food businesses install or purchase to reduce fire risks?

In terms of the equipment needed to run your business and to offer the items on your menu, you often need to adapt. Therefore in terms of fire safety you need to do the same .Doug Agnew told us that the required fire protection equipment varies depending upon what type of food business you are, such as a restaurant where you cook everything in your kitchen or a patisserie where you may

buy your food in.

He also warned that a fire blanket and Co2 fire extinguisher are a minimum requirement for any food business.

"Depending upon what your fire risk assessment suggests and what cooking equipment you have on the premises, as well as the type of building you are situated in, an ansul kitchen fire suppression unit may be required, he added."

Keith Sillitoe also came up with a list of products that he thought were essential to running a business in the food sector. "You should have an Automatic Fire Detection (AFD) system for early notification i.e. heat and smoke detection as well as extinguishing media for use in kitchens i.e. foam, wet chemical, dry powder/smothering blanket.

"Making sure you have the correct ducting above cooking appliances &

ovens - fire safety equipment such as Very Early Smoke Detection Apparatus (VESDA) plus automatic firefighting equipment such as internal drencher or a foam applicator are all key, as is the regular cleaning of the internal lining of all ducting, he said."

Going back to the initial assessment, Stephen Adams highlighted that this will help identify the equipment needed when he told us: "A quality fire risk assessment will identify all potential fire hazards that will need to be actioned.

"There is no 'one solution fits all' answer to this. Every building will need its own assessment to acknowledge all dangers and what can be implemented to eliminate or reduce these risks.

"Some may only require fire extinguishers or blankets alongside their fire detection and alarm system and some may require a fire suppression system depending on

the scale of their kitchen etc."

Ian Bartle agreed that the systems should be implemented after the assessment and suggested some of the most common for the food industry. He said: "As previously mentioned, any system installed should only be done after a comprehensive fire risk assessment has been completed.

"There are a number of approved fire suppression systems on the market including Wet Chemical, Water Mist and Condensed Aerosol. Some providing more flexibility of install parameters and faster reaction to fire than others. "Choice of system should never be made on just one point of argument, it's the fire suppression system as a whole that needs to be considered with the sum of parts including - fire suppression and post fire security capability, post discharge clean up, environmental impact, ease of installation and service,

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reliability and longevity, cost and aesthetics."

What documents, checks and courses should business owners keep up to date with to ensure fire safety?

Recording all of the information that you can is not only a sign of good practice but is a legal requirement. Making sure that you are up to date with paperwork, training and that the equipment is regularly checked is of the upmost importance.

Stephen Adams told us that as a business owner your fire risk assessment must be reviewed regularly and again if any changes are made to the use of the building. Any points that have been actioned from your initial assessment (e.g. procuring fire extinguishers/fire detection and alarm systems/emergency lighting) must be maintained frequently and tested regularly to ensure they are working correctly.

Another to agree with this point was Ian Bartle who suggested that every establishment has a requirement under the RRO to carry out a fire risk assessment.

"This is a legal requirement with Fire Services now successfully prosecuting more and more managers and owners of businesses for failing to carry out that responsibility.

"Also, insurance companies are more proactive than they have ever been at risk management and risk improvements. An effective assessment coupled to a service of the fire system ensures that the kitchen as a whole is risk assessed."

In terms of supporting documents, Keith Sillitoe explained that all businesses should possess a Fire Log book which will contain records of weekly fire alarm and emergency lighting testing. It will also keep a fire evacuation drill record and notes on any staff training & fire warden/marshall allocation.

Businesses should also keep an emergency plan in the event of fire, planned maintenance records in relation

to fire alarm, extinguisher and emergency lighting service records and a current fire risk assessment with evidence of remedial actions where these are identified.

When it comes to training Keith also recommended that Fire Risk Assessment one-day courses are suitable for staff involved in supporting fire safety at work and the NEBOSH Fire Safety & Risk Management qualification is for staff designated as the responsible person for fire safety in a business.

Keeping your paper work safe is a huge priority, and something that Doug Agnew was keen to stress, he said: "Business

owners should keep log of visits from the company which comes out and services their fire protection equipment, an example would be a log book which is used for fire alarms, you can note down when you test your fire alarm as well.

"They should also keep a copy of the certificates their staff receive after completing fire safety training.

"We recommend that businesses keep a copy of their fire risk assessment in a safe place so they can keep track of when they last had one done and when it's time to carry out another fire risk assessment."

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What training should businesses offer their staff to ensure fire prevention? After identifying risks the implementation of the fire procedures and the offer of staff training is vital.

According to Stephen all staff should be aware of the fire safety policy for the building they work in. In the event of fire, educated staff members can assess situations better and begin the evacuation process quicker for visitor and customer safety as well as their own. Ian Bartle agreed and reinforced the message that fire safety is very

much a requirement of the employer. Regular service and maintenance of the installation, covers certificates and ensures necessary approvals are met. Businesses can also assist in the process of fire prevention by placing a fixed installation. Doug Agnew was of a similar opinion and said that businesses should offer their staff a minimum of basic fire training. "This is the most common type of fire training taken out by businesses.

"Basic fire training is there to educate staff on how to spot fire risks and how to avert unnecessary fires by helping widen

staff's understanding of safety and fire risks. "Training them so that they know what to do in case of a fire, and also how to prevent them is a must," he said.

In terms of training, Keith highlighted three main point that he thought were essential.

1) Highlighting in-house emergency evacuation procedures and offering fire warden marshall training for volunteers
2) Offering safe fire extinguisher usage for volunteers

3) Clearly explaining fire alarm actuation procedures and emergency evacuation for visitors.

"It is also important to engage in regular active workplace inspections to identify fire risks i.e. overloaded electrical sockets, poor storage of combustibles and inappropriate use of cooking equipment, blocked fire exit routes and poor security.

All in all we feel that it is clear that there are many consideration to make when it comes to the safety of your business and the people who work in or visit it. Ensuring that to speak to a qualified professional about the dangers to a business in the foodservice industry is and must. Doing this will allow you to plan for the prevention of workplace fires and in the event of an accident, will prepare you to deal with them efficiently and most importantly safely

Having taken the points of our panel into consideration it is clear that keeping all you fire equipment correctly maintained is essential. It is also key to the safety of your business that all paperwork and training are kept up to date and that you grow with the business in terms of your understanding of fire safety. If you maintain log books and do you research on the equipment that you will need you are halfway there. In terms of the other half, that requires you to highlight the dangers and isolate them. Removing human error or the likelihood of it is a top priority and if all else fails businesses must be in a position to calmly execute their extinguishing and evacuation procedures depending on the situation.