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# Fire Suppression Measures Overview & Scrutiny Review

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## **Background to the review**

This task group was formed at the request of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People to consider the potential for installing a fire suppression system (sprinklers) into all Lancashire schools. As a result the group has met a number of times to discuss this matter, basing the discussions around the report presented to the 'All Party Fire Safety and Rescue Group' parliamentary seminar by Jason Homan in April 2013 entitled '**The Financial Constraints of Implementing Fire Safety Requirements into New Build Schools**' (see Appendix 'B').

## **Membership of the task group**

The following County Councillors were appointed to the Task Group:-

- CC Jackie Oakes (Chair)
- CC Carl Crompton
- CC Susie Charles
- CC Cynthia Dereli
- CC Michael Green
- CC Sandra Perkins
- CC Jeff Sumner

## **Methodology**

The review sought to:

- Assess the financial aspects
- Assess the community impacts
- Assess the cost for fitting sprinklers into new schools and the retrofitting of sprinklers
- Understand the technical aspects
- Understand the role and thoughts of the Fire & Rescue Service
- To consider all of the above and formulate recommendations

## **Findings**

Regarding suggestions by members that all new schools be fitted with sprinkler systems, and that all other schools would be subject to a feasibility test to investigate if they could be installed, the following issues were discussed.

- Currently when designing a new build school a risk assessment tool developed by government is used to consider whether the installation of a sprinkler system is appropriate. LCC also add in additional site specific information into this assessment and based on the outcome make a decision about the overall fire safety measures that will be designed in to that particular school, which may include a sprinkler system.

- The provision of a sprinkler system is not about saving lives it is about saving the building itself and of equal importance the contents inside. New build schools are designed to ensure adequate evacuation in an emergency situation, however it is the loss of the contents, including school work, that may not ordinarily be protected against.
- If sprinkler systems were to be installed into new build schools what consideration would be given to the existing portfolio of schools, and indeed those schools that may be extended given that in the foreseeable future the majority of additional school places will be provided by the extension of existing premises as opposed to the construction of brand new school.
- If the group were to recommend the installation of sprinklers in new build schools it was felt important to develop criteria under which major school extensions would also trigger the requirement.
- There are a considerable number of schools within Lancashire that are not under the control of LCC, however it would be important to try and establish a common approach to all school provision within the county.
- The potential cost of sprinkler installations was discussed along with the potential cost for carrying out feasibility studies on all existing schools to assess their suitability for such an installation. Whilst it was felt important that the cost for a new build installation should be included with their capital budgets, it was acknowledged that the costs to assess the whole schools estate would be significant, as would the cost of then actually installing systems into existing schools were it was felt to be achievable.
- The alternative use of a misting system in lieu of a sprinkler system was discussed although the use of these was not as extensive and therefore the reliability of these systems has not been demonstrated to match that of a sprinkler system.
- The psychological impact on a school was discussed in terms of the disruption that can be caused to the pupils, their families and the staff in the event of a fire causing significant damage to a school, or indeed leading to a total loss of a school.

Regarding suggestions that schools should have assessments to check their existing sprinkler systems, as it had come to light that sprinkler systems had been painted over, the following issues were discussed;

- It was noted that all such systems should currently be inspected as part of a school's annual 'premise management' procedure. However it was accepted that it would be difficult for the authority to ensure that this was the case and hence the possibility of the authority itself carrying out such an inspection was discussed.
- It was confirmed that in the event of a sprinkler system discharging it was only the sprinkler head within the vicinity of the source of the fire that would be triggered which meant that if an individual head had been painted over that wouldn't necessarily mean the entire system would not function. It also means that if a system does discharge, the resultant water damage is confined to the area of the source of the fire.

Regarding suggestions that in the event that systems were fitted, they would become the responsibility of the school and that this was to be clearly stated, the following issues were discussed:

- The group felt strongly that this should be the case as it currently is with regard to any other system within a school premise. It would form part of a school's annual statement of compliance in respect of their premise.

Regarding suggestions that secure fire retardant storage be created to avoid the loss of work in the event of a fire, as a cheaper alternative to a sprinkler system, the following issues were discussed:

- In the event of a fire, although they present significant disruption to a school family, the buildings themselves can eventually be replaced, however what cannot be replaced is the school work whether that be staff curriculum information or the pupil's work. Therefore if it is not possible to have sprinklers installed in all schools and consideration should be given to the provision of such storage.

### **Recommendations**

Having considered all of these issues over a number of meetings the task group would like to make the following recommendations to the county council in respect of fire suppression in schools;

1. All brand new schools developed by LCC shall have a sprinkler system installed as part of their fire safety strategy. With regard to the extension of an existing school, where the capacity of a school is to increase by 50% or more, based on pupil numbers, then a sprinkler system shall be installed into the resultant new facility (both the new and existing elements).

Once installed the responsibility to correctly inspect, service and maintain the sprinkler system shall rest with the governing body of that school.

2. All schools that currently have a fire suppression system installed shall have an initial assessment carried out by LCC to establish the condition of the system. Any remedial work required to ensure the correct operation of the system shall be carried out by the individual school within 6 months of them being notified of these requirements.
3. Upon completion of the initial assessments and resultant remedial works where necessary the responsibility for the future inspection, servicing and maintenance of the system shall rest with the governing body of that school.
4. All schools under the control of LCC and which do not have a fire suppression system installed shall seek to provide a fire retardant storage facility suitable for their needs as assessed by themselves

All other organisations that are responsible for the provision of school premises within Lancashire shall be encouraged to adopt the same recommendations as will apply to those schools under the direct control of LCC

5. In order to ensure this policy remains consistent with future changes in building legislation it is to be reviewed every 5 years.