

# Facilities-UK

The A3 monthly product and services magazine for Facilities Managers

April 2009

Volume 9

Issue 04

## Fire safety debate persists

By Richard Storey of RSL Associates

Last summer a risk assessment company decided that, on health and safety grounds, the removal of fire extinguishers from a block of council run residential care flats in Bournemouth was the right course of action. Since then, a debate on the issue of extinguisher safety has rumbled on. Surely the question we should be asking is, "If fire extinguishers are installed in public buildings to provide immediate protection in the event of a fire, and their presence should not endanger the public, how do you achieve both?"

Much of the debate so far has focused on the potential dangers of fire extinguishers being used by untrained people.

This danger clearly needs to be part of a risk assessment but is only one of a number of risks inherent in the way extinguishers are positioned and located in buildings. It could be argued that the greater dangers are those posed by extinguishers being dislodged from traditional wall mountings, knocked over from floor mounted stands, removed to be used as doorstops (especially when used to prop open fire doors!) or tampered with in a variety of ways. These common hazards appear to have been largely ignored in this debate. Many of us will have witnessed at first hand typical examples such as these.

Then there is the potential for misuse which can, and does, involve tampering or abuse of equipment. Extinguishers can be rendered unfit for purpose and this may only be picked

up when a fire engineer calls to check which could be up to 12 months away. Where children and young people are concerned, behaviour stretching from hi-jinx to wilful misuse can result in the extinguisher being discharged causing damage to property and injury to the perpetrators as well as others. Considerable inconvenience and cost is also incurred when fire engineers are called in to refill/recharge and check the extinguishers.

The case for protecting fire extinguishers is particularly strong in the most vulnerable environments and where the greatest potential hazard to health and safety arises. Experience shows that these situations are in educational establishments for young people and accommodation for the elderly or disabled.

In these cases what is needed is a simple storage solution which will help overcome most, if not all, of these potential hazards. It seems illogical that in offices, shops, leisure facilities, entertainment locations and public buildings from hospitals to schools and libraries, safety equipment, such as first aid equipment, isn't left to its fate by being placed in unprotected locations but fire extinguishers frequently are.

Extinguisher operational integrity should be seen as equally important and its protection against misuse or abuse provided for by being installed in specially designed tamper evident or alarmed cabinets. Such cabinets, typically consisting of a red back and translucent polycarbonate door, are fixed at an appropriate height on a suitable wall to prevent accidental damage or dislodgement.

They allow easy visual checking of the contents without opening the door. A quick-release single door catch affords easy access but, at the same time, acts as a deterrent to opportunistic misuse. Should greater protection be required,

small and unobtrusive alarms can be fitted to alert any unauthorised entry.

One company which has designed a particularly aesthetic solution is UK specialist storage cabinet manufacturer Jo Bird & Co Ltd. Cabinets such as the SOS101 and SOS201 have been designed specifically for use in buildings with access to the general public or where few, if any, people have been trained in extinguisher use. They are increasingly being installed in the education and children's charity sectors where the health and safety of potentially vulnerable young people is involved.

In the education sector secondary schools appear to be confronting the issues involved with examples at Worcestershire County Council at Hanley Castle High School and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. At Barking's Eastbury Comprehensive School, Ecovert, the facilities management company contracted to manage the school's estate, was concerned at the growing burden on its vandalism budget prompting the installation of the first phase of a planned programme to adopt the more widespread use of protective cabinets. Local engineering manager, David Solvey explained, "This large comprehensive has over 200 fire extinguishers sited throughout the complex which are a mixture of large and small units. The large ones are situated in all the main corridors in the school and are vulnerable to being tampered with by students. The problems have been with the water filled extinguishers where we have experienced a high level of refills. We purchased and installed the cabinets for the school as a trial to combat false activations. There have been no reported incidents since so we are already seeing savings in our maintenance costs as a result and expect to be installing more over the coming months".

bibic, a national charity for children with a wide range of



learning difficulties, and Radlett Lodge School in Hertfordshire, run by The National Autistic Society, have both recently installed large and small cabinets to improve the safety of children and their carers.

At bibic, at its national headquarters in Somerset, the decision was taken to locate cabinets at vulnerable locations throughout the premises including the reception area and in main corridors. This is where exposed extinguishers could become dislodged by wayward hands as children move between different therapy areas, soft play areas and the sensory pool. Jim Cloney, Operations Manager, explained, "When we saw the way these new cabinets had been designed we decided to install them in strategic locations for maximum security. We had never before

seen a design which combines maximum protection against accidental damage with ease of inspection. Ensuring that disabled children remain safe throughout their time with us is essential and we have found the ideal solution".

In a separate development, Bristol City Council has installed single extinguisher cabinets on posts in combination with lifebuoy housings along the busy waterfront as part of the redevelopment of the Canons Marsh area of the city.

Creative thinking and an innovative approach to finding practical solutions to a problem which pre-existed the Bournemouth incident, and which has stirred up so much debate, provides an appropriate answer where risks to both fire extinguishers and the public are, or become, an issue.



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