Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service
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To whom it may concern

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION - COMPOSITE FENCE PANELS AND SMOKE CONTROL SYSTEMS

We have been made aware of a number of incidents nationally where fires involving composite fence panels resulted in rapid fire spread, significant property damage and risk to life. This letter includes information on action that can be taken to address these concerns in order to reduce the risk.

This letter has also been produced to highlight concerns around smoke control systems failing to operate correctly within residential buildings, such as blocks of flats. The failure of these systems has the potential to endanger the lives of both occupants and attending firefighters.

These types of incidents are becoming more common place and as such responsible persons should be aware of the risk of both of these impacting on people that are living within these premises.

Composite Fence Panels

There have been a number of serious fires involving composite fence panels. The panels in question were ignited accidently and the resultant fires spread rapidly and generated large volumes of acrid smoke.

The use of this type of fence panel is now becoming more widespread due to the attractive appearance and low maintenance requirements, but there are a number of things which may not have been considered:

- Although the panels often look like wood the behaviour of them in fire can be very different.
- The speed with which they burn is much faster and the heat and smoke released can be much greater.
- Purchasers may believe that they will perform the same as timber products.
- Although it is possible to purchase fire resistant composite fencing panels, there are many that have little or no fire resistance.

The presence of composite fence panels (where applicable) must be addressed as part of your fire risk assessment including the associated hazards. Consideration should be given to the external envelope of the building and the fire resistance of any composite panels that you have. Action must be taken to ensure that adequate control measures have been implemented to manage those risks and reduce the risk from fire.

If you do have composite fence panels then you should:

- Ensure that all other aspects of your fire precautions are fully functioning such as your fire alarm, fire doors, etc.
- Consider if there is the potential for fire and smoke to spread into the wall system or into the premises.
- Consider who is at risk, if occupiers are vulnerable and/or require assistance to escape, could the fire or smoke from burning composite panel fencing prevent them from escaping in the event of a fire.
- Take action to reduce the potential for fire spread.
- Take action to prevent any sources of ignition.
- Consider replacing the flammable fence panels with fire resistant or wooden panels.
- Notify occupants and managers and make them aware of what they can do to reduce the risk of a fire.

If you chose to appoint a third-party Fire Risk Assessor to carry out the assessment on your behalf, then you must take steps to ensure that the Fire Risk Assessor is competent. You can view advice on choosing a competent Risk Assessor on the Fire Protection section of our website Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service - Fire Risk Assessment.

Smoke Control Systems in Blocks of Flats

There have been several incidents nationally where the smoke control systems protecting staircases (and/or adjacent corridors and lobbies) within residential blocks of flats have failed to operate as designed during a fire situation.

The design of these systems is to ensure that heat and/or smoke generated in the event of a fire doesn't compromise the protected escape routes and ensures that they can continue to be used safely and to facilitate firefighting activities within the building.

Section 9 of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government document 'Advice for Building Owners of Multi-storey, Multi-occupied Residential Buildings' provides advice on smoke control systems.

Building owners should be aware of the type of smoke control system they have in place and how this is intended to control the spread of smoke in the event of fire. This should be available in original design information, but if it is not then building owners should seek professional advice to ascertain how it should function.

The standards for the maintenance and testing of smoke control systems are set out in BS EN 12101 and BS 9999:

- Smoke control systems should be tested weekly by the building owner to ensure that they are operating effectively, including fans or powered exhausts, dampers and door hold open/close devices.
- Every 3 months a full activation of the smoke control system should take place where each zone is checked individually.
- An annual inspection carried out by a suitably qualified person.

The correct operation of a smoke control system is essential to the safety of the occupants of a residential building, as well as improve the working conditions for the attending firefighters. The effects of an incorrectly functioning system can be disastrous, spreading the smoke and fire throughout the building and trapping building occupants from escape. **It is crucial that the Responsible Person is aware of the correct operation of any systems and that they are being maintained correctly**.

If you have any queries or questions relating to the letter then please contact our headquarters fire protection team on 01606 868700 or by email to fireadvice.shq@cheshirefire.gov.uk.

Yours Sincerely

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