



# EUROPEAN FIRE SPRINKLER NETWORK

## **December 2007 Report**

In December there was a debate in the European Parliament about fire safety in hotels and the need to fit them with sprinklers. This debate took place thanks to the efforts of the EFSN, in particular Bernadette Hartley and it has put hotel fire safety back on the agenda in Brussels.

Shortly before Christmas I and others met the UK Fire Service Minister to discuss how to bring sprinklers into the core strategy for fire safety in buildings. He agreed to start a pilot project, fitting sprinklers in 3,000 homes each year for the next five years to build up British experience. He also agreed to look at any early learning from the reports into the tragedy in Atherstone-on-Stour, where four fire-fighters died in a warehouse fire in November.

### **Fire Safety Debate in European Parliament**

Arlene McCarthy, a Labour Member of the European Parliament, MEP, put forward the following question for oral debate. *“On 18 August 2007, a fire in the Penhallow Hotel in Newquay in SW England led to three deaths. While there was concern afterwards about the lack of resources in terms of the number of available firefighters and turntables, no fire sprinklers had been fitted. This particular tragedy confirms what appears to be a European trend. In the past three years alone, there have been at least 60 deaths in hotel fires, all of which have occurred in hotels with no fire sprinklers, while no deaths are recorded from sprinklered hotels. Does the Commission think that the collection of EU-wide statistics would be helpful in order to have a real picture of the deaths and injuries toll in hotel fires? Currently consumers using hotel accommodation have a variable risk across Europe due to a lack of common standards, with Hungary best protected with regard to sprinklers, no mandatory sprinkler protection in France, and other Member States in between. Does the Commission think that fire sprinklers could be an efficient way to improve fire safety in hotels when fitted on new-build hotels or on escape routes of existing hotels? Does the Commission believe that citizens would benefit from a common EU fire-safety standard for hotels? The Commission has been discussing the issue of hotel fire safety from 1986 onwards and no final decision has been made.”* 40 other Members of the European Parliament signed the question. During the debate on 10<sup>th</sup> December in the European Parliament in Strasbourg Glyn Ford MEP pointed out that, *“The Union has competence for health and safety. We limit lawnmower noise but not the prospect of being burnt to death. Consumer protection means that we are concerned about the safety of lifts and escalators but not the safety of hotels. The Commissioner has just said that all our actions are proportional. I wonder if she considers that it is proportional that no action has been taken with respect to safety in hotels.”* Both Arlene McCarthy and Glyn Ford were briefed by Bernadette Hartley. The issue of

hotel fire safety is back on the agenda in Brussels with the European Commission consulting the hotel industry and others.

Following the publication of the question and the oral debate, I was invited onto BBC national radio for a discussion with a representative of the UK hotel industry.

### **Fire-Safe Cities**

Before she fell ill, Bernadette Hartley organised a meeting between representatives of Strathclyde Fire & Rescue Service, which serves Glasgow and surrounding areas, and Stockholm Fire Brigade. This was to launch a campaign for Fire-Safe Cities, with sprinklers as a core element of fire safety. All who attended were enthusiastic and they agreed to meet again. On 10<sup>th</sup> December a second meeting was held in Stockholm, this time without Bernadette and experiences were exchanged. If successful the aim is to link up with cities in other countries during 2008.

### **Meeting with Parmjit Dhanda MP, UK Fire Service Minister**

In December I met Parmjit Dhanda MP, the UK Fire Service Minister. I was joined by Nick Ross, a well-known British television journalist, Steve McGuirk, the President of the Chief Fire Officers' Association, Ronnie King, a former Fire Chief and now vice-Chairman of the National Fire Sprinkler Association and John Willis, a lawyer without legs or arms and who is well-connected in the community of disabled people. We were only given 45 minutes to make our case but the meeting ran over an hour, showing the Minister's personal interest. Nick Ross began by making the case for sprinklers in homes, which is where most people die in fires. He previously led a car seatbelt campaign in the 1980s so has experience of public safety campaigns.

Nick is advocating combined sprinkler and plumbing systems, since these are expected to be a little cheaper than systems installed to BS 9251. I would prefer systems to be installed to the British Standard so that the ready infrastructure of trained sprinkler installers can properly do the work, rather than plumbers who are not trained to install domestic sprinkler systems and who are not interested because they can earn more as plumbers. However, if we can get a commitment to install systems we can then show that the cost difference is much less than the Government and Nick Ross believe. We then discussed warehouses, hotels and care homes. John Willis explained the need to fit sprinklers in the homes of disabled people so that they can live independently, which is Government policy.

The Minister had obviously been briefed by his civil servants, who are not in favour of sprinklers. He agreed to look at any early learning from the various enquiries into the warehouse fire that killed four fire-fighters in November. He also committed to fit sprinklers in 3,000 houses each year for the next five years as a pilot study to see to what extent deaths and injuries can be reduced in the UK. We know this will prove that sprinklers work and will press the Minister to use any early learning from the pilots. Meanwhile I have another meeting scheduled with him for January to go over some of the arguments regarding industrial buildings in more detail and to discuss our European plans, for which we will be seeking his support.

### **Angus County**

Angus County is an area of the east of Scotland. Following a successful parallel burn demonstration where fires were set in two homes, one with and one without sprinklers, on 18<sup>th</sup> December the Council announced it had voted to require sprinklers in all new Council housing from 2009. This is housing supplied by the Council to those on low incomes. Angus Council is also pressing the Scottish Parliament to introduce a national measure. Combined with the campaign in Glasgow, the local pressure is building.

### **Seminar in Prague**

In December I gave a presentation titled, "How do Sprinklers Improve Fire Safety?" at a seminar organised by Pavus, the Czech fire safety laboratory and approval body.

### **New Members**

During December Stefaan Ketels of Centerparcs joined the EFSN.

### **BS9999**

I attended a meeting of this committee, which is drafting a British Standard that provides standard relaxations in prescriptive, passive fire safety measures if other measures, such as sprinklers, are fitted. This was the final meeting before the draft goes to public comment in January.

### **Next Steps**

- 1) Participate in a training seminar for French fire-fighters in Paris.
- 2) Meet the UK Fire Minister to discuss European initiatives.
- 3) Give a presentation at the Finnish Insurers' Association meeting in Helsinki.
- 4) Attend a board meeting of the French Chapter of the SFPE in Paris.
- 5) Give a presentation at the European Fire Brigade Academy meeting in Paris.
- 6) Write articles for Fire Risk Management and for a magazine read by disabled people in the UK.