

ESTABLISHING COMMON GOALS AND A SHARED AGENDA

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Speech by Jim Fitzpatrick MP to the All Party Parliamentary Fire & Rescue Group, 6 February 2006

Checked against delivery

1. Whether in the fire and rescue service, central government, local government, voluntary sector or elsewhere working on fire-related issues, we all share the same goal. That is to cut deaths and injuries from fire and you all know our targets.
2. Make no mistake these are ambitious. We have been criticised for not aiming for zero deaths – who can oppose the principle – but in Government we have to set realistic targets. In 2004/05 deaths were down 16 per cent and injuries were down by 7 per cent. This is real progress. This is not to say we are not more ambitious – clearly we have to be.
3. The main way we can go on achieving this progress is through prevention. We have a world-class emergency fire and rescue service – probably the best in the world – and we must maintain that.
4. Prevention must be – and is – the new culture and that means protecting the most vulnerable people in our society as a priority. Statistics continue to show that a third of all fire deaths are people aged 65 and over, with the highest rate of all among those aged 80 and over. And demographics are working against us. We have an ageing population. By next year there will be more over 65s than under 16s.
5. The £25 million initiative of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to provide smoke alarms and fire safety advice to one-and-a-quarter million vulnerable households was launched nearly two years ago. So far over 390,000 Home Fire Risk Checks have been carried out and 417,000 smoke alarms have been installed.
6. I recently announced £11.4 million grant funding for fire and rescue authorities in England. This covers the period April 2006 to March 2008 and is to support fire prevention work. It includes community fire safety, arson reduction and work with children and young people. The single grant provides revenue funding to complement the capital grants paid to all fire and rescue authorities under the Home Fire Risk Check initiative up to 2008.
7. This substantial investment will support fire and rescue authorities, working with local partners, to go on reducing the number of accidental fire deaths in the home and the number of deliberate fires in our communities. Statistics clearly show that vulnerable groups, deprived households and certain communities are at far greater risk of fire and suffer a greater impact from its effects.
8. I would now like now to turn to the question of sprinklers – the main theme of your event today. Let me say first that I do believe sprinklers have an important role to play. In particular, I believe they could save lives and reduce the devastating effects of fire when installed in buildings where the occupants are most at risk.

9. But sprinklers are not a panacea. It is important that they form part of a package of measures. This must include both active measures and passive measures. Effective building management is also a very important factor in preventing fires.

10. In the light of research findings we have consulted on whether sprinklers should be provided in tall blocks of flats – that's over 30 metres high – and in residential care homes. That is part of the current review of Part B of the Building Regulations and the guidance in Approved Document B. We are looking at the responses and hope to publish a revised version of Part B and the supporting guidance in Approved Document B towards the end of the year. The aim is for it to come into force in April 2007.

11. We have also looked at the potential role of 'lower-cost' sprinklers for domestic dwellings. I personally visited the test rig at Little Rissington. The initial findings of the research are very encouraging but we need to analyse some of the data in more depth. In particular, the cost benefit analysis will be critical. There also needs to be more research done on the practicality and costs of the present design of the 'lower cost' sprinkler system in a real housing environment.

12. One way forward is to run pilot schemes. These would determine how the sprinklers would work in practice and give a clearer idea of actual installation costs. We could then take things forward on the basis of robust information and practical evidence. Let me reassure you, this is not delaying for the sake of it.

13. We hope to make funds available to support a pathfinder programme for installing 'lower cost' sprinkler systems in new social housing projects. I hope you, the key stakeholders, will join us in this and add to our knowledge base. The programme would also give potential installers the opportunity to resolve any practical problems and issues – which in turn would help us to develop a design and installation standard for 'lower cost' sprinklers.

14. The capital funding set aside for Home Fire Risk Checks is what Government likes to call 'non-ringfenced'. In effect, this means it is open to fire and rescue authorities to use some of this money to install sprinklers in domestic dwellings. But that is a decision for them and must be based on the assessment of local risks and local strategies for improving prevention. Some services have even persuaded Social Services to pay for domestic sprinklers – very smart! We can do more.

15. If 'lower cost' sprinklers were to be fitted in all dwellings subject to the Building Regulations, for example, this would really only affect new and materially altered properties. The impact would be restricted to less than 1% of the building stock each year. You know the evidence shows that the majority of fire deaths are in existing buildings and are often influenced by socio-economic factors. So, the impact of lower cost sprinkler systems might be fairly limited for some time.

16. I know CFOA, Nick Ross and others here have made other suggestions for ways forward and I've noted them. We must make sure that every option is tested properly and practical.

17. Of course, sprinklers have a wider role than purely protecting domestic dwellings. Their possible role in schools is currently being considered by the Department for Education and Skills, as part of their

consultation on draft fire safety guidance for schools – Building Bulletin 100. I gather that DfES hope to publish a final version of this later in the year. We will continue to liaise closely with them on its development.

18. It has been a long day for you but I hope you will take away that we do believe sprinklers have a major contribution to make in preventing fire deaths and injuries. But that there is more work to do before we can be clear what are the best ways forward for using them in different places and circumstances. However you can rest assured that we are determined to go on doing whatever is needed to improve prevention and help the most vulnerable people in our society to live safer lives, free from the fear and tragedy fire can cause. It is worth remembering that over half of all fire fatalities occur before the fire and rescue services are even called out – so prevention really is the way forward. Thank you very much.

Speech by Jim Fitzpatrick MP on 6 February 2006.