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**Cleaning Matters**

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# The greasy truth of kitchen fires

*Richard Norman, managing director of Indepth Hygiene, discusses why catering facility managers must heed warnings of grease extract dangers and implement a proper cleaning and maintenance regime*

**T**he incidences of kitchen fires in catering facilities remain at a worryingly high level. One particularly high profile fire last year was at Jamie Oliver's Barbecoa restaurant which led to around 150 people being evacuated from a nearby shopping centre. Part of the ducting in the first-floor restaurant's extraction system had caught light, and four fire engines and more than 20 fire-fighters were needed to tackle the blaze.

In nine out of 10 fires linked to catering facilities, un-cleaned grease deposits in grease extract ducting have ignited to make fires more widespread and destructive. But despite the compelling evidence that grease deposits in extract ventilation systems present serious fire hazards, the message doesn't seem to be getting through.

Grease extract systems are not always given the attention they demand because extract ducting from the kitchen canopy often runs hidden behind ceilings and walls. Until a fire occurs, there may be no other clear signs of danger. But I am shocked at how many establishments still don't prioritise grease extract cleaning; the costs of not doing so in terms of business disruption, damage to reputation, danger to the public and staff – not to mention the legal implications – can be substantial.

Fire authorities believe that the grease extract ventilation system linked to catering facilities is the greatest risk to the safety of building occupants, and indeed grease deposits in extract ventilation systems must be removed for compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 England and Wales, and similar legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The Fire Safety Order requires that 'a person who has some level of control in the premises must take reasonable steps to reduce the risk from fire'. It is worth noting that should a fire occur in grease



extract ductwork where there has been compliance failure and a fatality arises, the 'responsible person' could be facing criminal prosecution.

In addition to the requirements of the Fire Safety Order, UK property insurers, including major providers such as Aviva, Zurich, Liverpool Victoria and AXA are now demanding kitchen grease extract ventilation ductwork be 'cleaned in its entirety' to comply with policy warranties.

## How often should systems be cleaned?

The frequency of grease extraction systems is normally determined by usage. The industry standard TR/19 from B&ES states for heavy use (around 12 to 16 hours a day) the system should be cleaned every three months. For moderate use (six to 12 hours a day) systems should be cleaned every six months and for light usage (two to six

hours a day) cleaning is required every 12 months. However grease build-up can also be affected by the nature of cooking and fuel being used. Where cooking processes involve fat frying or wood/charcoal burning, cleaning may need to be more frequent.

In any event, regardless of usage, most property insurers require grease extracts to be cleaned every six months or annually at an absolute minimum, but we are seeing an increasing number of insurers requiring as many as four ductwork cleans per annum under their policies. We are frequently asked to provide expert witness services in court cases dealing with disputed cases involving fires in grease extract systems, and we also provide informed and impartial advice prior to any litigation.

Businesses need to pay attention to fire risk management; if it is not done in-house, it is essential to ensure the company it is outsourced to is accredited by the Fire Protection Agency (FPA), Institute of Fire Engineers (IFE) or the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH). Failure to ensure this could lead to substantial financial implications if a fire was to occur.

Caterers may believe cleaning and maintenance of their grease extract ductwork to be disruptive and costly. But any professional duct cleaning specialist will work round an organisation's operating hours to minimise inconvenience and downtime, and costs can start from as little as £300 depending on the location of the ductwork. In any event, the implications of invalidating property insurance by not adhering to the required cleaning regime could be very costly indeed.

Tel: 0208 661 7888

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cchristie@progressive-media.co.uk