

Greatest Fire Risk often Out of Sight

Here, Richard Norman, Managing Director of Indepth Hygiene Services explains why it is important for those responsible for the safety of pupils and staff to give extract ventilation systems the priority attention they require.

Most Bursars and Managers of Educational establishments will be familiar with the visit from the Environmental Health Officer. But the EHO's brief is essentially concerned with practices and procedures relating to the storage, preparation and cooking of food. There is, however, one important aspect of running an academy's catering facility which does not fall within the EHO's remit yet requires priority management attention. It is the fire risk to be found in most extract ventilation systems linked to catering facilities which are designed to take grease laden air from the cooking operation to exhaust to atmosphere. As the air cools, so grease particles settle on the internal surfaces of the extract ducting, requiring only a spark or flash to ignite and create a fire which will be a threat to the safety of all. This danger often arises out of sight because extract ducting frequently runs behind walls and ceilings.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, generally referred to as the Fire Safety Order, has been on the statute book for over four years.

So first, let's do a quick re-cap of major changes brought about by this legislation. The most fundamental change was to move responsibility for protecting building occupants from the dangers of fire from the Fire Authorities onto the shoulders of owners and managers of premises. No longer do Fire Authorities issue Fire Certificates. The concept of the 'responsible person' was introduced – someone in an organisation who would be appointed to carry out Fire Risk Assessments throughout the premises for which he had been made responsible, and to ensure action is taken to eliminate any identified risks to the safety of the building's occupants. The Fire Authorities (the Fire & Rescue Services) have become the 'policemen' for enforcement of the Order's requirements and have been given powers to ensure compliance with fines, closure and imprisonment the ultimate sanctions.

Your Fire Safety Order Compliance Checklist

- Ensure you have produced comprehensive Fire Risk Assessments that identify all possible sources for a fire that might put building occupants' lives at risk.
- Ensure the grease extract system is included in these Fire Risk Assessments.
- Have the system professionally inspected for presence of fire hazardous grease deposits.
- Have grease accumulations removed by specialist contractor who will carry out work in accordance with the Industry's standard of excellence HVCA TR19 "Guide to the Cleanliness of Ventilation Systems" published by the Heating & Ventilating Contractors' Association.
- Ensure contractor has accreditation with the HVCA and has £10m of liability insurance cover
- For Insurance and Fire Service inspection demand a detailed certificate on completed work showing clearly what has been cleaned.
- Have extract system inspected and cleaned regularly to ensure that grease deposits do not build up in ducting.

At a recent seminar, a spokesman for the Fire and Rescue Services stated – ***"Uncleaned grease extract systems present probably the greatest potential fire risk in buildings with catering facilities"***.

My company's experience of visiting many hundreds of establishments each year underlines the relevance of this statement and I would urge all academies to review their assessment of fire risk and ensure their grease extract systems are included in the Fire Risk Assessments.

The Fire & Rescue Service has reported a spate of recent fires in restaurants which have been linked to uncleaned, or inadequately cleaned, grease extract systems. In a number of instances the owners or operators claimed to have had in place a cleaning service only to find, as a result of a fire, that flammable grease deposits had not been removed from the internal surfaces of the extract ducting and consequently supported a fire arising from a spark or flame in the kitchen.



Internal ducting surfaces of a grease extract system showing uncleaned potentially flammable grease deposits



Fire in Extract Ducting at London Restaurant

A fire at Liverpool Street Station's Burger King Restaurant in June, where according to a London Fire Brigade spokesman, an uncleaned kitchen ventilation shaft in the restaurant had caught fire demonstrates clearly how widespread and dangerous such fires can be.

This is yet another example which clearly demonstrates that grease deposits in inadequately cleaned ducts can lead to substantial fires. On this occasion, thankfully, no one was hurt. However, if premises managers fail to have internal cleaning of their extract ductwork carried out, the chances of serious fires remain a potential threat.

The Hidden Dangers

As I have explained, grease extract systems are often not given the attention they demand because extract ducting from the kitchen canopy often runs hidden behind ceilings and walls. Until a fire occurs, there are often seldom other clear signs of danger, although canopy filters which appear clogged can be a sign of hidden dangers in the ducting beyond. For the system to be made safe, access has to be gained at regular intervals into the ducting so thorough end to end cleaning can be carried out. It is totally inadequate for just the ducting to be cleaned as reachable from the filter housings. The total system must be cleaned.

The Fire Safety Order has real teeth. For example, the 'responsible person' (and in terms of the legislation this would almost inevitably be the Bursar) can be prosecuted for failing to fulfil his responsibilities to protect building occupants and, in the event of death or injury resulting from a fire, be subject to criminal prosecution. There is also the question of property insurance warranties to be fulfilled. More and more property insurance policies now spell out the frequency with which grease extract systems should be cleaned from canopy to exhaust to atmosphere, and most commonly demand cleaning every six months.

Apart from providing specialist cleaning services, my company provides expert court witness services, particularly where Insurers are disputing claims on grounds of non-compliance. We know of several recent instances where fires started in restaurant kitchens and then were spread through the ducting as a result of grease deposits catching fire.

Perhaps more worryingly, the owners thought they had in place a cleaning service to remove the flammable grease deposits in the extract ducting. Forensic inspection of debris after the fire showed clearly the ducting was not being cleaned. If access panels had not been cut into the ducting to provide access for thorough cleaning, you can be sure the internal duct surfaces have not been cleaned of flammable grease deposits.

“I thought it was being cleaned” is no defence. Insurers are disputing claims where there is evidence of non-compliance.

Only when those providing catering facilities realise that not cleaning extract ducting can result in a major fire putting occupants at risk with possible prosecution for non-compliance with the law and refused insurance claims, will they call in a professional contractor like my company. We will remove the fire hazardous grease to make sure diners and staff are not put at risk.

It is perhaps worth noting that should a fire occur where there has been compliance failure and a fatality arises, the ‘responsible person’ could be facing criminal prosecution. One cannot resist speculating that a serious injury or death arising from a fire in a kitchen’s extract might be the catalyst for making the checking of these systems by the ‘responsible person’ an absolute priority.

Incidentally, even when the catering service at an academy has been contracted out, the responsibility for meeting the requirements of the Fire Safety Order remain with the academy and cannot be passed over to the caterer.

How to improve the situation?

Numerous fires in restaurants have been made more extensive and destructive by the support of flammable grease in the extract ducting and inadequate duct cleaning processes, so the potential dangers have been well proven.

*My company, which is the UK’s leading provider of specialist ventilation system cleaning and a member of the HVCA (Heating and Ventilation Contractors’ Association), will check out whether your grease extract system is a potential fire hazard and provide you with a “risk of fire survey”, **free of charge**. This will tell you whether or not you are complying with the Fire Safety Order and the terms of your insurance policy.*

**To arrange for a risk of fire survey to be carried out,
please call 020 8661 7888 or email ductclean@indepthhygiene.co.uk**