



The Case for Sprinklers in Schools **NEU guidance for members, reps and local officers**

Every year, many schools are damaged or destroyed by fires, affecting the education of thousands of pupils, and causing millions of pounds worth of damage. The impact of fires is significantly reduced by fitting sprinklers in schools. This briefing sets out NEU policy in this area, and the case for sprinklers to be fitted in all schools.

How common are school fires?

In 2015/16 there were nearly 700 fires attended by the emergency services in educational establishments in England and Wales. Many school fires are deliberate with schools being key targets for arsonists. The Arson Prevention Forum has estimated that the education of around 90,000 children is affected by arson each year.

London fire statistics for 2017 show that there was a 34 per cent rise in school fires from 2016. The cost and severity of school fires is also increasing. The Fire Protection Association has found that the average cost of large school fires has increased from £330,000 per incident in 2009 to £2.8 million per incident in 2014.

What is the impact of school fires?

There is a massive financial loss when a school is destroyed or damaged by fire. As previously explained, the average cost of a large school fire is nearly £3 million. Unfortunately, the most recent Government figures for the overall costs of school fires are from 2004. In this year, the cost of school fires was £52 million. It is likely that these costs have increased substantially in over a decade.

School fires also have a significant impact on pupils' education caused by the upheaval and disruption of moving into temporary accommodation for a significant period of time. Coursework, teaching notes, resources and equipment may also be destroyed in the fire, impacting the teaching and learning within the school. This will also undoubtedly have an impact on staff morale.

What is the case for sprinklers in schools?

Sprinklers can significantly reduce the impact of fires in schools, and NEU policy is that all new schools should be built with sprinklers, and they should be fitted retrospectively whenever schools undergo development. There are many benefits to sprinklers being fitted in schools, namely:

- Sprinklers virtually eliminate fire deaths and injuries of both inhabitants of the buildings and the emergency services. In fact, there have been no reported deaths from fires in buildings with maintained sprinkler systems.
- Fire and smoke damage is significantly reduced when sprinklers are fitted, by around 80 per cent. This significantly reduces the costs of rebuilding the school and replacing equipment, and also substantially reduces the additional costs of relocating pupils and staff.



- Sprinklers also significantly limit the disruption and upheaval that can follow a fire. When a school is destroyed by a fire, it can be out of action for a year or longer. Conversely, when schools are fitted with sprinklers, the school can re-open within a day or so, as the fire is contained in a much smaller area.
- School fires often result in the release of asbestos fibres, when asbestos containing materials catch fire or are damaged. Nearly 90 per cent of schools contain asbestos, so the likelihood is that there will be asbestos on the premises when a school catches fire. Asbestos contamination is significantly reduced when sprinklers are fitted. This prevents unnecessary exposure for the emergency services, pupils and staff.

How much do sprinklers cost?

Sprinklers cost between one and two per cent of the total construction costs of a new school, around the same as the cost of carpets. Carpets become worn and need to be replaced, whereas sprinkler systems last for the lifetime of the building.

Schools also benefit from reduced insurance premiums and excess when they are fitted with sprinkler systems. The Local Government Association has estimated that the cost of installing a sprinkler can be recouped in around five years and, after this time, schools will continue to benefit from reduced premiums and excess.

What is the Government's policy on sprinklers in schools?

In both Wales and Scotland (where education matters are devolved) it is a requirement for sprinklers to be fitted in new schools. Unfortunately, this is not the case in England, where the Government has not only refused to make sprinklers compulsory, but in 2016 attempted to water down the existing policy on sprinklers in schools.

In 2007, the then Labour Government introduced an 'expectation', in a document called Building Bulletin 100 (BB100) that all new schools would be fitted with sprinklers, except those that had been deemed very low risk by the fire risk assessment. Although this wasn't made compulsory, it did lead to the majority of new schools (70 per cent) being built with sprinklers. However, since 2010, the proportion of new schools built with sprinklers has halved, to just 35 per cent.

In 2016, the Government consulted on changes to BB100, which included removing the expectation that new schools would be fitted with sprinklers and significantly increasing the compartment size in un-sprinklered schools. The NUT and many other organisations responded to the consultation and strongly opposed the changes. Despite this, it was announced in August 2016 that the Government had gone ahead with the proposals. A variety of joint activity between the NUT and Fire Brigades Union (FBU) forced the Government to backtrack, and during November 2016, the Department for Education (DfE) held meetings with both unions and other stakeholders. A final decision about whether the expectation was to be reinstated was due in early 2017; however, confirmation was not received until July 2017 following the Grenfell Tower fire.

In a letter to the NUT and FBU general secretaries, the Secretary of State confirmed that the original version of BB100 remains in place. However, because BB100 is not



compulsory, the NEU continues to have concerns that those responsible for building schools will ignore the principles within the document, as demonstrated by the significant drop-off in schools being fitted with sprinklers since 2010.

Furthermore, the Secretary of State confirmed in the letter that the Government does not hold records of how many schools are fitted with sprinklers and whether the principles of BB100 are being adhered to. The Secretary of State went on to say that “sprinklers must be installed in new schools if a risk assessment identifies them as necessary” which is a significant re-interpretation of the original principles of BB100 which was clear that the starting point should always be that sprinklers should be fitted, and this should only not be the case in “a few low risk schools”.

The NEU will continue to campaign for it to be made compulsory for sprinklers to be fitted in all new and refurbished schools, and will strongly oppose any future attempts to weaken the current provisions.

More information
NEU health and safety briefing Fire Safety
neu.org.uk

[Arson Prevention Forum](#)

[National Fire Chiefs' Council](#)

[Local Government Association](#)
[Dispelling the myths about sprinklers](#)