

Security and fire standards - changing times

Contributed by The National Security Inspectorate, 2007

The National Security Inspectorate (NSI) discusses the need for regulation in security and fire protection in order to ensure high standards are not just maintained but continue to progress in these sectors.

What are the pros and cons of voluntary regulation?

How do the new fire regulations impact FM?

The progress of safety standards continues to be a topical issue. As society develops, we demand even higher standards from every field and the security and fire sectors are no exception. However, we also look for every opportunity to reduce our costs and far from seeking out value for money, we are sometimes tempted by the cheapest option. This is rarely the best option and we know that the value route is a better one. But our insatiable demand for cheap solutions often encourages us to turn a blind eye to the negatives of taking this direction, making us vulnerable to the approaches of poor quality and unscrupulous service providers.

So we choose the cheapest option and pray that nothing goes wrong. Rarely is it that simple. When the service falls down or our insurer won't pay up or we even end up being prosecuted for failure to comply with regulations, we cry foul. It would be unfair to say that we are always looking for the cheapest option irrespective of the consequences, but it happens enough to allow poor performers to thrive.

Security and fire protection responsibilities provide no exception to this trend. Both are often viewed as a grudge purchase and the temptation to keep the cost of such a service to a minimum is often a direction company decision-makers opt to choose. The resulting problems can lead to a chorus of complaints and action has to be taken to protect the whole.

Voluntary regulation versus government intervention

Sometimes successful action can be achieved by an industry policing itself by creating its own codes of conduct, which suppliers can sign up to and customers can select from. However, government intervention through regulation is sometimes required. Examples of both approaches can be seen in the security sector today.

The electronic security sector, embracing technologies such as intruder alarms, CCTV and access control systems, has a strong record of regulating itself to a high level.

For over 35 years, the National Security Inspectorate (NSI), through various guises including NACOSS, has been leading voluntary regulation in this area. The need to develop higher standards was a result not only of customer demand, but was also driven by insurance companies seeking to lessen their risk exposure and the police seeking to reduce false alarms.

Although voluntary regulation has been successful in the electronic security sector, it has had less impact in the manned guarding arena. This can probably be attributed to a number of issues including vicious price competition linked to the customer expectation of paying low prices. Insurers have not always been as rigorous in their specification of approved companies in this area - although this is changing.

NSI operates voluntary regulation for manned security companies and many have chosen this route. Firms that achieve the requirements of voluntary regulation will become "approved" and receive a certificate of approval. Approved companies can issue their own mark of approval of the third party certification body, which acknowledges that work carried out - relevant to the scope of approval - meets an acceptable standard. Furthermore, these accreditations are also recognised by the relevant authorities and insurance companies. However, it is straightforward for any individual or organisation to set up a scheme where a piece of paper is issued to a contractor stating that they meet certain standards and are suitable to conduct particular types of work.

The resulting problems caused by some unregulated companies, combined with lobbying from various security and customer-interested organisations including NSI, led to the Government introducing the Private Security Industry Act 2001 (PSIA) with the objective of improving standards in the security industry. The PSIA resulted in the creation of the Security Industry Authority (SIA) under the direction of the Home Office. The SIA has in-turn introduced two initiatives.

Licensing of security staff

It firstly introduced much welcomed licensing of security staff operating in door supervision, wheel-clamping and, most recently in March 2006, contracted manned security (but critically not in-house) and public space CCTV surveillance for example. Other areas, such as private investigators and security consultants, are likely to follow in the near future.

Improving contractor standards

For over a decade the NSI has operated and continues to operate voluntary guarding schemes to a very high standard. The NSI structures its approval through three levels, Gold, Silver and Bronze. The premier Gold scheme includes the majority of NSI approved companies and all these must comply with the industry specific ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management System. The Silver scheme provides for newer and smaller companies where ISO 9001:2000 is not appropriate and Bronze is a time-limited entry scheme focusing on encouraging approval at an early stage of a company's life.

European standards and grading - caution!

Briefly reverting to intruder alarm systems, British Standards including BS 4347 were recently replaced by a UK scheme - known as PD 6662 - calling up the European Standards EN 50131 and EN 50136. Common with any changes, confusion has arisen in some areas. As a rule, UK insurers are following the guidelines set down by these standards and are specifying that new systems must be installed to an appropriate grade relative to the level of risk. For many commercial property installations, this is grade three.

In some situations installers are undercutting competitors by recommending grade two systems that are not always suitable for commercial locations, although there may be technical reasons for taking the grade two route. Customers should always consult with their insurer before the system is installed. This avoids the problem of your insurer declining cover until a grade two system is upgraded to or replaced by a grade three system. Be warned - check with your insurer first, it could be a costly mistake.

New fire regulations

Fire is an area that has recently undergone regulatory change with implications for all organisations. The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order and the Fire Scotland Act 2005 focus on improving fire safety standards in business premises and multi-tenancy domestic dwellings. As a result, the quality of the design, installation, commissioning and maintenance of fire protection systems has become a major consideration of the risk assessment required for all premises. Owners are now required to prove that new and upgraded systems are fit for purpose and risk prosecution in the event of system failure.

The new CFOA Policy for dealing with false alarms from remotely monitored systems calls for owners to obtain a Unique Reference Number (URN), entitling them to receive a Fire Brigade response to automated systems. URNs will only be issued for systems certified by specific third-party certification bodies such as NSI. This policy is now being phased in and ultimately all systems requiring response through remote monitoring will need to have been designed, installed, commissioned and maintained by companies with third-party certification.

The accepted route for certification bodies is by accreditation through the DTI-sponsored United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS). The remit of UKAS is to ensure that certification bodies meet an acceptable standard and it is itself recognised by the likes of the fire and police services, as well as local authorities and insurance companies.

NSI is UKAS accredited for Quality Management and Product Certification for its fire and security schemes. For an example, an NSI Fire Gold or Fire Silver approved contractor who has installed a fire protection system will issue a certificate that is recognised by the fire authorities as being valid, therefore providing the authorities and insurers with approved fire companies that they can depend on.

Further information

NSI, www.nsi.org.uk