

# Looking ahead



**I**N OCTOBER, leading industry figures were on hand at the third annual Fire Sector Summit to discuss many of the key issues facing the sector. The event was once again chaired by BBC journalist John Humphrys, who opened proceedings by interviewing Chief Fire Officers Association president Paul Fuller.

The veteran broadcaster was keen to probe Mr Fuller over the possibility of creating a single fire and rescue service in England. Mr Fuller initially dismissed the suggestion out of hand, stating 'we do not think a single FRS is workable, as it would likely take control away from local communities'.

Humphrys continued to push the point that having 46 fire and rescue services in England is too much and is not an economical use of resources. Mr Fuller conceded that there are currently too many services in operation and that they should all work closer together to share research and knowledge.

'There should be fewer fire and rescue services in England, but currently political and financial barriers are preventing this,' said Mr Fuller. 'You cannot compare England to Scotland and say a single fire and rescue service would work here, as the countries are politically and actively different.'

'It does not make sense for fire and rescue services to be quite so independent and in fact all the emergency services should work closer together. But reducing the number of fire services too far will create public concern at a local level. If local taxes are paying for the service, it is only right that you would expect some element of control on the spend in your area, and in my opinion localism is key.'

## Considering combustibility

Event sponsors Rockwool delivered a presentation on its partnership with the FPA, which showed delegates a video demonstration of how different insulation materials used in external wall insulation systems can propagate the spread of fire.

Rockwool UK manager of installation delivery Darren Snaith explained that residential tower blocks are some of the least energy efficient buildings in the UK. To help rectify this problem, the government has decided to target these buildings with full packages of high-grade thermal insulation measures to make them cheaper and more comfortable places to live in. However, as the levels of insulation are increased to



## The theme of this year's Fire Sector Summit centred on sustainability, innovation and direction. **FRM** was on hand to report from the FPA's flagship event

reduce energy usage, the insulation – if combustible – can make up an ever-larger percentage of the building's potential fire load.

The demonstration used three 10m high, steel-framed rigs clad with commonly used insulation materials: stone wool, phenolic foam and expanded polystyrene (EPS) with fire breaks. The ignition source was a timber crib designed to represent an established fire in an apartment that had reached flashover and then broken out of a window or other opening.

Darren explained that the demonstration had proved useful as it emphasised the high risks of using combustible materials when cladding buildings, and that this risk is greatly reduced if non-combustible materials such as stone wool are used.

### **FSO and prosecutions**

From her wide experience, including in the Lakanal House inquest, Eleanor Sanderson QC provided insight into the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 [FSO], highlighting the duties of the responsible person under the Act. She also discussed other fire prosecution legislation related to construction design

management, the carriage of dangerous goods, and their manufacture and storage.

Then she took a close look at the 2006 Marlie Farm fireworks factory explosion and fire in East Sussex, covering the events, detailed investigation, findings, conditions and sentences.

Two firefighters died in the incident and other people were injured. Last July, the company owners were convicted of manslaughter and received prison sentences of seven and five years. The judge ruled that the deaths were preventable and ordered the fire authority to pay damages to the victims' families, which underlined the importance of conducting fire service visits under Section 7(2)d and finding a suitable and effective way of disseminating conclusions.

Dealing with some of the current complexities faced during prosecutions, Ms Sanderson explained what needs to be proved, the advantages and disadvantages of enforcement and Prohibition Notices, and difficulties in consistency – since these need to be building specific. She discussed who is prosecuted and the importance of managing prosecution, including by ensuring full disclosure, following documentation procedures and looking at press strategy.



## Recycling centre fires

Roy Wilsher, chief fire officer (CFO) of Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) and CFOA's director of CFO Operations, discussed how the impact of fires at waste management centres is being tackled. He said the current concern is not the amount of waste, as we are told this is being managed, but the amount being stored above ground. While statistics show that waste fires reduced from 1,105 in 2011 to 739 in 2012, from 2012 there has been an upward trend.

Typical causes are waste processing time, stockpiling refuse-derived fuel bales for shipment abroad, rogue traders, and the effect of severe and recurring fires on communities, as well as environmental and economic impacts. Stretched fire services and firefighter safety are important concerns, although he conceded that this was helping develop further innovation in firefighting techniques.

To illustrate the scale of impacts, Mr Wilsher cited one of the largest London fires seen in years at the Dagenham recycling centre near London's Olympic park, which closed businesses down; the extensive Smethwick fire caused by a sky lantern; and the Lawrence recycling plant fire last June in Kidderminster that took seven weeks to extinguish, causing CFOA to look into this problem across the UK. Access to the internal fire at Kidderminster had raised concern, along with pollution of drinking water and the impact on the local fire service's budget, which was not foreseen.

A large fire at the Appspound Lane wood recycling site in London had highlighted the risks to the electrical supply, and of plant collapse through melting. The fire occurred despite numerous fire service visits and liaison with authorities over risks at the site, which exceeded

limits in the 2010 regulations. The site was finally closed down.

Mr Wilsher recommended approaches such as keeping smoke away from workers and extinguishing such fires bit by bit. He then outlined good work in progress and some next steps – understanding the waste industry, involving insurers and creating a road map for working together. Solutions do exist within existing legislation and also involve sector-led outcomes, local planning consent, cost effective insurance premiums and working with industry, he added.

## Delegate questions

Questions from the floor led by John Humphrys included one

on the issue of charging for the fire service to be called out despite the public having already paid council tax. Though pressure was increasing to reduce costs, if the public was to be charged it might put off calling out the fire service, thereby delaying response and a potentially better outcome. It was explained that the public can be charged for starting fire deliberately, if chemicals are spilled in a fire, if someone is locked in a lift or for automatic fire alarms.

In her response, Ms Sanderson said the Marlie Farm insurers did not want to pay out because the owners were in breach of their licence. The judgment was based on the appropriateness of the firefighters' approach to an explosives fire rather than on the content of the container that caused it.

This led to discussion of reliance on 7(2)d inspections by the service, which could have the wrong information, and whether generic risk assessments, which had evolved through necessity, had been challenged. Ms Sanderson said her comments about specific risk assessments being required had related to prosecutions, not 7(2)d visits.

On what basis is a person judged incompetent when there is no consistent cross-industry standard and the fire service considers what is safe to carry out? Ms Sanderson advised staying abreast of all the various guidelines, standards and bodies, and aiming for the highest. Some delegates advocated increased focus on third party certification of products and people, particularly installers, and UKAS accreditation. Primary Authority schemes from April 2014 should also help.

Discussion continued around the strength and clarity of building regulations and how they relate to insurance regulations, the need for consistency in enforcement, and potentially charging for specifying the wrong materials, for instance when care homes are built using combustible materials ■