



Products RIBA/Hilti expert webinar

Fire safety bill puts onus on building designers

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Legislation going through parliament on fire protection in tall buildings has major implications for architects, with new duties and competence demands. Josephine Smit reports

Changes to the UK construction industry to ensure it delivers safer tall buildings will be complex and fraught with challenges. These are already under way, as expert panellists discussed at the 'Fire Safety in Practice – How to Mitigate the Risk' webinar, hosted by RIBA Journal and Hilti in July.

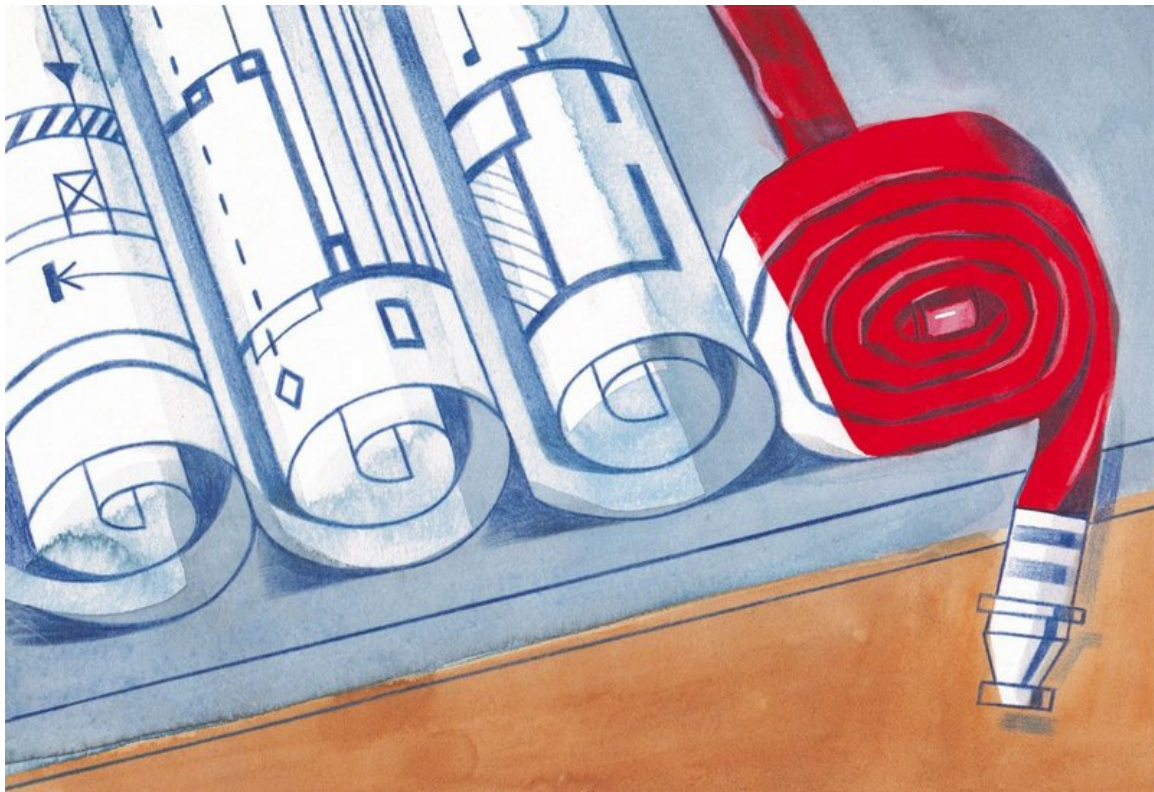
The government introduced its Building Safety Bill and accompanying fact sheets in early July. These were swiftly followed by the Building Regulations Advisory Committee's golden thread report, setting out the definition and principles of the golden thread of information that extends through a building's design, construction and

operation.

So documentation is coming at the industry thick and fast, along with the first demand of the new regime. This requires fire safety information to be submitted for approval at three gateway points – planning, pre-construction and completion – for higher-risk, multi-occupied residential buildings of 18m or more or seven or more storeys in height. Compliance with the first gateway was required from 1 August.

‘Pandora’s Box has without question opened for the entire construction industry,’ says Jane Duncan, RIBA past president and chair of the RIBA Expert Advisory Group on Fire Safety, as she opened the ‘Fire Safety in Practice’ webinar.

‘The implications of the bill are enormous. We have a complete rethink of our competence requirements, we’re going to have to think about retraining and taking CPD, our responsibilities as architects within the bill itself will change, and the principal designer role will come into force as a new dutyholder.’



Central to the new regime is the principal designer, whose dutyholder role is set out in a government fact sheet.

Paul Bussey, senior technical consultant at Allford Hall Monaghan Morris and a member of the RIBA Expert Advisory Group on Fire Safety, compared this role to that of an orchestra conductor: ‘We don’t have to know how to play all the instruments but we need to know when it’s sounding wrong and pull everyone together to create a symphony.’

'We need to step up to the plate and do it, but we have a seat at what's called the Interim Industry Competence Committee, who will be setting the level of accreditation and competence expected of our members.'

'There's a strong onus on architects to take this role on,' says Matthew Needham-Laing, partner – construction and engineering, at law firm Edwin Coe.

'Architects are front and centre of the bill as they are the only construction professional body that has a statutory obligation to do CPD, basically in relation to fire safety. If architects don't comply with their CPD requirements in terms of the bill, then they could get sanctioned.'

Needham-Laing saw problems in aligning the sharply defined parameters of the gateway regime with the realities of managing a project.

'The bill itself doesn't really lend itself to design and build. When you get to the second gateway, the assumption is that the design is completed and it is handed over to the contractor who takes over as the principal contractor and builds,' he said.

'It is the area where architects have least control because they are often not the people who determine the procurement process in that wider sense of what contracts will be used to get a building built.' Ultimately, he suggested, this could be resolved through greater adoption of collaborative contracts.

Uncertainty continues around several areas as the bill works its way through parliament – expected to take at least nine months – and secondary legislation is put into place. However, the panellists said, there are steps architects can take now.

Peter Caplehorn, chief executive of the Construction Products Association (CPA) said: 'The issue is to get organised.'

New tools are helping architects gather information, with RIBA's Fire Safety Compliance Tracker tool, which enables project teams to record and share fire safety information, issued in July.

'Central to the regime is the principal designer, who has a dutyholder role'

The quality of product information is being addressed by a Code for Construction Product Information, which is being developed by the CPA with the Considerate Constructors Scheme. This 11-point code, due to be published in November, aims to ensure manufacturers' information is clear, transparent, obvious, honest and

available. Architects are already asking manufacturers for more information.

‘While in the past, we would have been contacted by specialist contractors down the chain during installation phases, we’ve recently been approached more by designers and architects, which we welcome as it allows us to engage and support much earlier in the construction process,’ said Olga Katsanova, head of product management for Northern Europe at Hilti.

‘That has also challenged us to think beyond our existing tools to how we can make sure our products fit into BIM models and support the industry through BIM services, for example.’

Jenny Carter-Vaughan, managing director at Affinity Select Insurance Services, highlighted the bill’s intention to extend the time limit for claims under the Defective Premises Act to 15 years, and apply it retrospectively.

‘As the principal designer, it seems to me that architects will be left holding the baby,’ she said. ‘I know it’s not particularly exciting, but record-keeping and the quality of those records are going to be the things that enable you potentially to defend claims if they are made against you.’

Now looks like the time to get ready.

SEVEN WAYS TO GET READY

- 1 **Stay informed:** Check the government, Construction Leadership Council and RIBA websites regularly
- 2 **Allocate resource:** Have a practice lead follow the progress of the bill and what’s going on – and disseminate information around the practice; sole practitioners or small practices can allocate a person or a certain amount of their time to keeping up to date
- 3 **Change your system:** Make sure your management system is taking the transition on board
- 4 **Create your own golden thread of information:** Ensure information is organised and available
- 5 **Brush up on the CDM regulations:** ‘There are lots of parallels on how we go forward,’ advises Peter Caplehorn.
- 6 **Communicate with clients:** Make sure your clients understand the ongoing changes
- 7 **Work on insurance paperwork:** Put time, effort and research into filling out your insurance proposal form, as you would if you were pitching to an important client. Include background, details, photos of projects – and mandatory CPD on core competences. ‘It can help open underwriters’ doors,’ says Jenny Carter-Vaughan

This RIBA J webinar was produced in association with [HILTI](#) and can be viewed [here](#)
