

Fire Safety Risk Assessors Seminar held at Devon and Somerset Headquarters

In April 2015 Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (DSFRS) successfully prosecuted a Fire Safety Risk Assessor (risk assessor) due to failures under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (also known as the FSO or Fire Safety Order).

This was only the 3rd time a risk assessor had been prosecuted under the Order by a Fire and Rescue Service since the legislation came into force.

As part of DSFRS policy to assist businesses to achieve compliance, (in preference to taking legal action, which is always a last resort) the prosecution was publicised as widely as possible.

The purpose of this was;

- to raise awareness of the varying standards of persons trading as Fire Safety Risk Assessors;
- to publicise that DSFRS will take appropriate action against those responsible for serious breaches
- to invite Fire Safety Risk Assessors to a seminar which was held on 11th September 2015 at DSFRS headquarters in Exeter.
- to open lines of communication between the fire service and Fire Safety Risk Assessors, with the aim of promoting an understanding of each other's roles and expectations.

Particular focus was placed on the contents and standards of the fire safety risk assessment, which is a vital ingredient to achieving compliance with the Fire Safety Order.

What did we aim to achieve in the long term?

Developing this understanding and cooperative approach will in turn (hopefully) ensure that the businesses employing Fire Safety Risk Assessors are assured of receiving sufficient guidance to achieve and maintain compliance with fire safety requirements.

This not only promotes safety for those working, visiting or staying in the region but also reduces the incidents of fires and ensures that when fires do occur, that the impact is limited because suitable fire safety measures should be in place.

This leads to a reduction in the loss of business activity due to fire, promoting productivity and prosperity for the community.

Note: 80% of businesses do not recover from the impact of a serious fire

The topics covered at the seminar

As this was the first time DSFRS had hosted this type of event, it was difficult to know exactly what should be discussed, but there were some key topics which were considered to be essential to ensuring the seminar achieved its goal.

It was also important to stress from the outset that the seminar was not a training or teaching event.

Topics covered;

- Legal background – ‘The law versus you’
 - It was important that the risk assessors understood how they were responsible under the Fire Safety Order, as many believed they were not culpable.
- Common issues for DSFRS
 - Examples of issues found with sub-standard guidance or Fire Risk Assessments were presented, including a detailed case study of the prosecution taken in April 2015
- Common issues for FRAs
 - It was important that the risk assessors were allowed the opportunity to comment on the issues they have found when dealing with DSFRS and other Fire and Rescue Services
- When does your involvement end?
 - Although risk assessors are generally employed to complete a specific task, and they may do this very well, frequently the business owner does not always understand or follow the advice given by the risk assessor. Ensuring the business owner has understood the findings and recommendations of the risk assessor is very important to ensuring a satisfactory standard of fire safety is achieved and maintained. Some risk assessors said they ensured this occurred by going through their reports with the business owner and making follow-up appointments to check progress, but others said, although they always went through their report with the business owner, the contract arrangements did not (usually) include follow up support, because business owners did not want to commit to a long term cost or contract.
- Qualifications?
 - There is no legal requirement to be qualified to trade as a risk assessor and there are many different training courses which can be taken which claim to provide the necessary skills. A presentation was given outlining an approach which involves 3rd party accreditations, National Occupational Standards (NOS) and industry specific qualifications. It was generally agreed that this was the best way forward to ensuring a consistent standard and professionalism for the fire safety risk assessment industry.
- Example of DSFRS audit process
 - In order for the risk assessors to understand the areas which are covered by DSFRS when premises are inspected (by Fire Protection Officers) the inspection and auditing process was covered in some detail. It was felt that having an understanding of this process would enable the risk assessors to ensure they had a system which covered and addressed the same topics.
- DSFRS expectations
 - The main purpose of the seminar was to develop a working relationship and understanding of the expectations of the fire service, with a view to

achieving a consistent and compliant outcome, preventing friction and challenges to approaches, without this understanding it would be difficult to have this outcome.

- DSFRS and FRAs - finally, we asked;
 1. What can we do for you?
 2. What do you think we could do better?
 3. What could you do better?
 4. Are you able to speak to us freely?
 5. Do you want to work with us?
 - These questions were asked to create a forum for honest discussion and feedback, with the intention of continued dialogue to promote engagement and improve cooperative working, where appropriate.

The evaluation

Following the seminar each attendee was contacted and sent copies of all presentations and asked to complete a simple survey (using survey monkey).

The overall feedback from the survey was very positive, though there were some comments on improvements for future events, which will be taken on board.

Examples below;

Question: What did you like about the seminar?

‘The floor was always open for discussion on all topics at any stage of a given presentation. This highlighted areas of confusion and areas most guests agreed on.’

‘Open, honest and frank discussion making it very clear where the fire service is now, how and why the change of stance and the lead towards better exchanges of information and ideas in the future.’

‘All from FB approachable and knowledgeable’

Question: What did you dislike about the seminar?

‘there was a lot covered and traffic was a nightmare getting home’

Question: Is there anything else you’d like to share about the seminar?

‘It was a difficult task to pull off a seminar on Fire Risk Assessments that would appeal to both those that undertake them and those that need them but on the whole I believe the balance was about right, it perhaps could have benefited from a greater presence and input from those that provide 3rd party accreditation to assessors. A definite thumbs up!!’

‘As someone new to the industry I did not feel completely out of my depth during the day. Everything was made clear and broke everything down in group discussion which was very helpful to observe and note upon.’

‘Thoroughly informative and enjoyable and have recommended colleagues to attend the next one.’

Next Steps

- Maintain contact with attendees via email
- Investigate potential of hosting repeat event
- Publicise DSFRS appetite to engage with businesses.

If anyone reading this is interested in attending a compliance event hosted by DSFRS, or would like to sponsor an event please contact Paul Bray, Community Safety Protection manager via email pbray@dsfire.gov.uk