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# Grease is the word

Improper cleaning of extraction units in the hospitality and catering sectors can cause devastating fires. **Allister Smith** looks at the facts.

**DIFFICULT** TRADING conditions for bars, takeaways and restaurants mean brokers need to be sure their clients in the hospitality and catering sectors are continuing to take cleaning and maintenance precautions seriously.

In kitchens and catering areas, improper cleaning of ducts and extraction units can increase the likelihood of devastating fires, as grease build-up in extraction systems is one of the most common causes of fire.

Cleaning and maintenance of kitchen ducts may seem like a costly overhead that can be postponed, but brokers should remind clients that failing to employ competent specialist contractors could be dangerous. Instead of waiting for a disaster to happen, those businesses reliant on kitchen facilities need to be taking appropriate measures to ensure they are cleaned regularly.

Of the 24 000 accidental fires per year in commercial properties, around 6000 are attributed to cooking and extraction systems. Businesses must pay closer attention to maintaining their catering extraction systems, since claims arising from fires caused by poorly maintained ones regularly cross insurers' desks, and many of these fires could have been avoided with good risk management practices.

## Cleaning effectively

Too often, businesses do not give enough consideration to cleaning their kitchen extraction systems effectively. It is simply not enough to think 'out of sight, out of mind', especially now the onus is on those deemed a responsible person to ensure regular cleaning of kitchen ducts.

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In many cases, grease deposits that have built up in extraction ducting become ignited and cause rapid fire spread throughout the entire ducting system.

Because extraction ducts may often be routed through other parts of a building to reach either a roof or are channelled to an external wall to extract fumes, there have been some cases where the entire property has been consumed by widespread fire damage as a result.

The consequence of a fire occurring in the extraction ducting can be enormous, not only to the property, lives of occupants and fire fighters, but to the bottom line of a business. Business interruption costs are likely to have a significant impact as an out-of-action kitchen is catastrophic to a catering establishment or licensed premises.

One recent example of a devastating commercial kitchen fire involved a Greek restaurant, which had a 24-hour takeaway facility. The owners of this organisation simply did not recognise the dangers of the immense amount of grease being deposited in the ducting and suffered a large fire.

As a 24-hour catering operation, cleaners were simply unable to carry out the work needed. Shutting down the fryers meant lost profits. The grease had accumulated over several years to the point that this was essentially a fire waiting to happen.

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The insurance industry is trying to raise awareness among bar and restaurant businesses of the dangers of not paying attention to grease and oil build up in the kitchen extract ductwork of catering premises. The *Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order* makes it a legal requirement for the responsible person to carry out fire risk assessments and take necessary steps to reduce any potential fire hazards.

The frequency and scale of kitchen duct fires has led the insurer-funded fire research body Risk Authority, and the Building Services Research and Industry Association, to publish *Recommendations for Fire Risk Assessment of Catering Extract Ventilation*, a guidance document aimed at helping those responsible to assess fire hazards in a kitchen and take suitable precautions. This can be downloaded free of charge from the Risk Authority website.

Businesses failing to pay attention to cleaning their extraction systems could be doing so for a number of reasons; ignorance and cost are the usual suspects, but the latter even more so given the current economic climate.

Many insurance policies contain specific conditions relating to regimes of kitchen extraction cleaning. If a fire occurs within the extraction system and can be shown to be associated with inadequate cleaning, it could jeopardise a claim for loss or damage.

## Consider fire hazards

In assessing risk, owners have to consider fire hazards such as cooking equipment left unattended or not switched off after use, poor maintenance, or the absence of safety thermostats and shut-off devices in appliances. Flames, sparks and hot gases from other cooking can ignite combustible deposits inside extract ducts, which will quickly spread around the building.

To minimise grease build up, ductwork should reach the atmosphere by the shortest, most direct route and with the minimum number of bends.

The expertise and training of staff is crucial in minimising the risk of fire. Staff should know how to use commercial cleaning chemicals, and know what to do in the event of a fire breaking out.

Understanding the risks of grease in extraction systems, and how to use the specialist tools required to remove the grease, is vital for all staff. Knowledge of commercial cleaning chemicals and safety training to demonstrate how to isolate the extractor fan or report faulty controls and sensors should be compulsory.

Keeping records of this training and maintenance is also essential. Should there be a fire or accident, these records may provide the only defence against criminal prosecution for non-compliance with the RRO.

Finally, when employing professional cleaning contractors, brokers and their customers should be aware that some can literally 'cut corners'. Bends and corners of ducts often trap grease and are hard to access so can be all too easy to ignore. A good competent contractor will always ensure a thorough, deep clean is carried out. **POST**

Allister Smith is property risk manager at Aviva

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