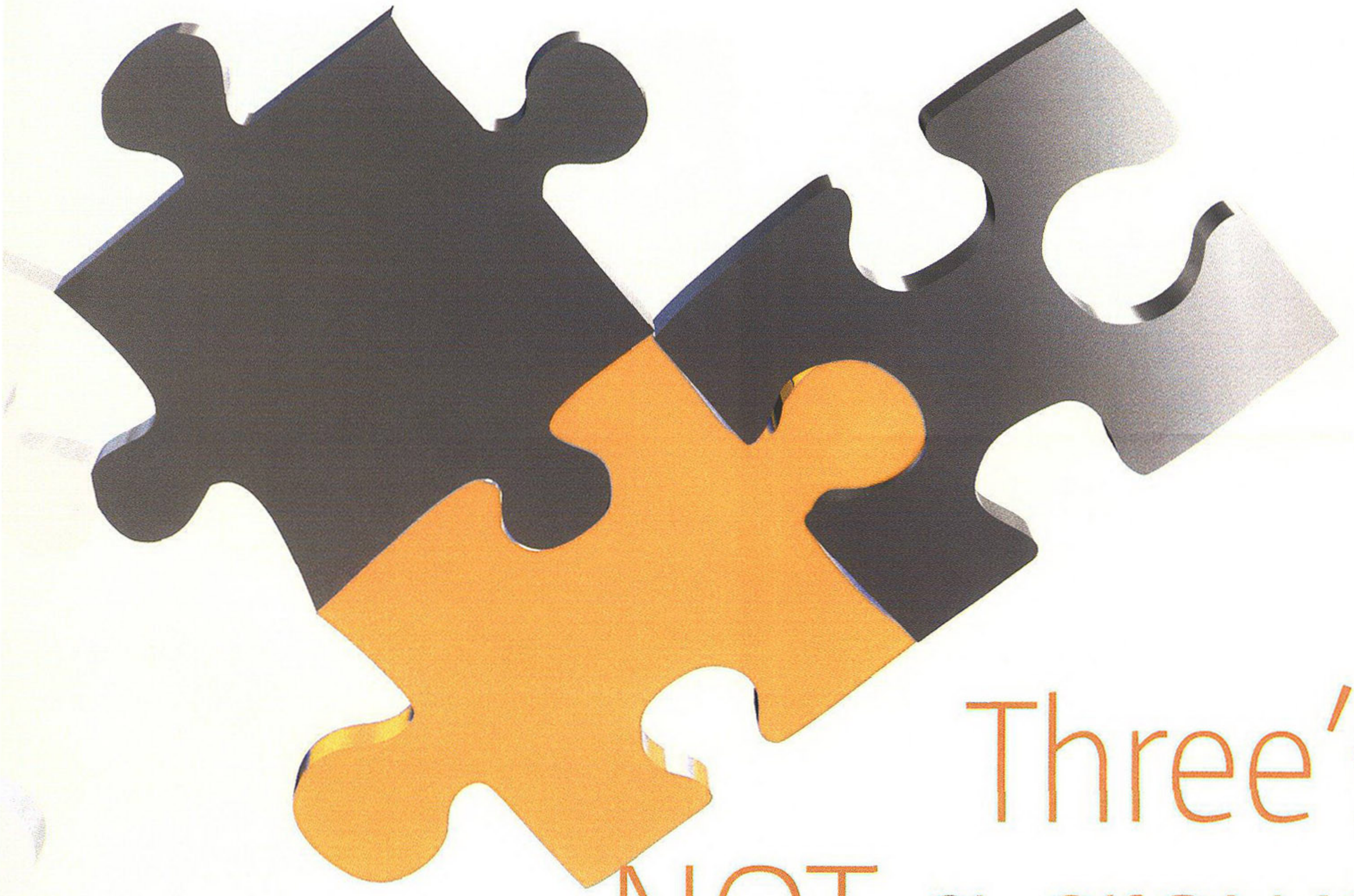


Three's NOT a crowd

John Davidson emphasises the importance of using credible contractors for installing and maintaining fire safety equipment and explains how to identify them.

DURING THESE TIMES OF ECONOMIC uncertainty and financial belt-tightening, businesses are looking to diversify into other areas. Many see the fire sector as an easy place to make a "fast buck", relying on the fact that the majority of end users do not fully understand the requirements for fire detection and alarm (FD&A) systems and portable fire extinguishers (PFE). They depend on their fire contractor to give them the best advice and provide them with equipment that is suitable for their requirements and fit for purpose.

It is also very tempting for property developers, owners, occupiers, and specifiers to reduce the amount they spend on FD&A, PFE, and other 'life safety' equipment, and to engage the services of unskilled and untrained people and organisations to provide and maintain their systems and equipment for a reduced cost.

October 2006 saw a radical change in fire safety legislation in the UK, with the revocation of the Fire Precautions Act 1971 and introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (for England and Wales) and the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, which replaced a plethora of existing legislation.

Consequently, the onus of ensuring that premises have adequate 'life-safety' systems, such as FD&A, emergency-lighting systems, and fire-fighting equipment now falls on the appointed 'responsible person', or 'duty-holder' within an organisation.

These two pieces of legislation require that 'the premises are, to the extent that is appropriate, equipped with fire-fighting equipment and with fire detectors and alarms" and that "equipment and devices provided are subject to a suitable system of maintenance and maintained in an efficient state, in efficient working order, and in good repair". The responsible person or duty-holder must also nominate competent people to carry out work on any of the equipment provided.

In addition to the requirements of this specific fire legislation, Approved Document B 2006 (part of the Building Regulations for England & Wales), the Chief Fire Officers' Association's (CFOA) Policy, and other documents now recognise and acknowledge the importance of third-party certification schemes in helping to prove competence through independent inspection.

Buyer beware

However, under the present legislative regime, any one man and his van can trundle down to the local electrical wholesalers, or PFE distributors. Or they can go online to one of the many Internet-based suppliers, order a van full of

equipment, install it, commission it, and claim it complies with the necessary legislation and codes of practice. The onus is therefore on the end user to check that any company contracted to install FD&A systems can prove it is competent to do the job.

Three questions spring to mind: would you, as an end user, insurer, or enforcing authority accept a gas-heating system in a building that had been designed, installed, commissioned and maintained by a non-Gas Safe (previously CORGI) registered company? Or would you, as an end user, insurer, or enforcing authority accept an electrical installation in a building that had been designed, installed, commissioned and maintained by a non-approved electrical contractor?

The answer to the above questions is (hopefully) no, which brings me on to the third question: why are FD&A systems accepted that have been designed, installed, commissioned and maintained by non-approved companies? Is the safe operation and performance integrity of a fire detection and alarm system any less important than the gas and electrical systems in a premises? Indeed, it could be argued that it is *more* important, as it is relied upon to give you early warning if something goes drastically wrong with the other two!

But how can you, as a 'responsible person' or end user, be sure that the person you have contracted to do the work has the necessary training and experience, and is using reputable equipment?

Third-party certification

Probably the most robust and reliable method by which you can demonstrate that you are using competent people to provide and maintain your fire detection and alarm system is by using a company that is certificated to a recognised third-party certification scheme.

BAFE (British Approvals for Fire Equipment) develops relevant schemes for the fire sector in conjunction with interested parties, such as NSI (National Security Inspectorate), BSI (British Standards Institution), BRE (Building Research Establishment), SSAIB (Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board) and the Chief Fire Officers' Association, as well as insurance companies and the fire industry itself.

These schemes can then be operated by appropriate Third-Party Certification Bodies (TPCB), which must be accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) for the relevant BAFE scheme, known as the accredited scheme.

In the UK, there are two recognised fire certification schemes for the provision of FD&A systems. One of these is the BAFE SP 203-1 Modular Fire Detection and Alarm System scheme, provided under the NSI Fire Gold and Fire Silver brands. Other certification bodies also provide the scheme under their own brand identities. The second is the BAFE SP 201 scheme, provided by the Loss Prevention Certification Board as the LPS 1014 scheme.

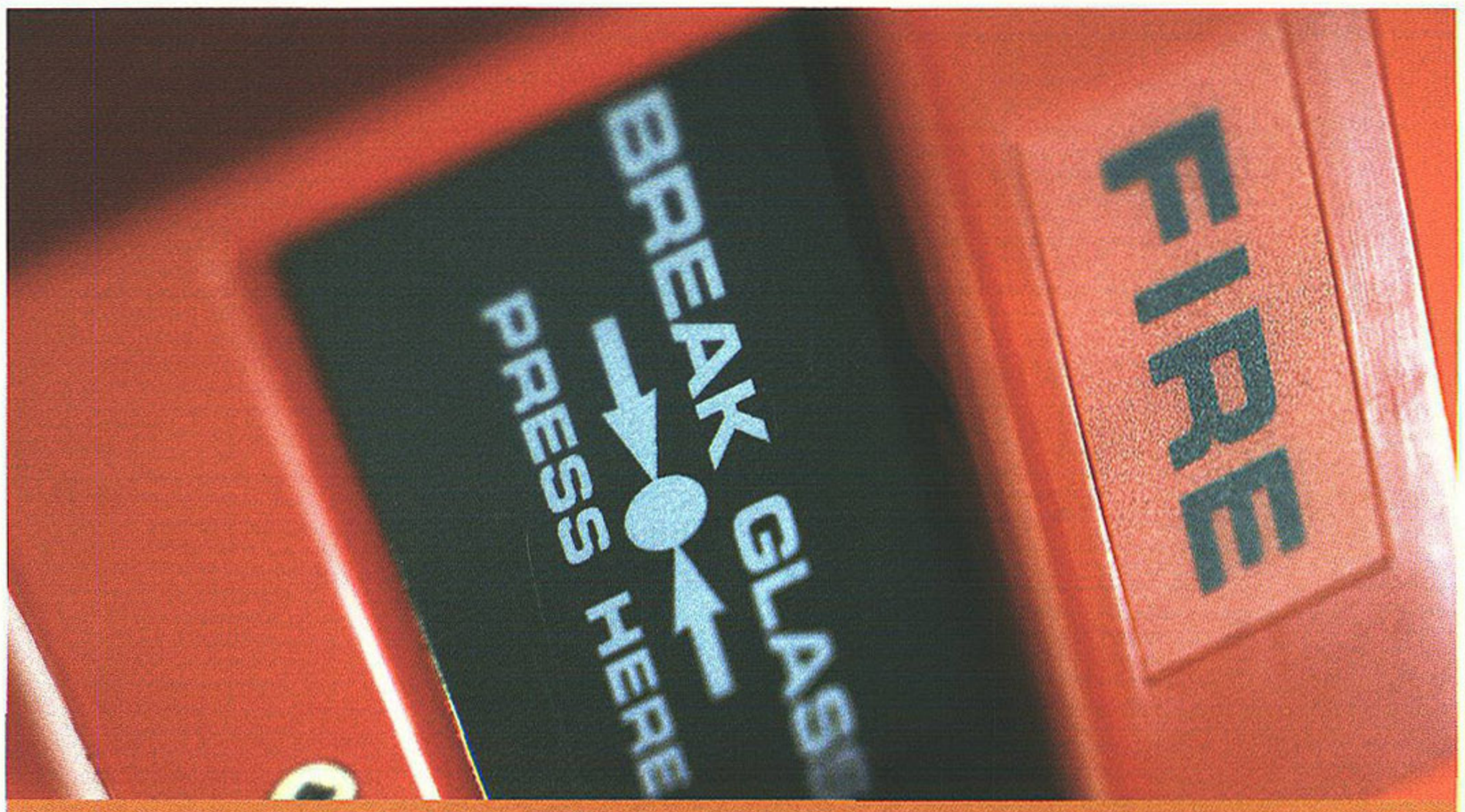
The initial assessment process for a company wishing to achieve third-party certification for one of the schemes does vary according to the certification body, but is generally as follows:

- The applicant company submits its documented management system for review by the TPCB to ensure that it meets its requirements;
- This is followed by two assessment visits made to the applicant company – the first is primarily a technical assessment, concentrating on the inspection of FD&A systems that the applicant company has designed, installed, commissioned and maintained. The second is primarily concerned with the auditing of the company's documented management system and the implementation of the system within the company.

To achieve certification, a company must satisfactorily address any issues raised during the course of the assessment.

However, this is only the beginning of the audit process. Once a company has achieved certification an ongoing programme of surveillance visits begins. Companies generally receive two visits a year from their certification body and, in NSI's case, the surveillance programme has three elements:

- Technical site inspections are made at randomly selected sites where the FD&A systems have been recently installed or maintained, and are subjected to a rigorous inspection against the relevant codes of practice;
- Management systems are audited



"The onus is on the end user to check that any company contracted to install fire detection and alarm systems can prove it is competent to do so"

"Several types of fire extinguisher exist, and it is the responsible person's job to ensure they have the correct type, and adequate provision"

to ensure that the company is continuing to work in compliance with its own management system;
- Three-yearly recertification audits are carried out, in which the certificated company's performance over the previous three years is assessed and, if satisfactory, a further three-year period of certification will be granted.

Maintaining portable fire extinguishers

In addition to the schemes for FD&A, there is a BAFE scheme for the provision and maintenance of portable fire extinguishers (PFE), known as the SP 101 scheme. Almost all non-domestic premises in the UK contain portable fire extinguishers. These can quickly become part of the furniture in a building, so much so that they are often used as doorstops, usually to keep fire doors open!

However, unlike FD&A systems, which can be tested by the end user on a regular basis, how do you find out if a fire extinguisher works? When it is needed in an emergency – hardly the ideal time to find out that the device in your hand is actually more use as a doorstop!

Just as different fire detection devices are suitable for different fire risks, several types of fire extinguisher exist, and it is the responsible person's job to ensure that they have the correct type and adequate provision of extinguishers.

Portable fire extinguishers should be selected and installed in accordance with BS 5306-8:2000 and maintained to BS 5306-3:2003, but how do you know if your PFE provider or maintainer is actually operating to these standards? Again, this is where third-party certification plays an important role.

Firstly, end users should ensure that the technicians employed by their provider are registered to the BAFE ST 104 Scheme for the Maintenance of Portable Fire Extinguishers, which assesses an individual's competency in the provision and maintenance of PFEs. The initial certification lasts for three years, after which the individual must be re-examined in order to maintain their registration.

Secondly, end users should ensure that the company they contract to provide and maintain their PFE is third-party certificated to the BAFE SP 101 scheme.

Emergency lighting

To raise standards and provide end users with a method of proving they have a competent contractor for their emergency-lighting requirements, a new scheme is being developed by BAFE, called SP 203-4, which is likely to be introduced later this year.

Identifying approved companies

So where can you find a third-party certificated company? Most certification bodies have search facilities on their websites, and the BAFE site lists all companies operating the BAFE schemes. Also, companies that are approved to one of the accredited schemes are also entitled to use the appropriate TPCB and BAFE logos on documentation and vehicles.

Summary

While there are many companies that will provide an excellent service without any form of certification, there are many others that will provide inadequate design, shoddy levels of workmanship, low-performance equipment, and poor customer support. This will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of unwanted alarms, and incidents involving the loss of property or – infinitely worse – loss of life.

End users, enforcing authorities, and insurers need a way of identifying the best from the bad. Third-party certification schemes are the way forward, giving people the confidence that by engaging a third-party certificated company, they will receive a professional service, provided by competent people, and – most importantly – FD&A systems and PFE that they can rely on. ■

Further information

- www.nsi-fire.org.uk
- www.bafe.org.uk

John Davidson works for NSI – see page 4 for more information