

Sprinklers save lives

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Despite continued fatalities in domestic fires, the construction industry seems reluctant to fit sprinklers in new-build properties. A bereaved surveyor explains how vital they can be

I write this piece having just seen news reports about the deaths of 4 young children in a house fire in Stafford, and I cannot help but think again of the night of 7 January 2003.

It was extremely cold, and my 2 grown-up sons happened to be staying with us as they were playing in a golf match at our local club the following day. We lived in a detached, 3-bedroom house built in 1966 that was fitted with smoke alarms. My eldest son was a firefighter with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service and so very keen on fire prevention.

At around 2.30am on 8 January, he woke my wife to tell us that the house was on fire, and we went downstairs. The lights were on and we could not hear, see or smell fire; neither had the smoke alarms activated. I had woken our youngest son before coming downstairs.

When I opened the door to the lounge, fumes did set off the smoke alarms, and my eldest rang 999. But I could still not see, hear or smell a fire. I suggested to my wife that if there was a fire then we should move our two cars in the drive in case the emergency services needed access.

Having done so, we were going back into the hall when the lounge area erupted into a fireball. I tried to get further into the hall but the fumes were suffocating. I was pulled out by a neighbour who had arrived on the scene. He explained later that he had been a retained firefighter himself and knew what might happen.

We went to the back of the house. The window to my youngest son's bedroom was flung open as black smoke belched out and we heard him shouting at his brother. Then silence. All these events took no more than three minutes.

The fire service arrived along with the ambulance. My wife and I were taken in by neighbours wearing nothing but our nightclothes. The Red Cross arrived and gave us some second-hand clothes, for which we were very grateful.

At some point a representative of the police and ambulance service arrived to tell us our sons had been taken out of the house but were pronounced dead on arrival at hospital.

My sister-in-law, who lived fairly nearby, arrived to take the two of us away. Later that morning I had to drive to my mother, who was then in her mid 90s, to explain she no longer had any grandchildren.

Our house was a total ruin. We had lost all our possessions ? everything. I cannot begin to describe what having absolutely nothing really means. We were interviewed by the police and had to give statements on the events of the night before.

Meetings with loss adjusters and builders took place, and two weeks later our sons' funerals were held. I cannot begin to describe how terrible this day was. In the main, we were comforting friends and acquaintances of our sons.

In the following months my wife and I received great support from the surveying profession as a whole and we moved back into our rebuilt house in November 2003.

During the rebuilding we had had a sprinkler system fitted, but the insurer did not want to know

At the behest of the fire service, I gave a number of talks to many professional groups in the building industry, and also met housing and building services ministers. Finally, we had to attend an inquest. I thought we had been through the worst; but listening to members of the fire service relate what they had found and how they dealt with the fire was quite the most traumatic thing we had to endure.

I got back in touch with our insurers who were happy to insure the new building and contents. They wanted to know whether we had a burglar alarm fitted, which we had; I also mentioned that during the rebuilding we had been approached by the [Residential Sprinkler Association](#) and had had a sprinkler system fitted, but the insurer did not want to know.

I wrote again to the insurers, stressing that in the event of another fire losses would be minimal thanks to the sprinkler system. I have seen many demonstrations of such systems. I received a response from the firm's chief executive officer, who stated quite plainly that there were few fires in domestic properties so it was not worth taking the sprinklers into account. You can imagine our disgust.

It has been said that if sprinkler systems were made compulsory it would inhibit the building of more homes. But did the need to wear seat belts reduce the sale of cars? The cost to the insurers of reinstating our house was around ?165,000, the cost of the sprinkler system 1.5% of that. When will the government and the construction industry begin to take fire seriously?

Sprinklers legislation

Since 2016, sprinklers have been mandatory in all new residential buildings in Wales. As part of the review of Approved Document B in England, RICS is pressing for changes to [mandatory sprinkler installation requirements](#) .

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Further information

- Related competencies include: [Fire safety](#)
- This feature has come from the [RICS Built Environment Journal](#) (June/July 2019)
- Related categories: [Health and safety in construction](#) , [Fire and life safety](#)

Fire safety conferences 2020

These two events will discuss the key fire safety considerations, latest legislation, building regulations, identify best practice and provide expert knowledge to remain at the forefront of your profession. They will be held on 11 February 2020 in [London](#) and on 17 March 2020 in [Manchester](#) .