

Fire Across Europe

Throughout the past decade the Federation of British Fire Organisations [FOBFO] has on behalf of all its members endeavoured to promote a European view on all fire matters. Most recently this has concentrated upon review and consideration of how best to improve what members perceive to be the complex trade and standards situation that exists for 'Fire across Europe'.

Why a new initiative?

In 2001 FOBFO enlisted the support of the international association of fire and rescue services, Comité Technique International de prévention et d'extinction du Feu [CTIF], to help with this task. CTIF responded positively by asking a group of European fire professionals to consider how best to move a European objective forward.

Why did FOBFO think this action was worth the effort? Well the original reasons behind FOBFO's desire to improve European fire arrangements are explained in part and in some detail later but essentially the main focus of attention has and remains the European Community [EC]. This is because most of what happens to the nearly half a billion people who live, work and play between the Atlantic and the Black Sea is seriously affected by the EC. It is a case therefore of regardless of whether you are pro, disinterested or against European engagement, what is certain is that no one can do is ignore either Europe or the EC.

Why Europe?

The early background of the EC as a community of interest is also worth recounting because it too contains a solid reason to engage more forcefully. Understandably the desire at the end of the Second World War was to secure lasting security through peace and the approach used involved the simple premise that countries that trade with each other rarely fight each other. Furthermore if that trade was actually focused on what were the then the essential materials of war, coal and steel, then a further war involving Europe was most unlikely.

So it was that what we now know as the EC founding 'six'; France and Germany together with Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands; came together and signed in April 1951 the Treaty of Paris to create the European Coal and Steel Community, the beginning of the largest free trade area in the World. Emboldened by their success six years later in 1957 the same six nations decided through the Treaties of Rome to create the common market of the European Economic Community. And make no mistake although the UK was not a signatory to the Paris Treaty it was an active supporter with Sir Winston Churchill promoting European collaboration right from the very end of World War II.

Why Now?

In 2007, the sixtieth jubilee year, 27 national Member States now work side by side on a vast range of policies either directed or recommended by a Council of Ministers, the European Parliament or the European Commission that aim to improve the lives of all Europeans. And those improvements, in the eyes of FOBFO and CTIF, should include safety from fire and other emergencies.

Safety from fire and other emergencies is therefore both the starting point and the finishing line.

But this a difficult path not least because fire is a subsidiarity matter, meaning that is how it is managed, or not as the case may be, remains the total responsibility of the Member State. There is however a modest concession introduced in 2001, which allows the EC through a small Civil Protection Unit, created post the 1976 Seveso disaster within the EC Directorate responsible for the Environment, to facilitate voluntary mutual aid and the exchange of expertise through guidance.

Limited Success

Despite the very limited nature of these concessions there has been some real success, especially on the fire and rescue front. For example there has been a number of transnational projects, such as those undertaken by the Federation of European Fire Chiefs [FEU] and the promotion of the 112 emergency call number; funding has allowed fire officers and other professionals to meet both on courses, through the European Fire Services' College Association, or at practical exercises. In 1996 with EC assisted funding the UK organised and hosted the first and only European Fire Safety Conference and most recently, following the advent of the 2201 mutual aid mechanism and establishment within the Civil Protection Unit of a Monitoring and Information Centre, coordinated responses have been made around Europe to a number of emergencies.

However many fire professionals both within the commercial fire industry and public fire and rescue service believe this is simply not good enough and whilst there is care to work along existing routes and in partnership with other EC organisations, recognising the principle of subsidiarity and the strength that is gained from a diverse community, there remains an overwhelming need to inform and assist policy makers and parliamentarians understand the contribution that is available from the whole fire sector. To FOBFO and many others that means re energising the debate on how Europe thinks about this sector and allowing the sector to demonstrate good practice and influence policy well before regulation and recommendations come into force.

A Safer Europe

Although these central tenets are quiet basic, since all those working in the fire sector share a responsibility and wish to help protect citizens whether through products or services from the ravages of fire, they are complex to

introduce. All those in the Member States' fire sector should therefore see the EC as a key player because the EC offers the opportunity to create a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable approach that will lead towards the achievement of a Safer Europe.

A Safer Europe would have

- Adequate legal foundations to protect citizens;
- Raise risk awareness;
- Help improve emergency response;
- Assist development of a safer built environment through specification of safe products, materials and fire safety engineering; and
- Identify European wide areas for action; and
- Assess improvement through statistical review and research.

Impact of the Four Freedoms

Many may consider these matters are already well defined in a national context but is that true for the interactive modern day situation that arises across Europe? The 'Four Freedoms' of the EC colossus of a trading block rest in the Free Movement of Goods, Services, People and Capital. Each of those freedoms impacts upon and has importance therefore to all those concerned about fire.

The example of the Construction Products Directive 89/106/EC helps indicate this level of importance under the movement of goods. This is a Directive, therefore demanding introduction by national law, designed to ensure products can withstand fire loads, limit fire growth and spread and assist occupant and firefighter safety, sounds exactly what is needed. The application however of prescriptive national standards has sought to erode competition and confidence in suppliers and regulators alike.

Another example is Council Recommendation 86/666/EEC Fire Safety Level for all Hotels remains as a lasting epitaph to the failed freedom of services. Designed to ensure the hotel service sector would provide safe escape, early warning of fire and have hotels across Europe constructed to agreed standards with well-trained staff, regular reviews have shown that how you are protected remains a potluck in the hotel safety lottery.

A Directive under the movement of people almost collapsed the whole European volunteer firefighter section of over 1 million people with the introduction of the Working Time Directive 93/104/EC. Sensible limits of a 48-hour week with minimum rest period's of 11 hours in 24, 30 minute day breaks, a day a week off, 4 weeks leave and 8 hours night work, ignored the well established working practices and socially acceptable conditions used by fulltime and volunteer staff to provide safety cover to local communities.

And likewise with economic freedom where Council Directive 88/361/EEC, which rightly within the EC trading zone encourages transnational trade and economic growth to increase opportunities, also introduces other impacts. Impacts in trade, which allows the manufacture, supply, use and

A European Fire Perspective

transportation of hazardous materials; or economics, which result in the movement of whole social groups and development of unsocial economies; and opportunities, that introduce cultural diversification and sometimes tensions.

Gross over simplifications and generalisations? Of course but all have an inescapable conclusion that, since all the freedoms invoke responses from the fire sector the very least that should happen is that there should be engagement with the fire that sector during policy development and that the sector should also be able to suggest a possible safety agenda.

European Fire Facts

The facts about fire in Europe also make interesting reading. CTIF estimates suggest that in Europe 1 fire will occur for every 1,000 citizens and every 100 fires will result in 1 death. It is worth recalling we are speaking of nearly half a billion people, a population only exceeded in China and India in a land mass that is half that of the USA.

Similarly it is believed 1% of the European gross domestic product goes up in smoke in direct fire losses and the fire and rescue service provision. The European GDP is estimated to be around 9,800 billion euros so 98 billion euro or £66 billion is lost. The cost to put out a fire is roughly about twice that of the actual damage caused, important since only 10% of fires are extinguished before the fire and rescue service arrive.

50% of fires are in buildings or transport and of those fires in buildings nearly 80% are in private homes, which is where 90-95% of the casualties arise. Finally arson, once the scourge of very few Member States, now accounts for 20% of fires and over 30% of calls are false alarms. Don't these facts suggest there is room for improvement?

Shared Challenges

This is a picture that goes alongside the shared challenges: of social cohesion and demographic change; environmental sustainability and less stable climates; of economic prosperity and impacts from migration; and of response to growing criminality and terrorism. These are challenges about which the fire sector knows something and has had in some cases practical experience so working to find solutions to these challenges, which confront every Member State, is already an area of contribution.

The younger and older members in our societies have long been a key focus for education and support but attention to the teenager; a neglected group but one where the fire and rescue service has had real success is important. Finding better tactics and resourcing improved logistics to manage climatic hazards like forest fires and floods are crucial concerns in vulnerable communities. And answering the unwelcome issues arising from economic development like aggression against migrant or ethnic groups or risks associated with unregulated conditions in the black economy is vital. Finally

working together to mitigate the consequence of crime and global terror, products of divided societies and twisted logics, must prompt us all to ask is there not something else we can all do better together as Europeans?

Current Weaknesses

Many believe there is but that the EC, as we know it, has structural and process weaknesses that must be addressed to allow this to happen. Weaknesses like a lack of understanding about the breadth of the subject, fire, and the technological environment that it both sustains and within which it operates. The lack of any discernable fire policy demonstrated by a series of unconnected activities that neither support existing known situations or more importantly confront those predicted in the next decade. However the greatest weakness is probably the sheer scale of the Commission and the inability of fire professionals to penetrate its corridors or permeate into its thinking without jumping the hurdles of officialdom that exist in every conceivable guise: a truly complicated maze worthy of the title 'Bureaucracy'.

If all that sounds unfair then allow some explanation. Fire is a subject that appears in numerous Directorates; Environment has been mentioned and so to hotels but hotels are not an issue for the Environment Directorate but for the Health and Consumer Affairs Directorate. Construction has also been mentioned and its home lies in the Enterprise and Industry Directorate. Tunnel safety, less important in the UK than many other countries, pops up in the Transport and Energy Directorate and health and safety has friends in the Employment and Social Affairs Directorate. Justice and Freedom are concerned with terrorism, whilst the cause of some crime, social cohesion, rests within Economic and Financial Affairs.

That quick canter across several issues affected by fire illustrates both breadth and diversity and without a very good cross Directorate process difficulties are inevitable. This lack of effective horizontal integration is perhaps why hotel safety still has some way to go. Take the relationships involved between economic sustainability, for a successful tourism industry, approval of construction products and methods, to ensure a safe building, the diversity created by the subsidiarity principle, when trying to gain equitable fire safety regulation, and the commonality of vocational competency in regulatory staff, to achieve satisfactory enforcement. A successful European hotel fire safety strategy would mean that all had to be considered, agreed and implemented yet each exists in isolation.

In a similar way if you consider how emergency response is now managed using technologies like digital communications and geospatial systems, which both enhance data transfer and improve inter service interoperability, you quickly realise that the EC could be of assistance in supporting emergency first responders in practical ways. Yet the activities undertaken are often project focused rather than system or process related creating segregation between elements that ought to be viewed holistically. And again even though millions of Euro is invested by the EC in research the subsequent outcomes are frequently derived from programmes, which had as their

starting point scoping studies that are either unaware or ignorant of the 'fire' contribution.

The isolation of the wide fire skill base of contribution from public and private bodies, which has a truly locally embedded nature, is quiet astounding. Maybe it is no more than the product of underestimating what is available, difficult communication along confusing access routes or thinking about fire simply as a technical issue without any political dimension. Those working within the fire sector see a completely different picture, one where community and national integration is the common operative style and one where mutual support is a recognised essential.

Improvements

How could we attempt to improve this situation when there are 27 independent Member States that need to align their views? Well we could start with a Bureau de Feu-a One Stop Shop- a Fire Desk- a Single Contact Point, a person and place that knows who is doing and does what about fire in the EC. Then there are those policies and projects that many suspect would benefit us all and which could be arranged to form a simple integrated EC strategic fire aim and hence plan. And we already all know that we really do need a statistics and research centre that is much better able to gather and analyse what is happening.

Awareness

However to make anything happen we require immediate improvement both in technical and political awareness. That is a tall order but without that awareness and ultimate commitment then the improvements sought in legal controls, trading standards, workplace fire safety, community wellbeing, risk based integrated response and first responders vocational competencies, will be long time coming. To press this case further FOBFO has already instigated a debate on these issues and will be calling for a congress of like-minded associations and non-governmental organisations in the near future to widen the discussion and draw consensus.

The priority is to have a new mechanism that manages the interface and facilitates the contribution of the fire protection industries and fire and rescue services throughout Europe: so that our Continent with a population larger than North America can be made more safe and secure.

Togetherness

The EC, in it's Lisbon Strategy, wants Europe by 2010 to be the most competitive and dynamic in the World; Michel Barnier, a previous EC Commissioner, wants Europe to contribute more humanitarian aid to the World; and we in the fire sector want to reverse the trends of death, injury and loss from fire and other catastrophes. The lesson of the past 60 years is that you can be safer by working together. Maybe through a new European connection, the fire community together, can make Europe safer still.