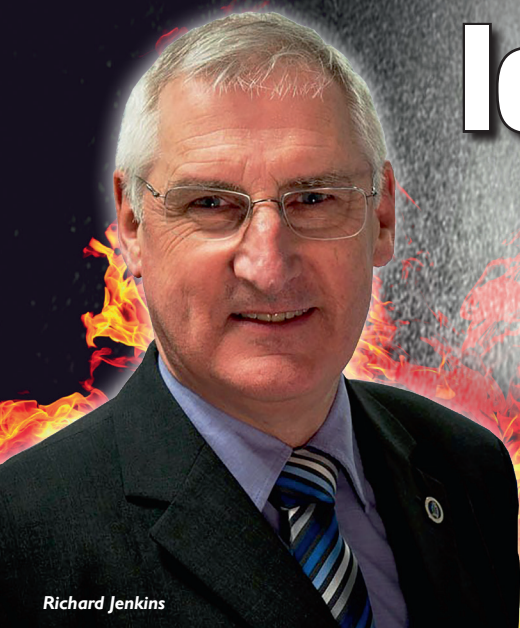




Fire extinguisher maintenance: leading providers working to enhanced standards



Richard Jenkins

Richard Jenkins, Chief Executive, at the National Security Inspectorate (NSI) – the UK's leading, independent third party certification body in the security sector.

NSI approves over 1800 companies for the wide-ranging security and fire services including CCTV installation and management.

Appointed by BAFE, NSI conducts independent, third party inspection of approved companies providing design, installation, commissioning and maintenance services for various fire protection schemes.

Protecting staff, visitors, contents and the building itself is a legal obligation of the occupiers of non-domestic buildings. A life safety fire risk assessment not only makes perfect sense as a first step in fire safety, it is also a legal requirement. A risk assessment determines how the building and the people within it may be best protected by a wide range of measures including a fire detection and alarm system, emergency lighting system and of course portable fire extinguishers.

Just as important as the design and standard of the product and installation of any systems, is its ongoing maintenance. Fire systems may never be used, but it goes without saying that a maintenance and testing programme should be in place to ensure

that if ever called upon, they will perform as expected.

Portable fire extinguishers are a first line defence, and a key part of every organisation's fire suppression plan. Extinguishers must of course be fit for purpose, that is, of appropriate type(s) for the known fire risk(s).

To deal with the different classes of fire, a range of fire extinguishers are available. All require regular inspection and maintenance to ensure readiness in any emergency, with the exception of the fire bucket: Water - Water Spray - Water Mist (Dry Water Mist) - Dry Powder (Multi-Purpose) - Dry Powder (Special Powders) - Foam (AFFF) - Carbon Dioxide - Wet Chemical - Fire Blanket - Hose Reel - Fire Bucket - Industry standards

BAFE, the fire industry body, provides approval schemes – including technical standards – to which fire protection companies can comply. Whilst not mandatory, approval to these schemes provide the buyer of services with an assurance of competence from service providers.

In the case of portable fire extinguishers, standards apply not just to the product itself, but to the maintenance regime that supports them. The scheme for portable fire extinguisher maintenance ensures provider organisations are competent to provide fire extinguisher services including:

- Selecting the appropriate fire extinguishers to be installed according to the identified risks
- Commissioning – on-site checking to ensure fire extinguishers are fit for purpose at the time of installation
- Siting – correct positioning and installation of extinguishers
- Maintenance and servicing – including regular scheduled checks to ensure ongoing effective working order is maintained and extinguishers are, at all times, ready for use.

Periodically BAFE updates its schemes. The BAFE SPI01 Fire Extinguisher Service Scheme was updated with effect from 1st October 2017. It is now known as a

benchmark of 'Competency of Portable Fire Extinguisher Organisations and Technicians'.

The update followed lengthy, industry-wide consultation, including NSI and other interested stakeholders, and recognises the importance of organisational and individual technician competence in the delivery of extinguisher services. It requires supplying organisations to maintain employed in-house competency, and not simply to rely on outsourced expert technicians.

Focus on technician competence

The revised scheme sets an expectation for more robust requirements for fire extinguisher technicians. These now include demonstrating competency in asbestos awareness and health and safety.

BAFE recognised portable fire extinguisher technicians' courses consist of in-depth theoretical training and practical experience over four days. The course content includes training on the different types of portable fire extinguisher based on the requirements of the British Standards for servicing and

maintenance, selecting and positioning, health and safety awareness and asbestos awareness. Practicing technicians also attend a three-yearly refresher course to maintain their credentials.

Under The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, anyone including extinguisher technicians, working in an environment where they are likely to disturb asbestos materials must be aware of, and fully trained in, the dangers and correct safety practices. Asbestos is still found in older buildings where it was originally installed for insulation and fireproofing.

Health and safety awareness includes workers' individual responsibilities for their own safety and the safety of others, manual handling, fire prevention, work equipment and occupational health. A technician holding a Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card qualifies as meeting the health and safety competence requirements of the BAFE Scheme.

During independent NSI inspection of providers, technicians' training records are reviewed to evidence they are complete and up to date.

Organisational competence

Approval for companies delivering portable fire extinguisher maintenance is also dependent on their management system capability covering the commissioning, servicing and recharge of portable fire extinguishers.

Management systems must evidence

- process and procedures including the assignment of relevant roles and responsibilities of key personnel,
- quality objectives and improvement plans
- scheduled (maintenance) work to meet customer requirements
- robust processing of customer call outs requests

- an assessment of health and safety and ways to minimise risks.

The management system must also cover

- the management of resources – both people and infrastructure,
- competency records – including training records, qualifications, certificates
- a register of relevant British Standards and publications, including manufacturers' technical literature, and trade organisations' safety notices

The customer perspective

From a client perspective choosing an NSI/BAFE approved company provides confidence that their provider has been subject to independent inspection of its business practice, and communications with clients, including the

- sharing of information relating to products and services,
- reports and records of record of works carried out – in the customer's fire logbook
- complaints procedures and corrective action plans.

The scheme aims to increase the quality of service and product provided by fire extinguisher service providers, delivering confidence to the consumer.

NSI approval requires all technicians employed by the approved company to hold the BAFE Diploma – ensuring capability to work in accordance with best industry practice. NSI recommends that you ask your supplier to evidence their technicians are working to these standards.

Choosing an NSI approved service provider to conduct service and maintenance, ensures personnel and the organisation have proven competence in maintenance of portable fire extinguisher products.

