

FIRE PROTECTION AND PREVENTION WORK OF THE FIRE SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Executive Summary

1. The fire protection and prevention work of the Fire Services Department (FSD) aims to reduce fire hazards in the community and to ensure that appropriate fire protection measures are provided in buildings and premises. For 2013-14, the estimated expenditure is \$369 million. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the FSD's fire protection and prevention work (paras. 1.2, 1.4 and 1.7).

Monitoring fire service installations and equipment in buildings

2. The Fire Service (Installations and Equipment) Regulations (Cap. 95B) require: (a) owners of fire service installations and equipment (FSIs) to have them inspected by registered FSI contractors annually; and (b) FSI contractors to forward a copy of the inspection certificates (FS251) to the FSD within 14 days after inspection (paras. 2.3 to 2.5).

3. *Monitoring maintenance of FSIs.* In 2012, the FSD launched a new computer system to support its fire protection work. As the FSD had not completed updating and verifying the system's data of FSIs installed in 47,000 buildings, the system could only be used to identify buildings without FS251 (i.e. no evidence of having conducted annual inspections). For buildings with FS251s, the system could not ascertain whether the inspections had covered all the FSIs installed. In April 2013, the FSD found that no FS251 was received for 20,690 (44% of 47,000) buildings, suggesting that annual inspection had not been conducted on their FSIs (paras. 2.8 to 2.10 and 2.12).

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4. ***Monitoring rectification of defective FSIs.*** Audit analysis of the computer records revealed 7,662 reported cases of defective FSIs, of which 67% had remained outstanding for over 100 days. Audit has found that the FSD's laid-down guidelines on monitoring the rectification of defects in major FSIs had not always been complied with (paras. 2.16 to 2.19).

5. ***Monitoring unwanted alarm cases.*** In 2006, an FSD review found that unwanted alarms had taxed heavily on FSD resources and induced a number of negative consequences on the community. However, there were over 20,000 unwanted alarms in each subsequent year. Audit analysis of the 28,461 unwanted alarms in 2012 revealed 498 buildings each having 10 or more unwanted alarm cases. The FSD needs to give priority to following up such buildings (paras. 2.25, 2.27 and 2.29).

Monitoring licensed premises

6. ***Fire safety requirements on food premises and checking compliance.*** After receiving a notification from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) of the grant of a provisional licence to food premises, FSD staff are required to conduct a verification inspection to check compliance with fire safety requirements within seven working days. Audit examination of 20 provisional licence cases revealed that: (a) there were delays in conducting some verification inspections; and (b) the FSD inspections found 17 cases of non-compliance with the requirement to submit invoices and test certificates of polyurethane foam filled mattresses and upholstered furniture. While the FSD issued advisory letters in all 17 cases, it only informed the FEHD of the non-compliance in 7 cases. For public safety, it is important to ensure that no food business is allowed to operate in premises not meeting the essential fire safety requirements (paras. 3.7 to 3.11).

7. ***Monitoring FSIs in licensed premises.*** The FSD has not used its new computer system to monitor the compliance with the statutory requirement of conducting annual inspections of FSIs in licensed premises because not all FSI data and FS251s have been input into the system. Audit examination revealed that no FS251 was received for some licensed premises for four years. There was no documentary evidence that the FSD had taken any enforcement action (paras. 3.14 and 3.16).

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Monitoring ventilating systems

8. The Building (Ventilating Systems) Regulations (Cap. 123J) and Ventilation of Scheduled Premises Regulation (Cap. 132CE) require ventilating systems to be inspected annually by specialist contractors registered with the Buildings Department. Specialist contractors are required to forward a copy of the inspection certificates to the FSD within 14 days after inspection (para. 4.3).

9. *Monitoring maintenance of ventilating systems.* Audit examination has revealed the following issues: (a) as the FSD started in 2001 to create records for monitoring the annual maintenance of ventilating systems installed in new buildings, the FSD's records of ventilating systems installed in pre-2001 buildings may not be complete; (b) due to system bugs, the FSD cannot use its computer system to match ventilating system records with the inspection certificate records so as to identify all ventilating systems not having been inspected annually; and (c) no inspection certificate was received for 60 ventilating systems (out of 602 cases examined by Audit) and enforcement action was not taken by the FSD (paras. 4.4 to 4.7).

Registration and monitoring of fire service installation contractors

10. *Improving the FSI contractor registration scheme.* The Fire Service (Installation Contractors) Regulations (Cap. 95A) governing the registration scheme for FSI contractors was enacted in 1971. An effective FSI contractor registration scheme will facilitate the FSD's work in ensuring the proper provision and maintenance of FSIs in buildings and premises. In April 2003, after a review of the scheme, a working group set up by the FSD made a number of recommendations to improve the scheme. Implementing the recommendations however requires legislative amendments. As at 31 August 2013, the recommendations had yet to be implemented (paras. 5.2 and 5.4 to 5.7).

11. *Monitoring FSI contractors.* The FSD has not established procedures to monitor the timeliness of submission of FS251s by FSI contractors. During the year ended 30 June 2013, the FSD received 124,685 FS251s from a total of 556 contractors. While FSI contractors are required by law to submit FS251s within 14 days after work completion, Audit analysis revealed that 29% of the FS251s were submitted late, involving a total of 470 contractors (para. 5.13).

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Handling complaints about fire safety

12. FSD staff are required to handle complaints about fire safety within specified time limits. However, Audit found cases of delay in handling the complaints, without documented reasons or approvals. As at 15 July 2013, there were 1,525 outstanding complaint cases, including 157 cases outstanding for over 360 days. Audit examination revealed that supervisors were not provided with regular reports for the monitoring and control of outstanding cases (paras. 6.4, 6.5 and 6.8 to 6.10).

Publicity and education on fire safety

13. The FSD has two announcements in the public interest (APIs) on the proper maintenance of FSIs which are now being broadcast on television. However, the statutory requirement to conduct annual inspections of FSIs is not mentioned in both APIs. As 44% of the buildings were found not complying with the requirement in April 2013 (see para. 3 above), the FSD should publicise the requirement in future APIs to help enhance public awareness (paras. 7.17 and 7.18).

Audit recommendations

14. **Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Fire Services should:**

Monitoring fire service installations and equipment in buildings

- (a) **for buildings found without FS251 in 2012-13 to support the annual inspections of their FSIs, closely monitor the follow-up actions and take appropriate further measures to ensure timely compliance with the statutory annual inspection requirement (para. 2.14(a));**
- (b) **complete updating and verifying the FSI data in the new computer system as soon as possible, in order that the system can be used more effectively for monitoring the proper maintenance of all FSIs installed in buildings (para. 2.14(b));**

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- (c) **tighten the controls to ensure that FSD staff closely monitor the rectification of defects found in any major FSI (para. 2.21(b));**
- (d) **formulate further measures to reduce the overall number of unwanted alarms and give priority to following up buildings with many unwanted alarm cases (para. 2.30);**

Monitoring licensed premises

- (e) **remind FSD staff to conduct verification inspections of food business premises granted with provisional licences promptly in accordance with the FSD's guidelines (para. 3.12(a));**
- (f) **ensure that FSD staff handle cases of non-compliance with fire safety requirements by provisional food business licensees consistently (para. 3.12(b));**
- (g) **make effective use of the new computer system to monitor the maintenance of FSIs in licensed premises and take enforcement action in cases of non-compliance with the statutory annual inspection requirement (para. 3.18(b) and (c));**

Monitoring ventilating systems

- (h) **take appropriate measures to improve the monitoring of the maintenance of ventilating systems (para. 4.9(b));**

Registration and monitoring of fire service installation contractors

- (i) **in consultation with the Secretary for Security, determine as soon as possible how best to implement the working group's recommendations on improving the FSI contractor registration scheme (para. 5.8);**
- (j) **monitor the timeliness of submission of FS251s by FSI contractors and take appropriate actions to ensure their compliance with the statutory requirements in this regard (para. 5.17(a) and (b));**

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Handling complaints about fire safety

- (k) provide supervisors with regular reports on the details of outstanding complaint cases to facilitate their monitoring and control work (para. 6.11(c)); and

Publicity and education on fire safety

- (l) publicise the statutory requirement on conducting annual inspections of FSIs in future APIs on fire prevention (para. 7.20(a)).

Response from the Administration

15. The Administration agrees with the audit recommendations.