GARY HURST
Shining a light on emergency illumination

Imagine a building suddenly losing mains electrical power – the lights go out, leaving those inside disoriented, unsure of how to exit safely. In these critical moments, battery-powered emergency escape lighting plays a vital role in guiding occupants to safety.

It is an essential safety measure in a wide range of non-domestic and commercial premises, including shops, offices, hotels, and entertainment venues such as pubs, clubs, and concert halls. In many cases, it is also a requirement in the communal areas of blocks of flats and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).

However, emergency lighting in these and other premises is often poorly specified and inadequately maintained, putting lives at risk and increasing the likelihood of injury due to insufficient illumination. In addition to safety concerns, there are serious legal, criminal and insurance implications for failing to ensure these systems are fit for purpose.

Emergency lighting uses/types

Besides providing illumination when the electrical supply to normal lighting fails – helping people in part, or all, of a building to reach a place of safety – emergency escape lighting also provides illumination for the safety of people involved in a potentially dangerous process or situation, allowing proper shut-down procedures to be followed for the safety of the operator and other occupants of the premises.

Two types of emergency lighting exist: self-contained systems, which use an internal battery providing power to the unit when the mains supply fails; and centrally powered battery-supplied systems that power all the emergency lighting units in a building – typically deployed in larger, more complex premises such as hospitals, large theatres and cinemas.

Equipping a commercial premises with emergency lighting requires appropriate maintenance to ensure the equipment remains ready in the event of any emergency. The duty holder (person, or team) tasked with responsibility for fire safety in a building should demonstrate they have acted with due diligence in sourcing a competent provider for these works. BAFE (British Approvals for Fire Equipment) – which develops certification schemes operated by licensed third-party certification bodies such as NSI – strongly recommends using an appropriately approved organisation.

BAFE operates a scheme called BAFE SP203-4 which covers emergency lighting systems. This scheme exists to deliver quality, independent evidence that organisations are competent to provide design, installation, commissioning, and/or maintenance services for these systems. It's a modular scheme, meaning providers can gain third-party certification in one or more of these areas of work. Many BAFE SP203-4 registered organisations hold approval to all these modules, but clients should check this when looking for an emergency lighting system contractor.

These modules observe best practice, working to British Standards BS 5266-1, the code of practice for the emergency lighting of premises, BS 1838 (which identifies different classes of emergency lighting systems), and BS 7671 (the UK's national standard for electrical installation and the safety of electrical wiring systems).

Buyer beware ...

Emergency lighting is an area which is dominated by electrical contractors, the majority of whom do not have any specific certification to design/install/commission or maintain emergency lighting. This leads to pitfalls including inadequately specified equipment, leaving those responsible for building safety exposed to potential legal prosecutions brought, for instance, by the local fire and rescue service and/or local authority for failing to provide adequate emergency lighting systems.

Failing to carry out required monthly and annual system testing could result in potential prosecution and subsequent conviction of duty holders, leading to substantial fines and prison sentences.

Using providers approved through SP203-4 by a UKAS-accredited third-party certification body licensed by BAFE, such as NSI, provides valued reassurance and protection against these hazards as well as helping ensure the highest safety standards for building occupants.

Gary Hurst

Gary is an NSI auditor with over 30 years' experience in the UK security and fire safety sectors. He serves as NSI's subject matter expert for BAFE's SP203-4 Emergency Lighting Scheme and conducts audits across several other BAFE fire safety certification schemes. As part of NSI's commitment to supporting the next generation of engineers in the industry, Gary also represents NSI on the adjudication panel for the WorldSkills UK competition for security and fire apprentices.

For more information, go to nsi.org.uk