

Guidance Note 25

PROTOCOL FOR UPGRADING JOINERY DOORS

This guidance note has been prepared to provide background information in respect of upgrading joinery doors to achieve a given level of fire performance.

When considering the suitability of a door for upgrading it is first of all necessary to establish what the performance objectives are for the door i.e. a period of fire resistance measured in terms of integrity only, or additionally a period of fire insulation.

Having defined these objectives it is then essential to ascertain by analysis what the performance of the door would be if it were to be tested in compliance with the fire resistance test procedure called up in legislation (BS476: Part 22: 1987) without any alterations or upgrading. The factors that will affect this performance are:

- Method of construction (jointing, glues etc)
- The quality, thickness and nature of the material used in the construction of the panels (if appropriate)
- The method of retaining panels (if appropriate)
- The materials used in the construction of the door frame (density, species) and the cross-sectional area and shape
- The size of the leaf; thickness, height and width
- Quality, density, species and section size of the timber used in stiles, rails and muntins
- The configuration of the assembly (e.g. single or double leaf, single or double acting)
- The amount of restraint provided to the leaf(s) via hinges, latches, closers and/or intumescent seals (if fitted)
- Size of mortices and morticed components
- The size of the gaps
- The type and design of any glazing including retaining bead details and fixings
- The current condition of the door and frame to be upgraded

In a number of cases this exercise is worth carrying out because it can sometimes be shown that very little needs to be done to the leaf and that the correct specification of seals and hardware (restraint) can maximise the performance. Unfortunately, in other cases this analysis will reveal that the method of construction is so inadequate that it is pointless spending money upgrading panels or fitting seals.

Having established the basic, unmodified performance it is possible to identify the degree of modification needed in order to achieve the requisite level of performance. At this stage it is important to ascertain the acceptable degree of invasiveness because in many listed, aesthetically sensitive properties the upgrading methods should ideally be non-invasive and reversible. Where splitting the leaf is contemplated it has to be accepted that there is little knowledge available as to the long-term durability of doors and/or panels that have been split and re-glued and this method of approach needs careful consideration. In all cases the selection of the glue and the choice of sandwiched board must be undertaken with care.

When considering both the basic performance and the upgrading techniques the following aspects should be taken into account:

Behaviour of the stiles and rails framework

Fire doors normally fail by distortion rather than burn-through and controlling or accommodating this distortion must be the primary objective (even purpose made fire doors can fail as early as 12 minutes due to distortion). It is also considered important that the doors prevent the spread of smoke just as much as the door remaining stable helps the spread of fire and this significantly. The fundamental performance of a door leaf will be a function of the factors listed earlier but the main objective must be to restrain the distortions that will cause a loss of integrity at the leaf/frame interface.

Controlling distortion

The control that various items of hardware can provide should be used in combination with each other to ensure that the proposed upgrading measures work in unison. Similarly, the correct specification of the intumescent door seal is vital to ensure that they can contribute to the control distortion of the door if the analysis identifies this as a requirement. And also provide a gap-filling function between door leaf and frame.

Note: Intumescent seals come in various types, some providing high-pressure expansion, others offering low pressure, also the direction and nature of expansion varies. Use of the wrong type of intumescent material could potentially worsen the situation and also be a complete waste of money.

The balance between hardware and intumescent is particularly important when considering historical/joinery type doors. Correctly specified intumescent seals can greatly improve the performance of the doorset, even if no other measures are carried out.

If a door is to provide more than nominally 15 minutes fire resistance when opening towards the fire, the normal situation, intumescent seals are required. Pressure forming intumescent materials are able to help control distortion by restricting door movement whilst ammonium phosphate based seals are large volume expanders and able to deal with the large distortions that non-fire doors are likely to exhibit when heated, unless they become too excessive as may happen in the case of thin doors.

The complementary method of controlling door distortion is by the correct use of ironmongery. Some closing devices, or even modes of operation are able to provide more restraint than others and these can be utilised where the door is able to accept the fixings for such devices. As an example, the fixing of the correct type of closer on the non-risk side will increase the door performance, as it will assist in controlling the distortion at the head of the door when fire is on the risk side.

Dealing with gaps

It is quite common for joinery doorsets to incorporate gaps between door and leaf, which would not normally be acceptable. Joinery techniques and re-hanging of the leaves may enable the gap to be minimised and/or equalised around the perimeter of the leaf. However, by correctly specifying the intumescent it is possible, based on our knowledge of test performance, to seal gaps up to 8mm and perhaps even wider if the intumescent is correctly specified, detailed and fitted. International Fire Consultants Ltd. (IFC) have helped some manufacturers to develop low profile, face fixed seals and these are often the preferred option for historically sensitive doors.

International Fire Consultants have a number of principles for specifying intumescent seals depending on leaf size, configuration and gap size, which take into account the unique behaviour of the various products.

Smoke seals

The fitting of effective smoke seals with the ability to prevent ingress of 'cold smoke' around door edges in the early stages of a fire can be a positive contribution to evacuation of the premises. Smoke seals must meet the requirements of BS476: Part 31: Section 31.1: 1983. They must also provide low closing friction to prevent the seal from inhibiting the door from closing. The action of the intumescent seal may be positively or negatively affected by the presence of a smoke seal and this should be taken into account.

Panel upgrading

With respect to upgrading the panel, it is often only necessary to address local weaknesses although in the case of flat panels this may mean the whole panel.

Flat panels

Recent developments involve the use of thin membranes commonly referred to as 'intumescent papers'. These come in a variety of types, each supported by evidence, again of a variable nature. When considering these the evidence of performance (test report and field of application assessment report) should be examined thoroughly to ensure that the applied material is able to upgrade the panel that you have, i.e. thin softwood, hardwood, plywood etc. Tests performed on plywood are not directly applicable to timber panels of similar thickness. Some thin membranes incorporate a reinforced backing layer that prevents tearing should the panel fissure when heated. These are far superior to the unreinforced papers. A very acceptable appearance can also be obtained when the membranes incorporate a thin veneer face on the outer surface but the bonding is critical, as is the strength of the membrane to which it is attached.

The method of retaining the panel in the structure is also important as normal bolection mouldings are normally completely consumed by the fire within 15 minutes and it is often vital that panel-retaining fixings are improved.

Moulded panels

In addition to the flat panels, research has been undertaken to evaluate the performance of moulded or raised and fielded panels. The fire resistance performance of such panels has been shown to be dependent upon the following factors:

- Width across the grain
- Thickness of panel
- Design of panel
- Material or timber type
- Physical condition of panel

Based on these factors an assessment of likely fire resistance of the untreated panel can be established. For solid timber panels, e.g. raised and fielded, improved burn-through resistance may be achieved from an application of intumescent paint or varnish. Any improvement of fire resistance due to such coatings can be added to the base fire resistance period. The likely improvement in fire resistance due to such coatings varies between an additional 5 and 12 minutes, depending on the type of material used, the substrate and the number of coats applied.

Expert judgement is often needed to ascertain at which end of this range the eventual performance will lie. Improvements of this magnitude may be of minimal use for damage limitation but may still be of critical importance for life safety if this is the main objective. As with the membrane treatment the method of retaining the panel is important.

Complete board protection systems

Covering the complete face of a door with a protected board is not generally an accepted method for a grade 1 listed building but may be acceptable for lower grades of buildings or for upgrading in non-listed buildings, e.g. Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO's). A number of published proprietary methods are available from board suppliers but, as stated earlier, the evidence must apply to the design, construction, size and most importantly configuration of the door to be upgraded. Fire tests on latched doors do not apply to unlatched doors. Many proprietary systems take advantage of one-sided applications. The rules in BS5588 and the Approved Document to Regulation B (England & Wales) currently require protected routes to be fire resisting from both directions. This must be formally waived or the evidence must be available to show that this requirement can be met. The selection of seals, hardware, gaps etc is just as important with these doors as with historic doors.

Glazing in doors

It must be appreciated that replacement of any existing glass with fire resisting glass can be very disruptive to the fabric of the door and, because of the low profile of beads frequently used on historic doors, direct replacement of the glass may not automatically be successful in achieving the required level of fire performance. Glass is highly conductive and allows the passage of radiation, both of which are likely to cause ignition of the unexposed face bead.

Where safety permits, the new range of partially insulating glass used as secondary glazed panes, may be used to upgrade in a sympathetic manner. Unlike insulating glasses which limit temperature rise to 140°C, partially insulating glasses keep temperature rises to around 300-350°C and at these levels of temperature rise, ignition of timber beads on the non-exposed face is not possible without a pilot ignition source. These glasses provide additional protection in terms of reduced heat radiation such that they allow lower profile timber beads to be used, and their characteristic of becoming opaque when exposed to heat can be an aid to evacuation. It is beneficial to use performance vetted fire resistant glasses and glazing systems

Many monolithic clear glasses are incompatible with timber beaded constructions because they cannot accept the amount of insulation protection that a timber bead provides. It is vital when selecting glass to ensure that it has test evidence in timber doors with beads of the size to be used.

Summary of the protocol

Enhancing the performance of an existing door, particularly a joinery-panelled door, is not a simple matter of 'slapping on some intumescent paper'. If the door is inherently unstable this may do very little with respect to improving the fire resistance. Similarly, fitting intumescent seals may have no benefit if they are of the wrong material! Therefore if money is not to be wasted, or if the performance is to be guaranteed for safety reasons, then the upgrading should be undertaken correctly as a package of measures.

The important stages in this process are:

- 1) Survey the door, frame, hardware and gaps in some detail
- 2) Establish the likely fire resistance/fire behaviour of the untreated door assembly by analysis.
- 3) Select and specify the intumescent seals, membrane protection and hardware needed to make good any shortfall in performance between the value established in 2) and that required.

Note: The test evidence used to substantiate the ability of the specified product to make up for the shortfall must relate to the substrate/materials used in the door to be upgraded and frequently reports use plywood or chipboard in lieu of thin timber. In some cases further testing may be required to quantify the level of protection that can be provided should no appropriate evidence currently exist.

- 4) Prepare a detailed upgrading specification based upon the materials and components selected in 3) above.
- 5) Submit the proposed upgrading proposals to the appropriate regulatory body (Fire Service, Building Control, Environmental Health Officer, and District Surveyor) for their approval.

Note: Their approval effectively forms an assessment of performance as is legally required in Regulations and they would be seen to accept responsibility should the door fail in a fire.

OR ALTERNATIVELY

- 5A) Submit the proposed upgrading proposals to a suitably qualified, underwritten, independent body for an assessment report on the upgraded assembly and submit this to the relevant authority.
- 6) Instruct competent persons to modify the door exactly to the specification given in 4) above. Audit the final assembly to ensure compliance with the specification and to ensure that there has been no substitution of materials by persons not appreciative of the critical role of the products specified.



It can be seen that the correct methodology for upgrading a door assembly can be fairly onerous and requires a number of specialist skills if the process is to be carried out correctly. If the authorities listed in 5) are willing to underwrite your specification without significant proof of performance then it may be possible to eliminate some of these stages but early consultation is urged to establish how lenient they may be in respect of their endorsement of your proposal.

International Fire Consultants Ltd. (IFC) Role in the Process

Where full justification of the performance is required there are obvious benefits in seeking professional assistance in respect of stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and the audit in stage 6. If the authorities are not willing to underwrite your proposal at stage 5 then independent third party assistance will be required for stage 5A anyway.

The Upgrading Studio of International Fire Consultants Ltd is able to provide the assessment report referred to in stage 5A as it is a nationally recognised independent fire safety authority that has actively worked alongside the DOE/DETR, the Home Office, BSI, etc, in the preparation of Codes and Standards and fulfils guidance recommendations of being a 'suitably qualified fire safety engineering body'. IFC carry substantial professional indemnity insurance as a measure of its confidence to carry out the task correctly.

As a measure of our willingness to help you may find enclosed various documents/articles that you may find of value in your upgrading task. Should any proprietary literature be included in this pack this does not infer a formal endorsement of its suitability, although we are careful to only include information on materials that we think are supported by a wide range of evidence of performance and supplied by reputable manufacturers

If IFC can be of further assistance please contact us at the address below.

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