

Cross government group on gas safety and carbon monoxide (CO) awareness

Annual report 2009/10

Published November 2010

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Introduction

The Cross Government Group on Gas Safety and Carbon Monoxide (CO) Awareness reconvened in June 2009 to ensure a joined-up approach across departments, the devolved administrations and other governmental bodies to improve gas safety and tackle carbon monoxide risks from all fuels. The Group, whose members are listed below, also aims to develop effective government strategies and promote knowledge and understanding of gas safety and CO risks and how to manage them.

- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
- Department of Health (DH)
- Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
- Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI)
- Health Protection Agency (HPA)
- Ofgem
- Partnerships for Schools
- The Scottish Government
- Welsh Assembly Government

Carbon monoxide poisoning is a serious and preventable form of poisoning. Each year there are around 50 deaths from accidental CO poisoning in England and Wales (ONS Statistics) and in excess of 200 non-fatal cases.

Gas safety and more broadly carbon monoxide awareness is a truly cross government issue with the majority of Government departments, the devolved administrations and other governmental bodies having an interest from their particular perspective. This report provides a summary of the work carried out by all members of the Cross Government Group on Gas Safety and Carbon Monoxide (CO) Awareness under four key headings;

- Consumer Awareness
- Supporting Professionals
- Research
- Legislation and Securing Justice

Consumer awareness

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI): Consumer Campaign

HSENI has developed a high-profile Carbon Monoxide Awareness Campaign with the assistance of an advertising agency, which will go live throughout the media in Northern Ireland on 1st November 2010 after a launch by the Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont and will run well into 2011. The campaign has been given its own creative identity with the slogan 'WATCH OUT! CARBON MONOXIDE KILLS' and a specific colour scheme, which will be used in promotional materials for TV, radio, outdoor and press. Emphasis will be on the symptoms of CO poisoning, the need for servicing and maintenance and a recommendation to install an audible CO alarm. The campaign will be supported by an information helpline and a dedicated website – <http://www.hseni.gov.uk/watchout>

Based on results from consumer research, the campaign for 2010/2011 will specifically target students & the elderly, who are considered to be groups who are less aware of the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning. The campaign will emphasise that risks from CO occur with all combustion flues, not just from gas appliances and has been designed to be repeated in future years, with the flexibility to change the emphasis as appropriate.

The Scottish Government: Safety in the home

The Scottish Government has funded the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) to undertake home safety work in Scotland, which include raising awareness around the risks posed by CO poisoning. Additional funding was given to support RoSPA's "Year of Home Safety" initiative for 2010, which includes hosting the UK Home Safety Congress in Scotland in November 2010.

Health Protection Scotland have also produced a web-based leaflet to support work around CO Awareness week in Scotland –
<http://www.documents.hps.scot.nhs.uk/environmental/sg-co-awareness-factsheet.pdf>

Welsh Assembly Government: Carbon Monoxide Awareness

The Welsh Assembly Government has recently updated and widely distributed a CO warning leaflet throughout Wales –
<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/phhs/publications/101021monoxideen.pdf> .

On a local level Ceredigion County Council has successfully bid for support from the Gas Safety Trust to fund the purchase of 30 carbon monoxide alarms. The alarms have been installed to improve home safety and increase awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide in properties identified as high risk by Ceredigion's Department of Environmental Services and Housing.
<http://www.ceredigion.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=15325>

The Assembly Government plan to continue awareness raising activities through measures such as the issuing of guidance to social landlords on the installation of CO alarms and a Chief Medical Officer letter warning on the dangers of CO.

Health and Safety Executive & Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI): Gas Safe Register

In April 2009 HSE launched the Gas Safe Register. The scheme, which operates the statutory registration scheme for gas engineers also has the remit to raise consumer awareness of gas safety risks. During the first year of operation Gas Safe Register has undertaken a significant campaign raising consumer awareness of gas safety risks and CO dangers, including national TV advertising, coverage on a wide variety of consumer programmes (BBC Watchdog, Rogue Traders, Fake Britain, and This Morning) and national and regional press and radio. They have also developed novel initiatives to raise consumer awareness including a series of events in shopping centres across Great Britain to provide face to face information and advice.
www.gassaferegister.co.uk

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) ran a major advertising campaign in support of the introduction of Gas Safe Register to Northern Ireland on 1st April 2010, aimed at consumers and gas engineers. The campaign included numerous participative events, with a strong focus on use of Gas Safe registered engineers, regular maintenance of gas appliances and highlighting the use of audible CO alarms. Measurement of public awareness in Northern Ireland of Gas Safe Register and its role has indicated that the targets set at the launch of the scheme have been exceeded - http://www.hseni.gov.uk/gas_safe_register_campaign.htm

Department of Health: Sponsorship of Schools Poster Competition

The Department of Health has funded the schools poster competition run by carbon monoxide awareness charity CO – Gas Safety for the next 3 years (2010 – 2013). The competition is designed to raise awareness amongst primary school children and their families of carbon monoxide poisoning. Prizes for the best posters are awarded at a ceremony held in the House of Lords. <http://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/competition.html>

Department of Health & Health Protection Agency: Carbon Monoxide Awareness Advice

A video on the subject of carbon monoxide poisoning is to be launched on the NHS Choices website in early November. Professor Robert Maynard from the Health Protection Agency presents the important points around the subject of carbon monoxide poisoning - <http://www.nhs.uk/video/Pages/medialibrary.aspx>

Directgov: Gas Safety Advice

A video was launched on the Directgov website providing consumer advice on the gas safety issues. The video includes advice on how to ensure gas appliances are safe and what to do in an emergency – http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG_192397

Supporting professionals

Health Protection Agency: Responding to carbon monoxide incidents

The HPA holds workshops throughout the country which help to assist local authority personnel, healthcare practitioners, emergency responders, HPA staff, government departments and industry in understanding their role in preventing and responding to carbon monoxide incidents. These workshops also encourage joined up working practices within the region in which they are held. CO workshops have been held in London (November 2009), Birmingham (May 2010) and Sheffield (November 2010).

The HPA receives notifications from the emergency services, local authorities and GP and hospital staff about incidents of carbon monoxide poisoning in England and Wales. To encourage the notification of such incidents HPA staff provide ad hoc training to local partners and have participated in local CO initiatives to identify CO poisoning, such as the hospital emergency department study, led by Frimley Park Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, and housing association CO alarm schemes.

Department of Health: Chief Medical Officer/ Chief Nursing Officer letter

New data analysed by the Department of Health indicates that there are over 200 hospital admissions and a similar order of magnitude of A&E attendances each year due to accidental carbon monoxide poisoning, indicating that the previous figures for non-fatal incidents may be a significant under estimate. As a result, the interim Chief Medical Officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies and Chief Nursing Officer, Dame Christine Beasley, have written to medical professionals asking for increased vigilance of the signs and symptoms of exposure to carbon monoxide - http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_121501.pdf

Health and Safety Executive: Guidance for Landlords

In May HSE launched a new online web tool to support landlords understanding of their legal duties for gas safety. The one-stop-shop will help landlords identify their responsibilities for keeping tenants safe in any properties they let. The web tool breaks the information down into easy to use sections, including repair and maintenance, annual gas safety checks and record keeping as well as giving answers to frequently asked questions. The tool was developed in conjunction with the National Landlords Association who identified that as well as assisting landlords in recognising their legal duties the tool would also deliver considerable cost saving by reducing administrative burdens - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/landlords/index.htm>

Welsh Assembly Government: Landlord Accreditation Wales (LAW)

The Landlord Accreditation Wales (LAW) Scheme is a voluntary, national project run by the 22 Local Authorities (LAs) in Wales and is supported by the Welsh Assembly Government.. The LAW scheme is founded on the belief that the more aware and knowledgeable landlords are on the key property management issues, the more likely their properties will be maintained to a higher standard; their tenants' safety and health will be improved and their businesses better protected. To support this aim LAW provide carbon monoxide awareness information on their website.

<http://www.welshlandlords.org.uk/>

Department for Communities and Local Government: Building Regulations

A new edition of Approved Document for Part J (Combustion appliances and fuel storage systems) of the Building Regulations came into effect on 1st October 2010. The document provides guidance about compliance with the requirements of Part J of the building regulations and has been revised to ensure that combustion appliances can continue to function safely in more airtight homes. There is also new guidance on provision of inspection access to flue systems that are concealed within ceiling voids and other inaccessible places. The changes also remove technical disincentives to the wider use of Biomass heating systems.

The principal regulations now also include a legal requirement to make appropriate provision for detection and warning of carbon monoxide release. This requirement applies to the new installation or replacement of all solid fuel appliances in a dwelling, including open fires, solid fuel room heaters, log burners, pellet stoves and boilers, whether or not the appliance is described as room-sealed. The supporting guidance in the new Approved Document J is that this requirement will be satisfied for a solid fuel appliance by fitting a carbon monoxide alarm in the same room - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/buildingregulations/>

Partnerships for Schools: Guidance for Schools

Partnership for Schools have worked with IGEM to revise the technical standards for gas installations for educational establishments (IGEM/UP/11 Edition 2 technical Standard). The introduction of the revised guidance was supported by a Technical Seminar in September 2009 to brief industry, local authorities, school owners and managers.

To support the introduction of the new technical standards a guidance document was also introduced which picks up the relevant information for management and staff in educational establishments and details duties and responsibilities with respect to the gas installation and all appliances. It is hoped that the advice given will form part of the essential training for those people in educational establishments working with gas appliances - <http://www.igem.org.uk/Technical/newpublications.asp>

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI): Gas Safety Working Group for Northern Ireland

HSENI continues to facilitate the Gas Safety Working Group for Northern Ireland in working with key stakeholders, to drive joint initiatives. During 2009/2010 activities of the group in the areas of on gas safety and carbon monoxide awareness focussed on landlords duties, risks from gas cookers, ventilation in commercial kitchens and issues arising from concealed flues and buried LPG pipework.

Health Protection Agency: Working with Chartered Institute for Environmental Health (CIEH)

The HPA and CIEH developed and produced a Residential Inspection Aid aimed to assist Environmental Health Officers during inspections where CO could be or has been identified as a hazard. This aid, sponsored by the "Be Alarmed!" Carbon Monoxide campaign, has been made available on the CIEH website and hard copies distributed within Local Authorities. Environmental Health Officers have been notified of that the aid is available to assist them in their work through a press release and articles in CIEH reports and also at conferences and workshops. HPA also gave a talk at the CIEH Best of the Best Conference on the Residential Inspection Aid in September 2010 and have used it as a training aid at HPA workshops - <http://www.cieh.org/uploadedFiles/Core/Policy/Housing/COResidential.pdf>

Ofgem: Gas Distribution Price Control review

The next gas distribution price control (RIIO-GD1) doesn't come into effect until April 2013, however Ofgem has already established a number of working groups with the intention of identifying the key issues and outputs that the network companies will need to deliver. One of these working groups – Customers and Social Issues – has on its agenda the issue of carbon monoxide poisoning. The intention is for the network operators to identify how they can play a part through the most appropriate and effective approaches for addressing risks associated with carbon monoxide. Early investigation into these issues should allow for network companies to develop business plans that reflect these activities and for Ofgem to ensure that appropriate relevant allowances are provided within the price control.

The working group is chaired by Ofgem and is composed of representatives from network companies, CO Gas Safety and COGDEM. The outputs from the working groups will feed in to the strategy document outlining the latest thinking on issues relating to RIIO-GD1, due to be published in December 2010.

Research

Department of Health and Health Protection Agency: Non - invasive screening for CO exposure in selected patient groups attending rural and urban Emergency Departments in England

Statistics on the level of non fatal cases of CO poisoning are uncertain, with reported figures of CO poisoning in England and Wales each year likely to be a significant under-estimate. This project aims to gather more evidence about the prevalence of non-fatal cases by measuring the blood levels of CO non-invasively in patients presenting with a range of symptoms associated with CO poisoning (chest pain, flu, COPD, headaches and fits) attending rural and urban Emergency Departments in England. This research is due to report by the end of 2010.

Health and Safety Executive: Scoping study on the long term reliability of carbon monoxide alarms

HSE has worked with CO awareness charities. COGDEM, the trade association for carbon monoxide alarm manufacturers, and the Gas Safe Register on a scoping study looking at the long term reliability of carbon monoxide alarms. The study has involved collecting alarms that have been in use in consumers homes and then testing them to establish if they continue to operate to the standards prescribed in the British and European Standards. This research is due to report by the end of November 2010.

Department of Health: Pilot study of risks and long term effects of CO poisoning

CO poisoning may cause long term damage due to oxygen starvation. The Department of Health is working with the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh through a pilot study to follow up past cases of CO poisoning identified in a chosen Scottish A&E Department from around 1985 to the present day. The study aims to engage with participants through a postal questionnaire to ask about details of the incident, symptoms before and since, exposures, general health and life style and psychological and cognitive measures. This research is due to report by the end of 2010.

Health Protection Scotland: Restaurant emissions study

In support of work around carbon monoxide awareness Health Protection Scotland have undertaken a research study to look at using cooking smells from restaurants as a proxy for the impact of CO on adjoining properties. The results of this project are expected to be published in the coming months.

Health Protection Agency: Indoor air pollutants and airtight homes

The HPA is involved with others in overseeing a MSc by Cranfield University into indoor air pollutants in air tight homes, which includes work on carbon monoxide. HPA is also working on an environmental tracking project considering carbon monoxide poisoning in private dwellings. This project is looking to facilitate the identification of interventions which will prevent carbon monoxide poisonings in homes. A group of authors, including authors from the HPA, published a paper outlining considerations which are required on indoor air pollutants (including CO) in relation to increased air tightness of buildings.

Department of Health: Working towards improving CO poisoning detection system

The Department of Health commissioned and received two reports on the systems in place for detecting CO poisoning in the UK and France. The comparison of the systems will support analysis of the differences and identify where improvements might be made.

Legislation and securing justice

Health and Safety Executive

HSE continues to work to secure justice and provide consumer protection where gas safety incidents are highlighted. This may be through the issue of an enforcement notice or prosecution in the event of a breach of the law. Significant cases have included the jailing of a gas engineer for 3 years in July 2009 after two people died from CO poisoning following work on a central heating system. Another engineer was fined a total of £38,000 after he carried out unsafe gas work and continued to work while not registered with the Gas Safe Register.

A number of landlords, ranging from individuals with a small number of properties to large organisations, were also prosecuted for failing to ensure that gas appliances in their properties were safe. One case, which resulted in the death of a tenant resulted in the landlord being fined £300,000

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

BIS continues to be actively involved with product safety legislation and supporting related enforcement and operational requirements. BIS are actively engaging at the European level in Commission working groups, including test houses and manufacturers to clarify the intent of legislation and revision of the product safety legislation.

In the UK BIS supports the test houses and UK manufacturers in assisting them to understand their obligations. BIS are engaged in the development of standards, participating in a number of BSI Technical Committees to ensure concerns from across Government are fed into and effectively addressed by the standardization process. Close liaison is maintained with enforcement authorities (Local Authority Trading Standards Services and HSE) to support them as necessary and BIS have been involved with several safety issues over the year. BIS deals with policy issues and while ready to act should an enforcement authority identify a shortfall in its powers or there be a general issue with regard to safety of consumers, the incidents have primarily been related to a single company's products and as such dealt with by the relevant enforcement authority.

For the next year BIS, while dealing with anticipated significant budgetary constraints, intend to remain closely engaged in ensuring that new products are safe and the product safety legislation is fit for purpose. BIS will continue to engage to support stakeholders and the enforcement regime.