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Special Report: The Fire Safety Competence Gap

Why those responsible for fire safety still struggle to verify competence

Executive Summary

This report demonstrates that, almost ten years after the Grenfell tragedy occurred, organisations are taking fire safety obligations more seriously. Awareness has grown, fire safety is increasingly seen as a business priority and investment has increased. As this report shows, that investment is likely to continue. But taking fire safety seriously is not the same as being able to judge that the companies and individuals providing fire safety services are competent.

People with duties under fire safety laws for measures within buildings and premises, need to ensure that the people they appoint are competent – whether that's to carry out fire risk assessments, install or maintain fire protection systems or provide other fire safety services.

Many of these people remain unclear about how to identify competent people and what they are expected to check. In this regard, they lack a simple, reliable way to verify competence. The result is a gap between the responsibility placed on those in charge of fire safety and the tools available to help them make confident, well-informed decisions.

The evidence is clear:

33% of decision-makers around fire safety for organisations express doubt about the basic legal duties of the Responsible Person*

45% of Responsible Persons do not identify checking assessor competence as one of their responsibilities.

73% do not know whether their fire risk assessor is appropriately certificated, have no clear knowledge of who certificates them or do not know how to appoint a certificated provider.



These findings point to a straightforward conclusion. The current framework has succeeded in raising awareness but has not delivered consistent competence assurance. In many cases, a provider of fire safety services being a part of a simple directory of organisations or a member of an association is being misunderstood as proof of competence.

The problem is clear and a solution has been identified. In 2023, the UK Government acknowledged that those with legal responsibility for fire safety could not be reasonably expected to assess the competence of the providers they appoint. It also recognised that the market was highly fragmented with no protected professional title or universally recognised means of demonstrating competence.

Government guidance published that year advised those responsible to check whether an assessor held independent third-party certification. However, that advice was withdrawn before the relevant legal duty came into force. What we find in the market today is the inevitable consequence of that decision.

This report finds that the earlier direction of travel was justified and that Government should now go further by mandating UKAS-accredited third-party certification the acceptable means to demonstrate competence.

This report recommends that:

- **The UK Government makes UKAS-accredited third-party certification the required mechanism for verifying competence** – requiring Responsible Persons to use UKAS-accredited third-party certification bodies as the means of verifying a fire safety provider's competence.

- **The UK Government makes competent providers easy to identify and appoint** – by establishing a single, authoritative register of UKAS-accredited third-party certificated fire safety providers**

The recommendations in this report reflect an approach the UK Government has adopted in other safety-critical areas. Where people cannot reasonably be expected to judge the technical competence of those they appoint, independent assurance mechanisms can provide the necessary safeguards. The Gas Safe Register was established on this principle, recognising that consumers cannot be expected to assess the competence of gas engineers themselves. The recommendations call for a similar approach to fire safety, where those with statutory responsibilities need reliable evidence of competence to help them fulfil their duties.

Nearly ten years after Grenfell, the evidence presented here raises a simple question:

Why would fire safety services not be treated in the same way?

* In this report, the term Responsible Person is being used to describe the statutory role not only in England and Wales but also in Scotland and Northern Ireland – each of which have their own similar legal framework and equivalent term. Please see key definitions page 15.

** Similar to the role of the Gas Safe Register in helping consumers find registered gas businesses.

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Section 1



Fire Safety Since Grenfell: Progress and Limits

Since the Grenfell Tower tragedy there has been a transformation in the UK's approach to fire safety.

The Grenfell Tower fire claimed 72 lives, caused profound loss and suffering and fundamentally reshaped how legislators, policy makers and end users approach fire risk. Since then, increased scrutiny, wider public awareness and regulatory reform – most notably the introduction of the landmark Building Safety Act 2022 – have all contributed to a shift in how organisations approach fire risk and fire safety responsibilities.

This change is not temporary. Independent research conducted for this report shows that, across different industries and parts of the UK, organisations are putting greater focus on fire safety, increasing investment and recognising their legal obligations and statutory duties.

However, greater awareness does not necessarily mean greater confidence. Organisations may understand that fire safety is important but that does not mean they are confident that the people and companies they appoint to provide fire safety services are competent to do the job. This gap between recognising the importance of fire safety and being able to demonstrate that it is being managed properly is central to the next phase of fire safety reform.

Awareness and prioritisation have increased

Today, fire safety occupies a different place in organisational thinking than it did before the Grenfell Tower fire.

Decision-makers report a clear increase in attention, prioritisation and organisational focus, reflective of a lasting shift in awareness around accountability, resilience and duty of care.

- **93%** agree that focus and action around fire safety have increased.
- **76%** say fire safety has become more of a top priority over the last five years.
- **79%** expect investment to increase over the next five years, with nearly two in five anticipating a significant increase.

Investment trends reinforce this shift. Almost six in ten (59%) organisations describe their current investment in fire protection as high, with many expecting further increases in the years ahead. Moreover, among those organisations with greater awareness of their legal responsibilities, anticipated future investment in fire safety increases further.

On face value, these indicators suggest a system that has made positive strides forward in recent years. Fire safety has moved from being of peripheral importance to central importance. However, the data also shows that, for many organisations, fire safety has not yet become sufficiently embedded in operational decision-making.

Q. Fire safety is not taken as seriously as it should be in my organisation

- 13% **Strongly agree - 13%**
- 13% **Somewhat agree - 13%**
- 9% **Neither agree nor disagree**
- 27% **Somewhat disagree - 27%**
- 38% **Strongly disagree - 38%**

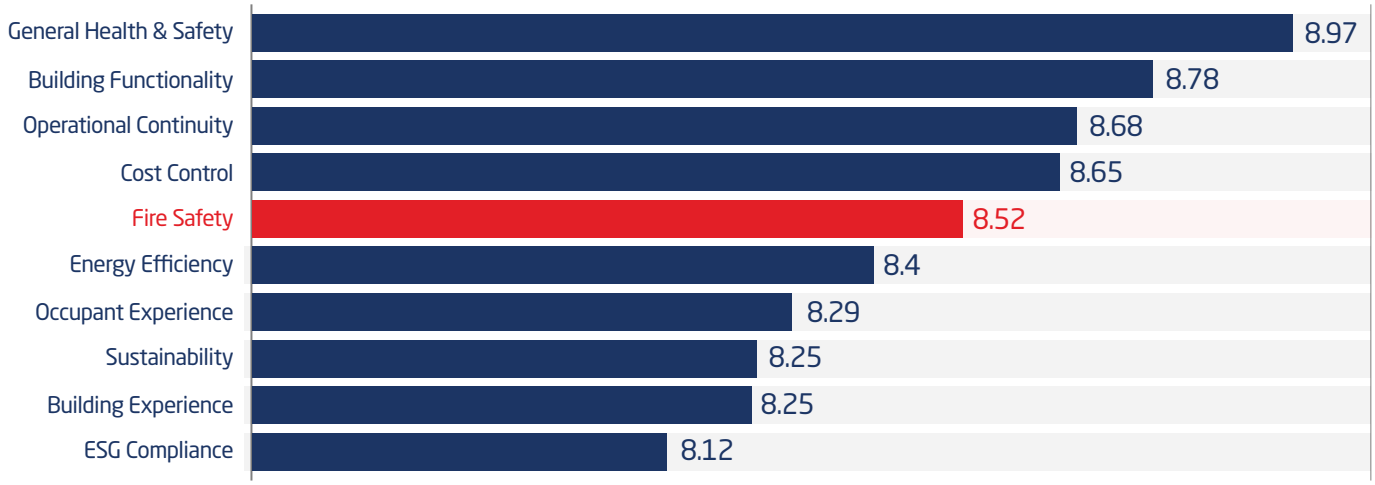
More than a quarter of respondents (**26%**) agree that fire safety is not taken as seriously as it should be within their organisation. Among those who hold this view:

- 51% say this is influenced by the belief that a fire is unlikely to occur
- 44% state fire safety is considered less important than other strategic competing priorities

Moreover, when decision-makers were asked to rank different aspects of building and premises management, fire safety placed fifth overall, behind general health and safety, building functionality and cost control.

Importance of fire safety in building management

Fire safety ranks as the 5th most important factor in building management, ranking below health & safety and cost control but above energy efficiency and occupant experience, indicating that, whilst fire safety is important, it is not necessarily the main priority.



Q1k. When managing the maintenance of your building/premises, how important is it to manage each of the following on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is not all important and 10 is extremely important. Select one per row.

While organisations are not disregarding fire safety, the reality is that – even for those who say it is given the priority it demands – competing operational priorities continue to influence how consistently it is embedded in practice.

Barriers to better fire safety in operational practice

Amongst those who believe that fire safety is not taken as seriously as it should be, communication, endorsement and enforcement are cited as the main areas where improvement is needed.

Q. You said that you think fire safety is not taken as seriously as it should be within your organisation. What do you think needs to change? Select up to three

- **41%** Better awareness and communication of fire risks and procedures
- **33%** Encouraging individuals to take more personal responsibility
- **31%** Stricter enforcement of fire safety regulations
- **31%** Making fire safety a routine operational priority
- **31%** Greater endorsement from the senior leadership team

These barriers are made more difficult by uncertainty about who is responsible for fire safety, what that responsibility involves and how organisations should demonstrate that they are meeting it.

The research suggests that this is an important part of the problem. Before looking at how organisations choose and assess those they appoint to provide fire safety services, it is important to understand how well they understand their own legal responsibilities.



Section 2



Accountability and Confusion

Fire safety legislation across the UK establishes clear duties for managing fire risk within buildings and premises. Although the legal frameworks, terminology and specific duties differ between Scotland, Northern Ireland and England and Wales, the underlying principle of accountability for identifying, managing and reviewing fire risks is consistent.

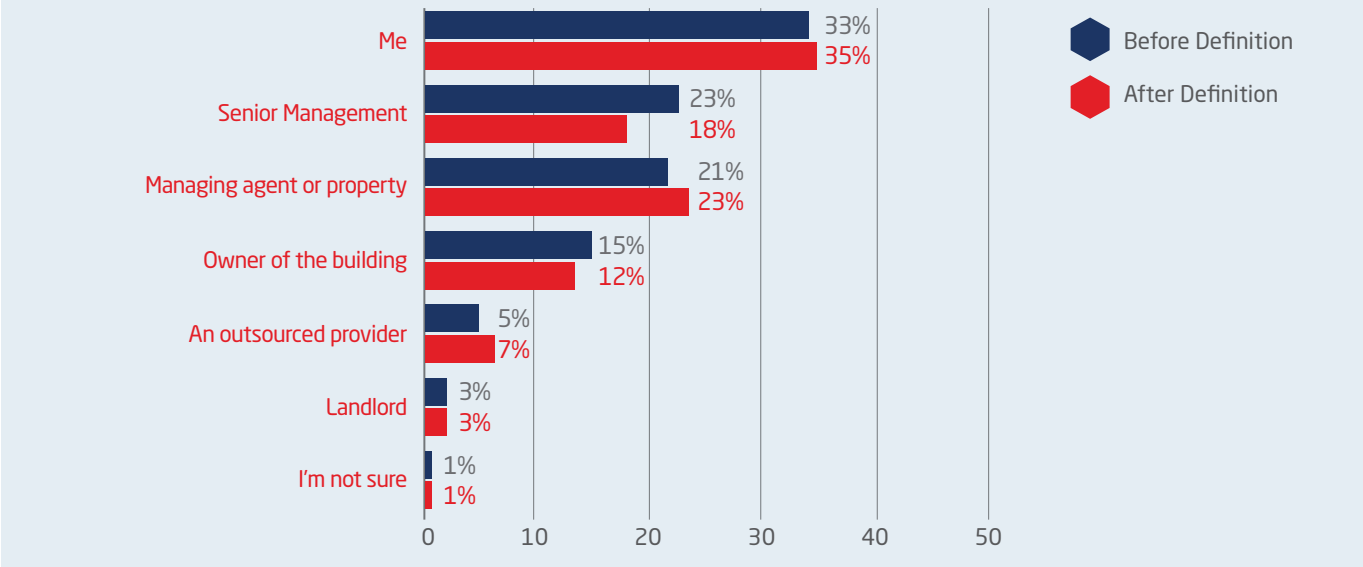
The findings reveal a significant gap between what those with fire safety duties are expected to understand and do, and how those responsibilities are understood and applied in practice. Many decision-makers report uncertainty around:

- Who it is that holds legal responsibility
- What responsibilities the role includes
- How accountability and competence should be interpreted and evidenced in practice.

Confusion around legal accountability

When decision-makers were asked who had duties under fire safety laws for their building, and were then subsequently shown the legal definition, over a third (38%) changed their answer.

Q. Who has duties under fire safety laws in your building(s)?



Nearly two in five people with fire safety purchasing influence are not fully clear on where legal responsibility sits in practice.

Confidence in legal duties is uneven

When asked about the responsibilities of the Responsible Person, 66% of respondents selected duties that do not formally sit within the role, while 33% expressed doubt about the Responsible Person's actual legal obligations.

Even among those who identify themselves as the Responsible Person (or managing those duties on behalf of a corporate body that is the Responsible Person), confidence is not universal.



are not fully confident in their understanding of the role's legal requirements.



reported that they had not reviewed their fire risk assessment within the last year, although regular review forms part of the Responsible Person's legal duties.



failed to select "Check the competence of their fire risk assessor" as one of their responsibilities.

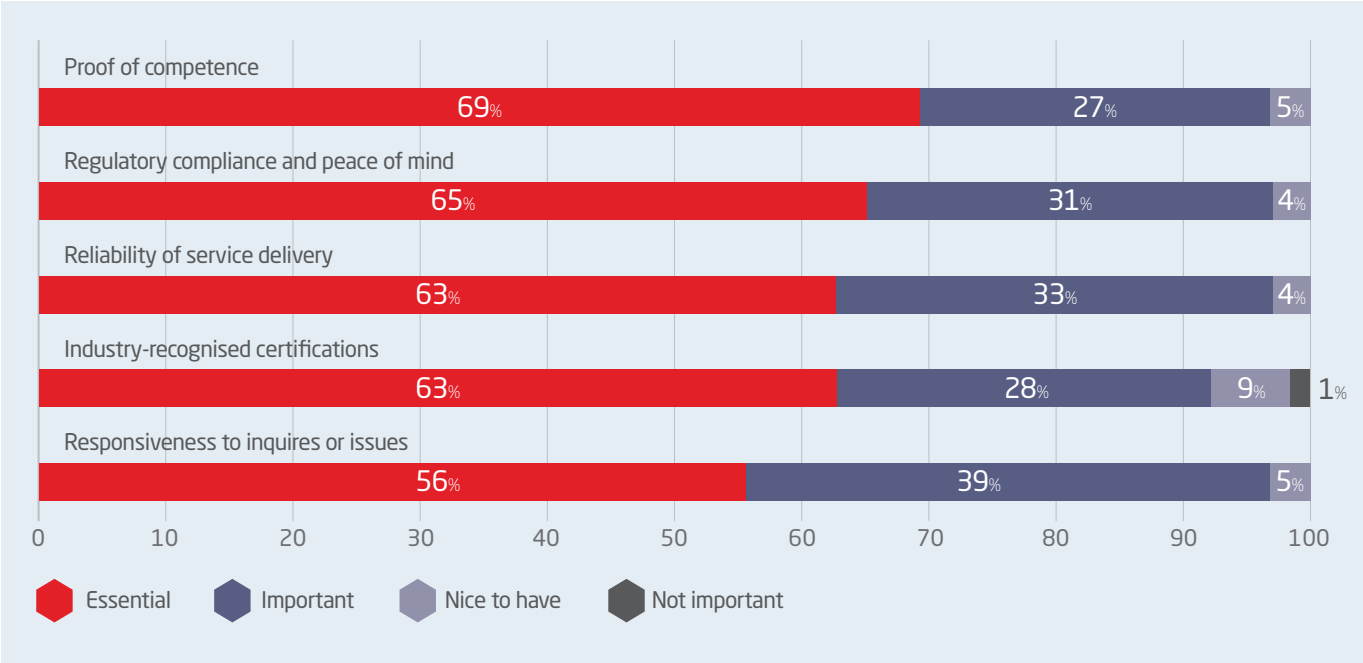
These findings show that awareness of accountability and statutory fire safety responsibilities does not always translate into clarity or confidence in practice

Accountability requires competence assurance

In making decisions around fire safety, Responsible Persons are expected not only to discharge their legal duties but also to demonstrate that those decisions were informed, proportionate and based on competent advice.

Proof of competence is the most important factor when choosing a fire safety supplier: 69% of respondents say it is "essential". Yet many still struggle to assess whether a supplier is genuinely competent.

Q. How important, if at all, are each of the following when selecting a supplier of fire safety products / services?



Nearly three-quarters of decision-makers (73%) do not know who their supplier is certificated by, if their supplier is certificated at all or use an uncertificated supplier. Moreover, amongst those who are unsure of their supplier's certification or who use an uncertificated supplier, many are unsure of how competence can be demonstrated.

These findings highlight the correlation between accountability in practice and demonstrable competence. As long as competence remains difficult to evaluate or evidence, barriers to establish and sustain accountability in decision-making will persist.

Awareness does not mean understanding

The research reveals a clear gap between how confident those with fire safety responsibilities under the law are about their legal responsibilities and what they actually know.

Within this research, 85% claim to be "fully aware" of their legal responsibilities under the law, only 55% correctly identified checking fire risk assessor competence as one of their obligations.

This means that, while the vast majority of Responsible Persons believe they understand their role, nearly half are missing the critical step of checking the competence of their assessor.

However, poor communication and lack of clarity around legal responsibility are only part of the issue. Current market fragmentation and the lack of a single, authoritative place to find certified fire safety suppliers is a significant hindrance to further progress.

In other words, even if the 45% of those who are currently unaware of their duty became aware, they will still struggle to comply.

Section 3



From Accountability to Assurance

Third-party certification schemes operated by a UKAS-accredited body provide an established mechanism through which organisations can evidence competence, demonstrate due diligence and make more informed supplier decisions.

Most decision-makers (97%) recognise the value of third-party certification in terms of this competence assurance. 83% recognise third-party certification as what should be the standard route to demonstrating fire assessor competence. Yet, nearly three-quarters (73%) remain unable to identify whether their suppliers are certified in this way.

In short, support for certification is widespread. Adoption is not.

The research presented throughout this report points in a clear direction. Further progress in improving fire safety compliance will require greater confidence that competence can be demonstrated, assessed and assured consistently across the sector.

Not all certification is equal: the case for UKAS accreditation

The value end users place on certification is only genuinely delivered when it is backed by UKAS accreditation.

UKAS, the United Kingdom Accreditation Service, assesses third-party certification bodies to ensure they themselves are competent, capable and fully qualified in the audits they undertake. It is the only body in the UK recognised to do this by the government.

By contrast, self-declared industry directories, trade body listings and unaccredited "certification" can use the same language as a UKAS-accredited certification body while offering none of the same rigour, independent oversight or meaningful due diligence. A Responsible Person may therefore believe they have discharged their duty to check competence when they have in fact relied on a register where no real evidence of competence was required. This proliferation of lists and registers in the market may go some way to explaining why so many end users are unable to say whether their suppliers are qualified – despite recognising the value of independent UKAS-accredited certification.

Only a UKAS-accredited certification body is itself independently and regularly assessed against recognised, consistent standards – the mechanism this report defines as "third-party certification" throughout. Equally, these bodies offer appropriate recourse for complaints and non-conformities and require their certificated organisation to take corrective action(s) within a given timescale.

When asked what would make them most likely to choose a third-party certificated fire safety provider, end users cited meeting legal or regulatory requirements (51%), the quality or reliability of the service provided (49%) and complete peace of mind (46%) as the leading reasons. In fact, 81% agree that third-party certified providers are worth the possible additional cost.

Independent research conducted for this report also confirms that these are not abstract preferences. 97% of respondents agree that choosing a third-party certificated provider brings tangible benefit, including:

70% **A trusted solution for fire safety needs**

69% **Confidence that risk to life would be minimised**

68% **An evidence trail that the Responsible Person has met their requirements under the Fire Safety Order**

66% **A solution that is fit for purpose**

These benefits are most valued by those who carry the greatest legal and reputational exposure. Larger organisations (250+ employees) are markedly more likely than smaller organisations to select peace of mind as a reason for choosing certification (54% versus 33%), and to value confidence that risk to life would be minimised (76% versus 57%). Those with legal fire safety responsibilities are more likely than other decision-makers to cite peace of mind as a driver (55% versus 40%). The more accountable someone is, the more they rely on certification to discharge that accountability with confidence.

If you use a company with third-party certification from a UKAS-accredited certification body	If you do not
You know the organisation's competence has been independently checked.	You have to satisfy yourself that the company knows what it is doing.
You know the company is regularly assessed.	You have to establish that standards are being maintained.
You know the work is checked against recognised standards.	You have to satisfy yourself that the work is up to standard.
You know important basics have been checked, such as appropriate insurance.	You need to make those important checks yourself.
You have independent evidence that you chose a competent company.	You need to demonstrate how you established their competence.
You reduce the risk around a system designed to protect people's lives	You take more of that risk on yourself.

Section 4



Recommendations

The challenge facing the UK fire safety sector is no longer awareness alone.

The evidence points towards two policy priorities for the UK Government:

1 The UK Government requires Responsible Persons to use third-party certification from UKAS-accredited certification bodies as the means of verifying a fire safety provider's competence

Responsible Persons are legally accountable for the competence of those they appoint but the research shows that many do not understand this responsibility and that, even when they do, assessing competence is difficult in a fragmented market.

The answer is not to expect Responsible Persons to become expert in judging technical competence. Government should provide a clear and reliable way for them to do so. Third-party certification offers that route by independently assessing suppliers against recognised standards and providing ongoing assurance.

Voluntary certification has helped raise standards but the evidence shows that many buyers do not routinely check for it. Government should therefore establish third-party certification by a UKAS-accredited certification body as the required route for Responsible Persons to verify the competence of those they appoint.

2 The UK Government establishes a single, authoritative register of appropriately certified fire safety providers, giving Responsible Persons a clear and trusted route to finding competent providers

Even where Responsible Persons understand the importance of competence assurance, the current market makes identifying appropriately certificated providers difficult.

The market is fragmented enough that even engaged, responsible organisations cannot reliably check competence.

Government should establish a clear, accessible and authoritative route for Responsible Persons to locate certificated fire safety providers audited by UKAS-accredited certification bodies.

This would provide the same underlying benefit delivered by other safety-critical registers: enabling those responsible for safety to identify competent professionals without needing to become experts in assessing competence themselves.

Conclusion: Closing the Competence Gap



Almost ten years since the Grenfell Tower tragedy, UK fire safety has moved forward but it has not moved far enough.

The evidence presented in this report shows that awareness has increased significantly. Organisations increasingly recognise the importance of fire safety, understand the consequences of poor decision-making and place greater value on competence, accountability and due diligence.

The challenge is that awareness alone does not provide assurance.

Responsibility needs to be matched by confidence

Responsible Persons carry significant responsibility for fire safety. The remaining challenge is ensuring Responsible Persons have the clarity and mechanisms they need to discharge that responsibility with confidence.

Awareness is not the same as assurance

Awareness alone does not provide assurance. Where those responsible for safety cannot reasonably assess technical competence themselves, independent assurance mechanisms are critical.

Independent certification provides a practical route

Third-party certification by a UKAS-accredited Certification Body provides a practical and proportionate way to demonstrate competence. It allows technical capability to be independently assessed, gives Responsible Persons an effective basis for decision-making.

Government can provide greater clarity

The Government has an opportunity to provide the clarity that Responsible Persons need. By establishing a clear route for demonstrating and identifying competence, supported by appropriate implementation measures, it can help ensure that responsibility is matched by assurance.

The question is whether the framework surrounding fire risk assessment is now sufficient to allow Responsible Persons to demonstrate that they have made the right decisions?

The next decade of fire safety should be defined not by greater awareness alone but by how straightforward it is to achieve, evidence and maintain assurance in practice.

About this Research

Fire safety legislation across the UK places clear duties on those responsible for premises. In recent years, competence, accountability and assurance have become central themes in both regulatory reform and industry discussion.

With this in mind, NSI and BAFE jointly commissioned independent research to better understand in practice:

- How fire safety is understood and prioritised within organisations
- How supplier decisions are made
- How competence is assessed and verified in practice
- Where gaps exist between awareness and assurance

The findings in this report are based on independent research conducted by Sapio Research, who surveyed 150 UK decision-makers with responsibility for, or influence over, fire safety procurement across a range of organisations, company sizes and building types in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Key Definitions

Responsible Person / Duty Holder / Appropriate person

Different parts of the UK use different terms for those responsible for fire safety. England and Wales use "Responsible Person", Scotland uses "Duty Holder" and Northern Ireland uses "Appropriate Person", reflecting differences in national legislation.

These terms are not exactly interchangeable and they can refer to corporate bodies as well as individuals. For example, in a workplace, the Responsible Person is generally the employer of those who work in the premises. In premises that are not workplaces, the person with control of the premises is typically the Responsible Person. If no one has control of the premises, the Responsible Person is almost always the owner of the premises.

Consequently, definitions and responsibilities do differ based on the relevant legislation and contextually may refer to a human being or a body corporate.

For the sake of simplicity, while acknowledging the differing terminology used across UK jurisdictions, the term "Responsible Person" is used throughout this report as a collective reference to those holding legal fire safety duties.

In addition, fire safety legislation also tends to impose duties on any other persons who have control of the premises. This can include contractors involved in the maintenance of fire protection measures as well as fire risk assessors.

Buyer / Decision-Maker / End User

The terms "buyer", "decision-maker" and "end user" are used to describe individuals within relevant organisations involved in selecting or approving providers of fire safety services, such as life safety fire risk assessors. This may include the Responsible Person but is not limited to that role.

Third-Party Certification

In this report, third-party certification refers specifically to independent, UKAS-accredited certification of fire safety service providers or fire risk assessors against recognised schemes and scopes. One example is BS 8674:2025 (Built environment – Framework for competence of individual fire risk assessors – Code of practice), the British Standard published in August 2025 that defines the competence, skills and knowledge required for fire risk assessors in the UK.

It does not refer to trade association membership, directories or unaccredited listing services as these do not audit competence.

bafe.org.uk

For over 40 years, BAFE has set the benchmark for fire safety competence in the UK. BAFE's independently verified, third-party certification schemes are all delivered exclusively through UKAS-accredited and licensed certification bodies such as NSI.

All BAFE schemes are accredited by UKAS and before they are approved, they undergo rigorous planning and drafting stages where experts from across the fire safety sector are appointed as technical authors or consulted as part of the drafting process. Transparency and co-production are vital to success and ensure that schemes reflect the needs of both stakeholders and end users before implementation and then throughout the scheme's lifecycle.

Becoming BAFE registered allows organisations to demonstrate that they meet the highest standards of professionalism, quality and compliance. This gives them a powerful competitive advantage in a sector where matters such as compliance, competence and assurance are considered vital.

fia.uk.com

The Fire Industry Association (FIA) is the UK's leading not-for-profit trade association, dedicated to elevating standards in fire safety. Established from the merger of FETA and BFPSA, the FIA represents a unified commitment to advancing professionalism across the fire industry. The FIA provides training, technical guidance, and valuable insights on evolving legislation, supporting both members and non-members. By working closely with government and industry bodies, the FIA shapes key regulations and promotes best practices. Our mission extends to fostering public safety through accessible knowledge and advocacy, ensuring that fire safety standards remain robust and relevant across the UK.

nsi.org.uk

NSI (National Security Inspectorate) is an independent, UKAS-accredited and BAFE-licensed certification body specialising in the certification of providers across the fire safety and security sectors. It is also the most recognised certification body working in the fire safety industry – a claim that is supported by the independent research carried out for this report.

For more than 55 years, NSI has assessed companies against recognised technical and management standards through regular auditing and inspection. Its certification schemes are designed to verify competence, professionalism and compliance, helping organisations make informed and defensible supplier choices.

By providing independent certification and ongoing oversight, NSI supports service providers in demonstrating quality and helps buyers select trusted, competent partners.

sapioresearch.com

Sapio Research is an independent market research agency that specialises in evidence-based insight for organisations operating in complex or regulated sectors. It works with trade bodies, professional services firms and public interest organisations to gather reliable data that supports informed decision-making.

For this report, Sapio Research conducted an independent survey of UK decision-makers with responsibility for, or influence over, fire safety procurement, providing the data and analysis that underpin the findings presented.