

DR. ZZEUS



IN THIS REGULAR COLUMN, DR. TOM BROOKES, MD AT ZZEUS TRAINING AND CHAIRMAN OF THE FSA, ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS RELATED TO FIRE SAFETY. IN THIS MONTH'S EDITION HE LOOKS AT COMPLIANCE OF FIRE SAFETY SYSTEMS IF FIRE ALARM INDICATOR DEVICES DON'T MEET THE REQUIRED STANDARDS.



If VAD and VID fire alarm indicator devices do not meet the standards established by EN 54-23, is the system compliant?

There isn't a simple answer to this question. However, in extreme cases, it may not just be non-compliant, it may also be illegal.

Since January 2014, Visual Alarm Devices (VADs) have been mandated to adhere to the standards outlined in EN 54-23. These adjustments by BSI were prompted by the UK Equality Act of 2010, aimed at legally safeguarding individuals from discrimination in the workplace. These regulatory updates have generated uncertainty regarding the use of combined sounder beacon devices, which are required to meet these standards for the beacon component.

Ensuring effective emergency alert systems for individuals with hearing impairments is paramount in any safety system. With millions of individuals in the UK facing challenges related to hearing loss, reliance solely on audible alarms becomes inadequate. To address this, integrating visual alarm systems becomes imperative.

The first step is to consult with the client and check their fire risk assessment. The client or their assessor may have good reasons for having EN 54-23 compliant VADs that you may not have considered – there could be many hearing impaired people in the building, for example.

Viewing this document is key for anyone designing a fire alarm system, as putting less safety equipment in the building than the fire risk assessment states could result in you having to explain why you went against the assessment in a court of law, should there be a problem at a later date.

A VAD serves as a fundamental component in emergency signalling, providing clear visual cues during critical situations to facilitate prompt evacuation. Versatile in application, VADs can be installed indoors or outdoors, mounted on walls or ceilings, and utilised either independently or as part of a larger alarm network.

VADs play a pivotal role in environments characterised by high ambient noise levels, such as industrial settings, or where individuals employ hearing protection devices. Moreover, they significantly enhance accessibility for those with hearing impairments, ensuring inclusivity across public spaces, offices, educational institutions, and toilet and bathroom facilities. These must comply with BS EN 54-23.

In contrast, Visual Indicating Devices (VIDs) serve a supplementary function within alarm systems. VIDs should be an addition to existing fire alarm devices but must not serve as standalone systems due to their inability to facilitate evacuation procedures. Common applications include exterior installation to aid Fire & Rescue Services, providing coded visual signals for staff, or serving

as remote indicators to pinpoint emergency locations.

Where I see people most commonly getting this wrong is within disabled toilets and bathrooms – if there is a need for a visual indicator in a disabled facility it needs to be a EN 54-23 VAD, as a standard beacon would not meet the client's obligation under the UK Equalities Act 2010.

Consequently, adherence to EN54-23 criteria mandates the installation of VADs to cater to individuals with hearing impairments effectively. However, in certain scenarios where EN 54-23 compliance is not obligatory, such as those identified during risk assessments, the utilisation of VIDs might be considered.

So, in simple terms, if the visual alarm device is likely to be the primary means of indication it needs to comply with EN 54-23, but if the visual alarm is for secondary purposes it may be a VID (standard beacon).

DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION YOU'D LIKE ANSWERED? EMAIL YOUR QUERIES TO: TOM@ZZEUS.ORG.UK

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