

IFE unveils new Netherlands Branch

*Fire engineering professionals in the Netherlands have formed a new IFE Branch. Its president, **Marcel Lasker**, reports from the inaugural meeting*

THE NEW Netherlands Branch – IFE Nederland – was officially launched in April. International president John Woodcock formally inaugurated the Branch during its first annual general meeting (AGM), held at Hanze University of Applied Sciences in the city of Groningen. This, the Institution's 41st branch, is the only fully functional one in mainland Europe. It currently has almost 60 members and has support from fire authorities, industry and academia.

Immediately following the meeting, a half-day technical conference on the subject of fires in parking garages was staged. Some 100 delegates contributed to a lively debate on ventilation and sprinkler protection in these structures.

Branch plans

During the AGM, the Branch Council outlined its plans for the coming year. One of the main ideas is to establish a forum where IFE Nederland members can raise complicated technical questions for consultation by their peers.

The idea here to provide Branch members with a thorough response to a well-researched question. If it is not possible to provide a satisfactory answer to a question, the forum will look to give directions on where to find an alternative solution.

In addition, the Branch is looking to introduce and reinforce the use of peer review as a tool to help with the evaluation of fire engineered solutions. Peer review is not commonly used in the Netherlands, and there is a need for documented guidance on the review process.

Conference debate

At the subsequent conference, the international president awarded Fellowships of the Institution to Ynso Suurenbroek and Ruud van Herpen – both highly experienced and dedicated fire professionals.



In his introduction, Mr Woodcock made some interesting observations about the increase in the cost of UK fire losses in recent years, and the links between sustainability and fire safety. The contribution that fire engineering and fire service response can make to achieving environmental targets, particularly through the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions from smoke, is receiving growing attention in the UK, and similar debate should be encouraged in the Netherlands.

Four conference speakers then explored fire protection issues for enclosed car parks, with the session chaired by Thomas Faber, fire chief of the Greater Groningen area. This prompted a lively discussion about the pros and cons of ventilation and sprinkler protection in car parks.

Forced ventilation

In the Netherlands, there is a growing trend towards the forced ventilation of car parking structures as part of firefighting tactics. There is also ongoing discussion about the proper design and layout of ventilating systems and their performance criteria, as well as the expectations placed on the fire service to control fires in enclosed car parks.

Many in the country argue that there is currently a 'disconnect' in influence and knowledge between the parties involved in the design, construction, ownership and public safety of car parking structures.

It was argued that most enclosed car parks comply with relevant building and fire safety rules, yet there have been a number of recent fires in car parks which

have indicated that ventilating systems, when combined with established firefighting procedures, are not always a recipe for guaranteed success.

Better designs

The development of good practice is hindered by the absence of clear regulations, and a widespread unfounded assumption that the fire service will extinguish a fire in a parking structure within a certain time, in undescribed boundary conditions. These problems are intensified by the fire behaviour of modern cars.

Contributing to the debate, Ynso Suurenbroek said that better design criteria for parking structures should be developed, which should have clearer objectives, be supported by more research and factor in fireground tactics and procedures. The role of active and passive protection systems in preventing and controlling fires was also discussed.

The enthusiasm and openness of all the delegates at the conference was clear to see – with a broadly felt sense of urgency, participants seemed willing to set aside their specific interests and consider how to develop new guidelines for fire safety and loss control in parking structures.

Plans are already afoot to organise next year's Branch AGM and conference ■

Marcel Lasker BEng, MIFireE, is president of IFE Nederland

Branch information and contact details are available at www.ife.org.uk/branches