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BESA flags critical fire damper safety issue

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The Building Engineering Services Association (BESA) has issued an urgent warning about a potential fire safety weakness in a large number of building ventilation systems.

It has issued an interim technical bulletin (VH001) ahead of a full update of its industry guidance for the 'Installation of Fire Dampers and Smoke Dampers' (DW145) which is due for launch at the Association's National Conference in October.

BESA said it was taking the unusual step of producing an interim announcement because of the urgent nature of the problem after annual inspections carried out by maintenance contractors found that "a huge number of dampers" had been incorrectly installed.

Head of technical Graeme Fox explained that many did not comply with manufacturers' instructions and needed remedial action "without delay".

"We have been alerted to the very dangerous practice of using self-drilling 'tek' screws which do not melt when temperatures rise during a building fire. This means spring-loaded dampers will not be released to contain the spread of fire within the zone and ensure the integrity of the fire stopping measure," he said.

"Dampers must be secured by fusible fixings that allow the duct to break away otherwise the collapsing duct could pull the damper out of place and break the seal between the fire zones," added Fox.

BESA's technical committee sanctioned the technical bulletin, which is freely available on the Association's website, to give contractors the information and appropriate terminology to alert clients to this potentially life-threatening problem.

The bulletin also updates the guidance and statutory requirements covering installation, testing and

maintenance of fire dampers and smoke dampers including clients' legal obligations to ensure their fire safety systems remain fit for purpose in line with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 for England and Wales and the Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006.

It outlines the crucial role played by the penetration seal in ensuring the overall fire stopping integrity of an installation, the importance of maintenance teams being able to find and access dampers for testing and repair, and the need for designers and installers to seek expert advice from damper manufacturers.

"While this is clearly a very worrying situation, we can take some reassurance from the fact that this problem is being brought to our attention by the increasing frequency of fire damper inspections and tests as awareness grows of this extremely important issue," said Fox.

"We would urge contractors to alert their clients immediately so all the necessary checks and repairs can be carried out."