



Fire Industry Association

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COLOUR CODING OF PORTABLE FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

BACKGROUND

For many years the colour of the outer casing of portable fire extinguishers indicated the type of extinguishant that they contained. The colours were normally; blue for powder, red for water, black for carbon dioxide, cream for foam and green for halon. The specification for the colour coding were contained within British Standard BS5423 (withdrawn in 1996) and guidance on the selection and installation of the extinguishers was included within British Standard Code of Practice BS5306 Part 3:1985.

During the 1990s, a European standard was drafted that replaced national standards. The series of standards were designated EN3 (and published in the UK as BS EN3) and this standard number can be found on most fire extinguishers that are sold today. One requirement of EN3 is that the majority of the surface area of the body of all types of portable fire extinguishers is painted red. This makes type differentiation by colour more difficult. However, it does allow for an area between 3 and 5% of the surface area to be colour coded to indicate the extinguisher type. BS 7863 was drafted to give additional guidance on where this colour coded area should be placed on the extinguisher.

In 2000, the British Standards Institution revised BS5306 Part 3, splitting it into two parts i.e. BS5306 Part 3 and Part 8 which now includes the advice on selection and installation. This states that extinguishers should, in most cases, be in accordance with BS EN3. By implication this recommendation requires the installation of predominantly red fire extinguishers.

REQUIREMENTS OF BS5306 PART 8

The advice provided by BS5306 Part 8, can create some problems for owners / occupiers of premises where portable fire extinguishers are installed. This results from the Statement within Clause 4.4 that reads as follows:

“4.4 Avoidance of multiplicity of types

To avoid confusion, all extinguishers installed in any one floor of a building or single occupancy should have the same method of operation and if intended for the same function should all be similar in shape, appearance and colour.”

Clause 4.6 then states:

“4.6 Extinguisher colour coding

The colour coding of all portable extinguishers in a new installation should conform to the recommendations of BS 7863. This specifies the size of the colour coded area.”

IMPLICATIONS WITHIN THE UK

When BS5306 Part 8 was drafted, it was not intended that all existing portable extinguishers be replaced. Clause 4.6 hints at this and there is no requirement that the guidance given affects products installed prior to its publication. The decision therefore rests with the owner / occupier or whoever else may have responsibilities under fire and safety legislation.

In reality, when an existing fire extinguisher needs replacing, the replacement should either be a refurbished extinguisher matching the others within the premises or a new extinguisher in accordance with EN3. Your extinguisher maintenance company may be able to supply a refurbished unit to match existing extinguishers.

If an EN3 extinguisher is installed, it is important to ensure that there will be no confusion caused by having the new extinguisher with older, colour coded, extinguishers in the same premises. The person with the legal responsibility for health and safety matters has to decide how to prevent confusion as part of their fire risk assessment. Suitable notices adjacent the new extinguisher(s) and segregation of these extinguishers to one area of the premises may suffice but it is important to ensure that at least those people who have been trained to operate extinguishers should be fully aware of the situation and any implications relating to first aid fire fighting.

CONCLUSIONS

- New extinguishers conforming to BS EN3 are predominantly red irrespective of the extinguishant they contain.
- The new BS5306 Part 8 does not require all existing extinguishers to be removed and replaced by EN3 extinguishers.
- Subject to satisfactory arrangements being made to satisfy fire and safety legislation, the owner / occupier or whoever else may have legal responsibility can decide how to prevent confusion arising from the different colouring of extinguishers.
- It is possible for special Extinguishers to be supplied which are not to EN 3 and are neither red nor coloured.

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DISCLAIMER

The information set out in this document is believed to be correct in the light of information currently available but it is not guaranteed and neither the Fire Industry Association nor its officers can accept any responsibility in respect of the contents or any events arising from use of the information contained within this document.