

Facilities Management from A to Z

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Gas is an important natural energy source and with industry accounting for two thirds of the UKs' energy consumption it is helpful if facility managers understand what they are dealing with. Natural gas is a hydrocarbon gas that is usually obtained from underground sources, often in association with petroleum and coal deposits. Natural gas generally contains a high percentage of methane and inert gases.

Britain used to get all of its gas from the North Sea and once exported gas to Europe from these supplies. This is now changing as the North Sea supplies have begun to dwindle and Britain now imports 10% of its gas supply. This figure is increasing annually. The gas is imported through pipelines across Europe linked to Norfolk from Belgium with additional supply brought in as liquefied gas via a terminal in Kent.

Natural gas is distributed through a network of buried transmission and distribution pipes which total around 275,000 km. Gas releases occasionally occur as a result of mains failure but also as a result of accidental damage. Under certain circumstances, these leaks can result in a fire or explosion, and although the number of major incidents has been low, the hazards are still serious.

In 2005/06 16 people died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by gas appliances and flues which had not been properly installed or maintained. Many others also suffered ill health. When gas does not burn properly, as with other fuels such as coal, wood or oil, excess carbon monoxide is produced which is poisonous. Because it is invisible, tasteless and odourless, carbon monoxide can kill without warning in just a matter of hours.

Because of the dangers of explosion and carbon monoxide poisoning there is a raft of gas safety regulations that must be complied with by building operators. Any place of work that has a gas installation and/or gas appliances installed must be maintained in such a way so as to prevent risk of injury to any person. The definition of what is an appropriate maintenance programme will be determined by the installation's age, condition and usage. If an inspector is of the opinion that the installation is not being properly maintained and may give rise to danger, enforcement action may be taken.

For more information on gas safety go to www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/gasindex.htm