

# Furniture and general safety

by John Shipman

Furniture

Furniture suppliers and manufacturers can comply with general safety regulations by testing to recognised standards for a particular product type.

The UK General Product Safety Regulations (GPSR) were revised on 1 October 2005 with the continued aim of ensuring that all consumer products sold in the domestic market are safe. The GPSR has been, and will remain, the main tool of the trading standards officers when prosecuting companies in relation to unsafe goods.

The UK GPSR follows on from the Europe-wide update of the General Products Safety Directive (GPSD). The main aim of the directive is to ensure that 'producers shall be obliged to place only safe products on the market'.

The term 'products' is defined in the GPSR and includes new or second hand items sold for domestic use. Excluded are such items as edible products, antiques, items marked as 'needing repair or reconditioning prior to use' and all services.

## What is safe?

Safe products are defined by the GPSD and the UK GPSR as those meeting specified, harmonised safety standards. To help companies understand which safety standards apply, the Official Journal of the European Communities (OJEC) will list, from time to time, those European standards which are deemed to be part of an annex to the GPSD. Therefore if a product meets the appropriate specified standard it may be considered as meeting the GPSD and the GPSR.

Note, however, that the GPSD states that 'failure to meet the standards does not necessarily mean a product is unsafe'. Indications are that the enforcement



authorities in the UK will use the standards as a benchmark and they may draw the conclusion that failure to meet the relevant standard means that the product is unsafe. Consequently suppliers who wish to claim that their products are safe will have to demonstrate product safety by another appropriate method, e.g. testing against national standards, such as BS or DIN.

The relevant furniture standards are given in Box 1. Furniture manufacturers and importers will need to look out for further lists published in the OJEC. Office furniture is included in the list as this may be relevant, according to the EC, for home offices or studies. Suppliers of home office or study furniture may now have to consider the higher performance levels of the quoted standards rather than using domestic performance levels. SATRA suggests it would be appropriate to test these products to the higher safety levels.

Typical standards for office furniture which are deemed to be appropriate are, for example:

- EN 1335-1, -2, -3:2000 Office furniture. Office work chair, dimensions, safety requirements and test methods.
- EN 527-1, -2, -3:2000/2002/2003 Office furniture. Work tables and desks. Dimensions, mechanical safety requirements, strength and stability.

### Most demanding first

Where a country has its own safety legislation, this can take precedence over the GPSD when it offers a more demanding requirement than the EU regulations. An example of this in the UK is the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988. Where there is no harmonised, European standard cited, the supplier may use a national standard to demonstrate safety.



Drawer testing in SATRA's laboratories. Test methods in the relevant EN standards ensure that furniture meets expectations for safety and function.

The GPSD and the GPSR now require suppliers to report any knowledge about 'potentially unsafe' products. If the potential is severe or if a consumer is severely injured, the incident must be reported immediately. There is however a difficulty in that there is no definition of 'severe'. Enforcement bodies can, in serious cases, insist on the recall or withdrawal of products in all EU states. This could mean that a product has to be recalled in the UK where there is no

perceived problem after a safety incident has occurred in another EU state.

### Protecting interests

The UK furniture industry relies heavily on imports and whilst this is attractive in terms of low prices, the trade-off might be the supplier's lack of knowledge of the UK regulations and the GPSR. If products are released onto the market without any testing or assessment to ensure their safety and fitness for purpose then the first supplier in the EU supply chain could be at risk of prosecution.

The best way for companies intending to sell products in the UK and the rest of Europe to protect their interests is to have products tested by an independent, UKAS accredited or equivalent test centre to the most relevant national standard e.g. BS or EN, before releasing them onto the market. In addition, advice should be sought on suitable markings, labels, warnings and customer information and instructions for assembly, use, maintenance and cleaning.

### Box 1: Some furniture standards that have been listed in the OJEC as being referenced to the General Products Safety Directive (GPSD).

- EN 1129-1:1995 and -2:1995 Foldaway beds
- EN 1130-1:1997 and -2:1996 Cribs and cradles for domestic use
- EN 1273:2005 Child use and care articles – baby walking frames
- EN 1466:2004 Child care articles – carry cots and stands – safety requirements
- EN 14749:2005 Domestic kitchen storage units and worktops – safety requirements
- EN 1888:2003 Child care articles – wheeled child conveyances
- EN 1930:2000 Child care articles – safety barriers
- EN 13209-1:2004 Child care articles – baby carriers
- EN 14988-1:2006 and -2:2006 Furniture – children's highchairs for domestic use

#### The following furniture standards may be included in the above list at a later date:

- EN 1023-2:2000 Office screens
- EN 12727:2000 Ranked seating
- EN 1335-2:2000 Office work chairs
- EN 1725:1998 Beds and mattresses
- EN 581-1:2006 Outdoor furniture – seating and tables general safety requirements
- EN 581-3:1999 Outdoor furniture – tables, safety requirements and test methods
- EN 747-1:1993 Bunk beds for domestic use

**Notes:** This list may be subject to change, and only publication in the Official Journal produces legal effect. It is suggested that readers visit the following web site at regular intervals to find a consolidated and updated list:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/newapproach/standardization/harmstds/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/newapproach/standardization/harmstds/index_en.html)

### How can SATRA help?

SATRA has the capability, equipment, expertise and experience to test a wide variety of products and to offer independent advice to all those in the supply chain whether they are selling or buying furniture. For further information on testing product for compliance to safety or performance standards please contact John Shipman.