

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

Listen to this podcast episode [here](#).

**Intro:** Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au).

**Amanda Farmer:** Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer, and this is Your Strata Property. Rob Broadhead is the CEO of 2020 Fire Protection. A graduate of the Institute of Fire Engineers, and a member of FPA Australia's New South Wales coordinating committee.

Rob has been in the fire protection industry since 1992, has contributed to Australian standards, and helped draft fire protection training for Strata Communities Australia. Rob is passionate about improving general knowledge around fire safety so building occupants and owners can make good decisions about fire protection before the worst occurs. Today, I'm delighted to welcome Rob Broadhead of 2020 Fire. Welcome, Rob.

**Rob Broadhead:** Hi Amanda. Thank you for having me on here. It's a great opportunity. I'm very new to podcasts, so I might be slightly nervous. Veronica Morgan, a mutual friend, introduced me to the concept of podcasts, and yours was the first that I actually listened to, Episode 168 with Tim Sarah. Really interesting, and I've gone on to listen to a few others while I've been driving. So thank you.

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent. Well, I feel very privileged that mine is the first podcast that you've listened to, and indeed very privileged that we have you with us today because I have been saying for a long time now, "I need a fire guy. Someone get me a fire guy. I need to understand what this is all about so that we can enlighten our listeners." I get questions all the time about what our buildings should be doing when it comes to fire protection, who is qualified to help our buildings, and it's all a little bit of a mystery to me let me say. I'm hoping you can demystify some of that for us today.

**Rob Broadhead:** I'll certainly try to. It's a really good timing to be asking these questions because for almost 20 years, it's been a mystery to all of us too being that we're now talking about competent fire safety practitioners in New South Wales. I think it's really important to go into a bit of detail and a bit of background as to how New South Wales has got into the position that we're in here where, "Who the hell is a competent fire safety practitioner?"

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. Tell us. Go for it.

**Rob Broadhead:** From about 2000 till about December, 2017, the owners of strata buildings started to look for properly qualified person. That was what the legislation said, and sounded like a great thing. These are the people to... A properly qualified person to service their fire system and to possibly sign off their annual fire safety statement. Well, it's a great idea, there was never really any legislative definition for what a properly qualified person was. This was further compounded by the fact that there was actually no qualifications really available to get.

**Rob Broadhead:** So in the early 90s, I suppose, I did a a fire technology course which led you towards being able to get the graduate of Institute of Fire Engineers qualification. However, since about 2000, there's been nothing really out there for you to have. As a result, the owners haven't really known who a properly qualified person actually is.

**Amanda Farmer:** Let me just stop you there. This is the person who is coming in to inspect all the fire safety bits and pieces in a building; extinguishers, smoke alarms, exits, signs, lights, hydrants, so that they can go tick, tick, tick. You've got all this stuff, it's all working, and you get your annual fire safety statement, or your fire safety certificate that the council wants you to lodge.

**Rob Broadhead:** Exactly right, Amanda. Exactly right.

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay. Go for it.

**Rob Broadhead:** And so in December, 2017, the legislation changed. This is the Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000, if you really want the boring details.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. This lawyer does want the boring-ness, yes.

**Rob Broadhead:** Right. They changed the person from being a properly qualified person to a competent fire safety practitioner, which sounds awesome, doesn't it? The challenge with this of course is that there was also still no real definition of what a competent fire safety practitioner was. It was deemed as a person that deemed qualified by the building owner.

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay. We haven't gone very far.

**Rob Broadhead:** Yes, we still haven't gone very far. So still, the building owners are still going, "Who is a competent fire safety practitioner, and how do I determine that?" The good thing, the great thing that happened in that December 2017 changed legislation is that they legislated there would be a pathway to be defined in the future as to how these people became a competent fire safety practitioner. So huge step. Probably back to you, they've defined a competent fire safety practitioner as someone needs to be there, deemed by the owner, and they've said there will be a pathway for this to happen.

**Amanda Farmer:** And nothing much has happened since then. Is that right?

**Rob Broadhead:** In fact, a lot has happened since then, which has been really great. I think all of the challenges we've seen with the cladding fires with the Greenfells, with the Neo 200s, things like that, has really brought to the fore the importance of this.

There's still no exact definition. However, as of April this year, the government wrote a letter to some organisations saying which ones they would accept. At the moment, there is a register, an interim fire safety register, and that's being run by FPA Australia, so the Fire Protection Association of Australia. Building owners and people in strata really should be looking on that list to see who's on the list, because that is the starting point for the pathway we're talking of.

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay. This is a register that professionals apply to the government to be on. Do they?

**Rob Broadhead:** In terms of the pathway we speak of, so what the government has said they'll do is... This goes into probably more lawyer speak than anything. They're going to put in place a co-regulatory framework that relies on the expertise of industry associations to accredit individuals as competent fire safety practitioners. So there's a lot of lawyer words there really, but essentially they've said, we're going to subcontract the accreditation to an industry body who has the ability to accredit these people.

When they put this in place, when the New South Wales government put it in place, they had applications from about 9 associations in this sort of space applying to be the co-regulator. Thanks to some really hard work on part of FPA Australia, so the Fire Protection Association, they put in the winning bid effectively, they put in the winning outcome. The New South government wrote, "The Fire Protection Association Australia's accreditation scheme has been approved by the secretary. It will become operational after an order has been published in the New South Wales government Gazette, which is expected January, 2020."

As a result, in the coming 6 months or so, we are going to have something that the owners of strata buildings and people in strata can rely on as a framework for how you pick your competent fire safety practitioner.

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay. It's sounding like it's going to be the Fire Protection Association of Australia is going to be the body that accredits competent fire safety practitioners.

**Rob Broadhead:** That's correct.

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

**Amanda Farmer:** All right, excellent. So we will be able to go to them, they will have a list of competent fire safety practitioners. Between now and then, there is this other register which is a New South Wales Government register.

**Rob Broadhead:** It's effectively the same register as it will be in the future. It's just called the interim one because until the government physically legislates it in the Gazette, it's only interim. But they have the letter saying it will be in the register.

**Amanda Farmer:** Perfect. So for now we have this interim register, and I'll have that link in the show notes. Do you believe, agree Rob that the people on that register are in the zone of competent fire safety practitioners? Is this a legit interim register?

**Rob Broadhead:** It is absolutely legit interim register. But due to the fact that the industry has only found out mere months ago that their scheme, their concept of a scheme, so it wasn't a built scheme, it was a concept, all the scheme has been accepted. At the moment, people have applied to be on it. They've said that they are competent. They've said they will commit to the training, to the exams, to the CPD, to all the things required for accreditation.

They've said they will be properly insured for those things to give the advice. So whether that be professional indemnity insurance to a certain level for at least 10 years. The people who are on that list have said they are committed to doing that. And by the time that scheme is in place, in January or thereabouts, 2020, the people on there will have been through a number of exams and a number of assessments to make sure that they actually are competent to be on that list.

**Amanda Farmer:** Look, aside from perhaps the obvious reasons, your building might burn down, people might die, get injured, why do you think this is so important that we have this mechanism for measuring and recording the competence of these people, particularly in the strata sector?

**Rob Broadhead:** I think it's incredibly important because for you, you as a lawyer, correct?

You went through a university course one would imagine, you went through a lot of exams. You probably had to do some practical at a law firm to get some experience. You went through a whole lot of steps to get to that stage and to be qualified as a lawyer.

In fire protection, what we do is, you walk up the street, you're breathing, you're a fire protection expert. I'm not saying that's my personal belief, but certainly there's nothing to stop people doing that. If we look at the sheer number of building defects we're hearing about in the media at the moment, I think it wouldn't be incorrect to say that the lack of qualifications, the lack of experience, the lack of examinations probably has led to this situation we're in where who knows whether you're getting competent people. This is a big step towards making sure that the people you're employing in fire protection are professionals.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. I do have buildings who come to me very frustrated because they have, for example, for many years had their building inspected each year for the annual fire safety statement. The fire safety devices all get signed off, and then they might have either employed somebody different the next year, it can in some cases be the same company coming back that then says, "Oh, you need new fire doors."

The building quite reasonably in my opinion, is saying, "Well, hang on a sec, haven't these fire doors been signed off every year for the last 10 years? Why is it now that you're telling me something different to what the other guys were telling me, or you've suddenly changed your mind about the fire doors?" That's when these questions about, "Who are these people, what are their qualifications? Do I have the right person for the job here? Do I believe this person," all start to come into play. Have you seen that happen before? Is that something that you're familiar with? Why does that happen?

**Rob Broadhead:** It happens all the time. It happens all the time. I cannot tell you how many buildings we come across where you find that. It really shouldn't happen because while there's been no regulation or accreditation of the people involved in it, we're all just working to an Australian standard or to a building code. And if the people who were doing your fire safety assessment read the standard applicable to that building, the answer should be the same every single year in... Aside from maintenance obviously and things that break. The fire doors, if they're compliant one year, should be compliant the next year other than where someone's

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

kicked it in or it's falling off the hinges or something like that.

**Amanda Farmer:** Do you say that those standards are clear? I know we've had in our recent discussions in the industry about building defects, of course, and looking at the reports of people like Dr. Nicole Johnston who was on the podcast recently. There is often a confusion between standards to the extent that they become nonsensical when you try to read them. Do you have this clarity? Do you believe around the standards and the guidelines that should be applied, or are they as confusing as some of our building standards are?

**Rob Broadhead:** They're complex to read, but there's very few things that are not clear in them. So every building has an annual fire safety statement. Every annual fire safety statement has a list of building codes and Australian standards on there. That's what we should be applying to that building, and what those standards and building codes say are pretty clear. There should be very few variances between how we read them.

I think the problem is that people are not reading the standards. It's a very hard thing to do, and it's also a very expensive thing to do because... In fact, I think we have about 120 or more Australian standards just applicable to fire protection. Add the building codes to that. Add the environmental planning and assessment regulation to that, add a few other laws. Particularly with the standards, every building only has to comply with the standard in place when it was built. There might be 8 to 20 different additions of that same standard.

For sprinklers, for example, there's standards ranging from 1929 through to 2019, so there's probably 15 or 20 of those. You need to have an understanding of them, have an understanding of where to find it, and know how to read them.

Part of all of this accreditation scheme is learning how to read the building codes. I think that's really important. In addition to that, I think one of the really hard things is that the Australian standards are incredibly expensive. I think in Australian Standard 16 to 17.1 which is for smoke detection systems, I can't remember the exact price, but it was in the \$200-300 mark for that. And so it's almost motivating the wrong behaviour. It's almost saying, "Don't buy me. Put it in and hope for the best with this rather than read what the code says." And so that again is how we also have come to this, the challenges we find with building defects.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, the standards are inaccessible almost.

**Rob Broadhead:** Correct. And some of the older ones are literally inaccessible. You have to pay someone to go and get them out of the archives and make copies and pay for the right to use that and then distribute it. So it's challenging.

**Amanda Farmer:** What are the most common problems, Rob, that you've noticed strata buildings have when it comes to fire safety issues? You're going in, looking at these buildings, issuing the annual fire safety statements, what are the common things that keep coming up again and again, and how do you fix those?

**Rob Broadhead:** I guess, first I probably want to cut that into 2 different streams. The first one is, if you're talking about a brand new building, just hundreds and hundreds of issues with cladding as we'll talk about later, is probably the tip of the iceberg of this whole thing. I'm not going to go to new buildings so I don't really touch them too much, but if you are moving into a new building, no matter how shiny and beautiful your building happens to be, get someone independent to look at it; both fire, building, everything, mechanically handling and the rest before you get past that 2-year typical liability period, because no matter how shiny and beautiful it is, there will be defects. You don't want to go past that 2 years and not have solved them.

**Amanda Farmer:** In my experience, the fire safety defects are often the most difficult because they are underlying, it's a problem inside of a wall sometimes. They're not visible until other work starts to be done, other rectification is going on. And when they identify that certain things are missing, it often means ripping out every ceiling and every lot, and that is hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**Rob Broadhead:** Yes.

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

**Amanda Farmer:** It's just devastating.

**Rob Broadhead:** It is. And so for anyone buying a new building, get someone independent to look at it immediately, or at least within a year of when you've moved in so that you will and truly have everything nailed before the 2 years. Also, there are no new buildings without defects.

**Amanda Farmer:** I agree.

**Rob Broadhead:** So please, just check them. The second perspective, which is more my specialty, which is maintaining existing buildings, I think the main things that you see when you walk in there is the annual fire safety statement schedule being incorrect. So many of them are not correct when you walk in. We saw one a few weeks ago in Auburn where it had a smoke detection and occupant warning system, but they had signed it off to being an emergency warning system. And so it's a completely different standard, a completely different area of compliance, and therefore it's been signed off for years to the wrong code because no one's really gone and read what the standards say about it.

I think in terms of what issues we see in strata, the main ones really are that people living in strata also need to understand that things do actually go wrong in their building and they've got a long-term investment in this building, it's important that their fire protection like any other building system is maintained so it lasts for the whole length of the building. We need to understand that things do go wrong, so say exit emergency lights. Until the advent recently of LED Globes, you were getting about 5% failure rate every year. So if you've got a hundred emergency lights, you've got about 5 of them failing every year at the building. Same with your smoke detectors, smoke alarms, they have a 10-year lifespan before they may be replaced.

Your extinguishes needs to be pressure-tested every 5 years. Your fire home sprinklers hydrant valves need to be overhauled every 5 years. I think as a result of some of the lack of trust in the fire industry caused probably by the lack of accreditation, the lack of professionalism that we have seen out there... I think Reena touched on this a little bit in a previous podcast of yours, the contract duration for most fire things now is somewhere in the one to 2-year mark.

Yet, you're talking about something that we need to keep running for the same length as the building, which could be 30, 40, a hundred years. Maybe they just don't quite last for a hundred years, but nevertheless, they need to last for the length of time they should last for. But with a short-term contract outlook on these things, no one's really looking at how they will be kept reliable for the long-term.

It think as part of this, this change to accreditation and the professionalism on the fire industry, hopefully the trust can be rebuilt in the fire protection industry, and hopefully your fire contractor can move to be more of your trusted advisor that you're sitting down and talking to about the long-term plans of the building, the long-term budgeting and making sure that all of these things are taken into consideration. That's, I think, probably the key thing first to work on.

**Amanda Farmer:** Interesting point. Do you work with buildings who have that long-term relationship with you and you noticed the difference when it comes to their attitude towards and outcomes for their maintenance?

**Rob Broadhead:** Without a doubt. Without a doubt because... There's a few surprises. No one wants to hear that they have to spend X amount per year on their fire protection. We've all talked about it well in advance, we all understand why it's important, and we can understand why the code requires it, why it will improve the longevity of the building, why it will protect the person's investment as well as protecting them if the worst happens. There's so many fewer surprises down the track in one year, in 5 years and that sort of thing.

**Amanda Farmer:** I think it certainly comes down to being able to trust that person who you've engaged to do that job. If that trust is there, then absolutely you want them there on a long-term basis. They know your building, they know what you've got in place, and you're not going to have those problems of someone new coming in, not reading the documents correctly, not reading the standards correctly, applying the wrong standard. I mean that's just terrifying that someone can't tell the difference. Someone who

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

is supposed to be an expert in this area can't tell the difference between one system and another, and is applying the wrong standard.

**Rob Broadhead:** It's absolutely scary. It bothers me greatly. This whole accreditation scheme by the way has been something that the industry association has been working on for 20 or more years. It's really taken The Grenfells, The Lacrosses, The Neo 200 fires in Melbourne to actually get the government interested in doing something about... In accrediting or allowing accreditation of the industry.

**Amanda Farmer:** Do you know why it was all just off the agenda for so long?

**Rob Broadhead:** I don't know exactly. I think it's just they haven't had the appetite to legislate it because it's one more thing that they're doing, and the government overall has been trying to, I guess, absolve itself or privatise so many things. I think they're hoping that market conditions will fix this, but it clearly has not.

**Amanda Farmer:** Well, again, it's good to hear that there is change on the horizon and I'll be interested to see how that all plays out in January. You've mentioned cladding there, Rob, do you want to give us the need to know, snapshot on cladding if you can?

**Rob Broadhead:** Firstly, it's not my area of expertise. Secondly, it's outside of the building, so it's not actually a component within the building. From a fire protection perspective, the key thing here is, building owners who know they do have cladding, they really need to make sure their fire protection systems are working because it effectively bypasses so many of the safety backstops if you will of building construction, so your active fire protection systems become infinitely more important. For the listeners, it's worth. I'm looking up YouTube to see pictures of the Neo 200 fire. There's going to be a report coming up in Melbourne soon about that. It's really, really concerning and interesting how... It brings into question the whole design concept of a building, because it bypasses everything that the building was supposed to do from a safety perspective. So yes, look out for that.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. All right, Rob, do you have a book for me?

**Rob Broadhead:** I do.

**Amanda Farmer:** The book that's had the greatest impact on you?

**Rob Broadhead:** I read a few of them, but probably the most, the latest one that I've enjoyed and had the most impact from was Mark Manson's, The Subtle Art of Not Giving a...

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, you know what.

**Rob Broadhead:** Yes, and you know what, exactly. I thought it was amazing. I don't know if you've read it.

**Amanda Farmer:** I have, yes.

**Rob Broadhead:** Really well-written and enjoyable to read, which rarely books of that sort of nature are. It really inspired you to look at your own life and to the people around you and realise the constant shoot of positivity will only cause you to not enjoy life as much. You've got to see it from both sides. You've got to see it from your perspective, from my perspective, and welcome some negative things because that just makes the positive things better.

**Amanda Farmer:** That's it, and that's life. I was talking to a number of people who have enjoyed that book, and I need to have that one on my shelf, and everybody has their different takeaways, which just shows you that the texture that's in that book along with its very colorful title.

**Rob Broadhead:** Very colorful. I think he just makes it approachable and more like the language we hear on the street particularly

**Publication Date: 10 September 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 178. How to find a competent fire safety professional**

our trades people, so we hear it a lot.

**Amanda Farmer:** That you might hear. Oh no, we would never speak like that in lawyers' offices. Not at all. All right, now Rob, let us know how our listeners can find out more about you, and if there's anything you'd like to add before we wrap up. Go ahead.

**Rob Broadhead:** Firstly, you can find me on LinkedIn. You can find me on our website, [2020fireprotection.com.au](http://2020fireprotection.com.au), or send me an email. I'm sure you have the link there. The key message really is, fire protection is really important. It's really important to you, your families, the occupants of your building, and you won't know it until the worst has happened. I highly recommend anyone who has concerns about whether fire protection is worthwhile, look up on YouTube flashover videos. It's really scary. 3 minutes from ignition to a whole room being engulfed in flame, it makes fire protection really important. Forgetting every other bit of fire protection, make sure you have a working smoke alarm in your house. That is the most important thing. Thank you.

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent. Thank you for sharing all of that good news, I think it is Rob, about what our legislation is doing, our government is doing, you guys doing your good work on the ground to make changes and these improvements that we need so that our buildings know who to go to and know that these people are properly qualified to be doing the work that they're engaged to do. Hopefully, we'll see that really positive flow-on effect of that from January next year. Thanks for making the time, Rob.

**Rob Broadhead:** Thank you, Amanda. Really appreciate it. Have a great day.

**Amanda Farmer:** You too.

**Rob Broadhead:** See you.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners reliable and accurate information about their Strata property. You can access all the information below this episode by the show notes at [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au). You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?