

Q&A on Blind Cords - Safety Requirements

To keep things simple, all references to the revised and supporting standards will be as EN 13120

Q What is the purpose of the revised standard EN 13120?

A: The European Standard (EN13120) sets out the performance and safety requirements for internal blinds. However, it was felt that it was not robust enough when dealing with child safety. The revised standard addresses this. The blind cord requirements are intended to minimise the risk of injury and death to children from looped cords. 28 children in the UK since 1999 have died (14 since the beginning of 2010).

Q: What sorts of blinds (and curtains) are captured by the requirements of the standard?

A: All blinds, curtains, indeed all window coverings intended for indoor use that have a looped cord, beaded chain or other material are captured by the new requirements.

Q: Who is required to comply with the standard EN 13120?

A: BS EN 13120, like any other standard, is voluntary and there are no plans to make this mandatory through legislation. However, as a European harmonised standard it will be referenced under the General Product Safety Directive (GPSD). The GPSD provides the legal basis for mandatory product safety requirements and means that any blind manufactured in accordance with the new standard will have a “presumption of conformity” with the GPSD in respect of all the elements of safety that is addressed by the standard. In other words adherence to the standard is sufficient, but not necessary, to demonstrate compliance with the Directive.

Manufacturers may choose not to follow the standard but they will still need to show evidence by other means, for example via test results or safety certificates, that their product meets the same level of safety as laid down in the standard.

The overarching requirement remains that products placed on the market must be safe. Given their engagement in this issue to date, we expect the entire industry to welcome and adhere to the new standard as soon as possible.

Q: What happens if a consumer does not want the safety devices or labels installed?

A: They should still be supplied with the compliant goods, including labels and any safety devices. Clearly a supplier cannot be held responsible if the end user decides to remove or not fit the safety features or labels supplied.

Q: What is the Government doing to raise consumer awareness on the potential dangers around internal blind cords?

A: In late 2008 the Department set up an “internal blind cords” safety group made up of various stakeholders from Industry, the British Blind and Shutter Association (BBSA), the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), Child Accident Prevention Trust (Capt) and Trading Standards and later the British Retail Consortium. From the early meetings it was decided that the best way to raise awareness was to highlight the work already being done by the BBSA’s “Make it Safe” campaign, and RoSPA’s “Safe at Home” programme, and the Group continues to look at ways in which the issue can be communicated to consumers. (The awareness campaign has included articles and messages from BIS Ministers)

Q: Is the internal blinds industry aware of the revised standard EN 13120?

A: The UK blind trade is characterised by small and micro businesses and this is representative of the BBSA membership. Also within the BBSA membership they have the world’s largest blind company, the UK’s largest supplier of hardware systems and fabrics and Europe’s largest retailer of blinds. The daily reach of these organisations within the trade and retail market is very significant.

To ensure as complete coverage as possible the Department with the assistance of BBSA delivered a mail shot in November 2012 to around 6,500 traders in the supply chain (manufacturers, importers, retailers, fitters) advising them of their responsibilities and highlighting the changes the revision will bring. This letter was also sent to all Local Authority Trading Standards offices and who further approached the industry in their area.

Q: What is a standard and is it compulsory?

A: In essence, a standard is an agreed way of doing something. The point of a standard is to provide a reliable basis for people to share the same expectations about a product or service and in the case of EN 13120 enhance consumer protection and confidence especially regards the aspects relating to child safety.

BS EN 13120, like any other standard, is voluntary and there are no plans to make this mandatory through legislation. As a European harmonised standard it will be referenced under the General Product Safety Directive (GPSD), which means that any blind manufactured in accordance with the new standard will have a “presumption of conformity” with the GPSD. In other words adherence to the standard is sufficient, but not necessary, to demonstrate compliance with the Directive. The overarching requirement is that products placed on the market must be safe.

Q: Why do I have to pay for the standards?

A: To get a standard published is a drawn out and costly process. This is why national standards bodies such as the BSI in the UK need to charge access to them. This is the case for all standards. It is unfortunate that this does of course represent an additional burden on industry and that this will fall disproportionately on small businesses.

Q: When were the standards published and I thought we had until the 31 March to comply?

A: CEN, the European Committee for Standardization, is responsible for developing and defining voluntary standards at European level and as such provides the platform for the development of European Standards.

CEN published the standards on 19 February and as an association that brings together the National Standardization Bodies (NSB) of 33 European countries disseminated the standards to the NSB's so they could check the language and content before they publish themselves.

The 31 March was a provisional date for publication. They were eventually published on 28 February 2014 by the British Standards Institute (BSI) which, whilst slightly earlier than expected, should not have been a surprise in terms of its content.

Q: What about blinds already on the market?

A: The introduction of the revised standard does not mean that blinds already placed on the market automatically become unsafe and are removed as they should already comply with the old EN 13120 standard. As with the introduction of any standard stock already on the market can continue to be sold until it has run out. However, a practical approach on the behalf of the supply chain with products already on the market may be to offer to provide or retro fit safety devices, and provide safety information whenever they get commissioned to install or sell the blinds.

The details of the new standard reflect the EU commission Decision of 27 July 2011 2011/477/EU 'on the safety requirements to be met by European standards to address the risks posed to children by internal blinds' and it is this mandate that the new standards have been based. It would have been advisable for any producer to risk assess their products against the Decision from that date until the new standards became available.

Q: Is there a transitional period?

A: We do not have the power to grant a transitional period as requested by some in the industry. The publication of BS EN 13120 will be treated in the same as any other standard. BSI has 6 months to remove the old standard and it is generally this period which is accepted as a 'transitional' period.

Given their engagement in this issue to date, we expect the entire industry to welcome and adhere to the new standard as soon as possible. In the interim, practical options might include offering to provide or retrofit safety devices, and providing relevant safety information at the point of sale. The main role of Trading Standards during this period is to offer advice and guidance to industry on making their products compliant, rather than removing non-compliant products from the market.

Q: There is a new requirement for a maximum cord and chain length, how will this affect some disabled persons?

A: There is a new requirement for a maximum cord and chain length. Unfortunately, this may affect some disabled consumers. However, there are alternative products or operating systems which can be installed which can allow the disabled person to operate a curtain or blind.

Q: Has industry been slow to react to the concerns of consumers?

A: Industry takes the issue very seriously, they are continually developing new and innovative blinds that are cordless or have concealed cord systems, and it is hoped one day there will be no corded products on the market. Through the participation of the BBSA the industry has taken action to improve the safety of its products, however, that effort needs to be maintained if the level of awareness amongst consumers is to be increased.

There have been blinds on the market without looped cords for over 15 years and industry continue to develop new and innovative blinds that are cordless or have concealed systems. However, the most common blinds in homes over the last 30 years have been venetian which have looped cords.

Q: What about blinds already in homes?

A: The safest option is to replace all looped corded blinds in homes with cordless but this would be too expensive if as estimates have said there are 200 million in homes. The revision of EN 13120 makes provision for the retrofitting of safety devices for blinds already in homes such as cleats or snap connectors.

The BBSA's 'Make it Safe' campaign already successfully promotes this safety message. The use of tie backs, cleats and snap connectors should be fitted.

Retailers and especially fitters when selling or fitting blinds to consumers should promote safety messages and where required provide and fit appropriate safety devices especially to blinds already fitted in homes.

Consumers who are concerned can in the first instance find advice on –

BBSA

<http://www.bbsa.org.uk/domestic/child-safety/26>

or

RoSPA

<http://www.rospa.com/news/releases/detail/?id=1285>