Recent cases

In June 2017 Electrical Safety First conducted a review of illicit streaming devices, selected by FACT, as part of a limited product safety assessment. The product review relates primarily to the switched mode power supply units for the connection to the mains supply, which were supplied with the devices, to identify any potential risks to consumers such as electric shocks, heating and resistance to fire. The boxes themselves were assessed in terms of any faults in the marking, warnings and instructions.

In total, nine boxes were tested and 100% failed to comply with the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 1994. They had not been designed and manufactured in accordance with the principal elements of the safety objectives given in Schedule 3 of the Regulations.

Summary of the key findings

• None of the illicit streaming device samples tested had been supplied and/or designed and manufactured in accordance with the principal elements of the safety objectives given in Schedule 1 of the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 1994.

• Several of the samples were considered to offer a potential risk of injury to the user, which includes risk of electric shock and/or fire.

• None of the samples were supplied with sufficient safety or warning information to ensure the safe and correct use, assembly, installation or maintenance of the equipment – regarded as a technical breach of the Regulations.

The wider electrical safety issue

This is not the first time that these boxes have come under scrutiny in terms of electrical safety. One of the key issues at play is that the majority of these boxes come unbranded, which makes it harder for the consumer to understand whether they are purchasing a quality product from a known manufacturer or potentially a counterfeit model. It would be recommended that caution is taken when buying any unbranded electrical item as it cannot be guaranteed that the necessary safety checks have been taken to ensure the product is safe to use.

• In June, the EU issued a recall notice for the OTT TV Box 4K, a Chinese-made Android TV box, or ‘Kodi box’ due to a serious risk of electric shock, calling for owners of the box to stop using it immediately and return it for a refund. The devices in question had faults with the power supply units, which didn’t comply with Europe’s Low Voltage Directive and the relevant European standard EN 60065, with a risk that users could touch live parts.

• In July, a raid in Westminster resulted in Trading Standards, National Crime Agency, the Government Agency Intelligence Network (GAIN) and FACT seize more than 40 illegal streaming devices that not only provided access to illegal content, but also lacked UK electrical safety measures making them potentially dangerous for users with the potential to pose a risk of electrocution or fire.

• These developments follow a rise in consumers purchasing counterfeit electrical goods. Just last year (June) it was revealed that an estimated 2.5 million Brits had, knowingly or by accident, purchased a counterfeit electrical product in the previous 12 months, with consumers influenced by cheaper pricing. Despite this, over half of those who had bought a fake electrical product stated that they had experienced a problem with them, compared to just 39% the year before (Electrical Safety First, June 2016). In doing so, consumers are taking risks, often without realising the potential safety implications to themselves or their families.

Issues with power supply units or unbranded and counterfeit chargers go beyond illicit streaming devices. In the last year, issues have been reported with other consumer electrical devices, such as laptop chargers and counterfeit phone chargers.

The total annual online sales of mains plug-in chargers is estimated to be in the region of 1.8 million and according to Electrical Safety First, and it is likely that most of these sales involve cheap, unbranded chargers. As such, there is the risk that many thousands of lives in the UK, particularly young lives, are being put at risk whenever they are used to charge phones, music devices, hand-held games consoles and similar electronic goods.

• In 2009, Buckinghamshire Trading Standards seized more than 3600 unsafe chargers from retailers over a 6-8 week period. The allegations were that manufacturers were submitting well-engineered electrical products for conformity testing purposes but removing non-essential components in production, to reduce costs, meaning that consumers were receiving goods that had not been fully tested to comply with the necessary safety standards.

• In December last year, Poundworld was ordered to pay almost £200,000 for selling faulty phone chargers that posed a significant fire risk to consumers, with claims that it failed to exercise due diligence in testing and certifying the products.

The latest Electrical Safety First report in to the risks associated with illicit streaming devices raises a wider concern around the safety of electrical goods that seem to provide consumers with a cheaper alternative, but which are potentially putting them at harm.

Advice to consumers

• The only way to guarantee that a product is safe is to buy a known brand product direct from a reputable manufacturer. There is no guarantee that any electrical device, sold by an unknown seller online, will meet the necessary safety requirements.

• Once you receive the product, ensure that you carry out the following checks:
  - Markings - look for the manufacturers’ brand name or logo, model and batch mark number. Check that there is a CE mark and that the output voltage and current ratings marked on the charge match your electrical device.
  - Pin plugs - that they plug in easily to the socket and there is at least 9.5mm between the edge of the pins and the edge of the charger
  - Warnings and instructions - it has all the necessary instructions for use and adequate warnings.

• For more information and advice around electrical safety, particularly around chargers, visit: http://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/guides-and-advice/electrical-items/chargers/