



UNISON HEALTH & SAFETY

# Information .sheet

## *Fire Safety*

*Last updated in August 2017*

This information sheet aims to give safety reps a basic understanding of fire safety and fire risk assessments under the current law. More detailed information applicable to specific types of workplace is available; see the 'Further Advice' section below.

### **BACKGROUND**

Fire kills and costs money. In the UK in 2015/16 the fire and rescue services attended over 12,000 fires in non-domestic buildings. Nearly 900 were injured and 17 people lost their lives. In 2004 the cost as a consequence of fire, including property damage, human casualties, and lost business was estimated at £2.52 billion. (Source: Department of Communities and Local Government.)

### **LEGISLATION AND FIRE RISK ASSESSMENTS**

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, applicable to England and Wales, is a consolidation of existing fire safety laws so that all workplaces and other non-domestic premises are now covered by the same law. In Scotland the Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006 along with Part 3 of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 apply. Fire and Rescue Services Order (NI) 2006 and the Fire Safety Regulations (NI) 2010 are the two pieces of fire safety legislation in Northern Ireland. Under this legislation there is the requirement to complete and to review a fire risk assessment if an employer has five or more employees

Fire certificates which had covered many work places no-longer have legal status. This does not mean that employers can just abandon specified fire precautions. Historical but now obsolete fire certificates will contain sensible advice, specifying what fire precautions should be taken: including escape routes, the number of persons that can be on the premises at any one time, and any training requirements. They will therefore contain sensible considerations for when fire risk assessing, but keep in mind that these will now have been prescribed a number of years ago so as with the fire risk assessment process in general, should be reviewed and amended in accordance with any relevant and more recent changes.

Fire risk assessments are geared towards identifying all significant hazards, and then taking reasonable precautions to avoid or control the risk of these. It is essential that eliminating the hazard is the main priority when conducting a risk assessment although this is not always possible. When identifying such hazards look at where employees might be at risk and implement control measures to eliminate or control those risks.

The terms 'hazard' and 'risk' are often used, which we define as the following:

- Hazard: anything that has the potential to cause harm;
- Risk: the chance of that harm occurring.

Employers must carry out fire risk assessments (specifically or as part of their general risk assessments):

- to identify fire hazards (combustible materials or sources of ignition, for example);
- to assess the risks of fire;
- considering:
  - all employees and others who may be affected by a workplace fire and in particular those who might be especially at risk, and
  - structural features which might promote the spread of fire (such as ducts and flues, openings in floors and walls or cladding);
- to check whether existing arrangements are satisfactory or need improvement (for example can a fire be detected in a reasonable time and can all the people at risk be warned and escape); and
- to put into place measures to remove or reduce the risks identified, including adequate provision for people with disabilities or special needs who use or may be present at the premises;
- to plan how to deal with an emergency.

The findings of the risk assessment must be recorded if more than 5 people are employed. The risk assessment must be reviewed whenever there is reason to suspect that it is no longer valid or if there has been a significant change in the matters to which it relates. A significant change would include a structural alteration, a change in the route of fire escapes, a change in the number of occupants, or changes in the dependency of the occupants.

Employers must also:

- provide and maintain such fire precautions as are necessary to safe guard those at work, as determined by the fire risk assessment. The fire precautions may include:
  - fire fighting equipment, detectors, and alarms,
  - non-automatic fire-fighting equipment must be readily accessible, easy to use, and indicated by signs,
  - nominating and training employees responsible for implementing fire fighting measures and for undertaking any special roles which are required under the emergency plan for the workplace,
  - a suitable system of regularly servicing and maintaining fire equipment , and
  - keeping emergency routes clear and complying with specific criteria relating to routes, doors, and signs so that those in the building can get out; and
- provide information, instruction, and training to all employees about fire risks and precautions in the workplace so that they know what to do in the event of a fire – ensuring that everyone can adequately understand the instructions.
- consult with safety reps about:
  - the nomination of ‘responsible’ employees,
  - proposals for improving fire safety,
  - and fire risk assessments;
- inform other employers in the same building of any significant risks they have identified which might affect the safety of their employees, and co-operate on proposals to reduce and control these risks; and
- establish a suitable and easy means of contacting the emergency services.

## **BUILDING SAFETY PROGRAMME**

Following the Grenfell Tower fire, the Government has contacted all building owners across the public services estate instructing them to carry out checks to identify any buildings requiring further investigation. This is a data collection exercise via a survey to identify buildings over 18m/4 stories with Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding. This establishes where further testing and inspection by fire authorities is required, including fire safety checks and risk assessments.

This process does not, however, capture buildings under 18m and / or without ACM cladding. If a building is under 18m and / or does not contain ACM cladding it is assumed by the Government that other aspects of fire safety are being properly managed.

Follow link to find out more about the Governments Building Safety Programme”

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/building-safety-programme> and information that your employers should be collating.

## **SAFETY REP ACTION**

- Remember your rights to consultation under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, and the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations – and use them.
- Ask to see a record of the Fire Risk Assessment - have the requirements in the assessment been met.
- Use the checklist attached overleaf to check the Fire Risk Assessment, and to carry out a workplace inspection.
- Liaise with your employer when they inspect your workplace and ask for a copy of any report they produce.
- Remember to speak to the employees – they often know far more about potential hazards (such as the waste materials which accumulate in the basement next to the fire exit before collection day).

## **FURTHER ADVICE**

The local fire authorities are generally responsible for fire safety at work. For further advice, contact the local fire service and ask for the Fire Prevention Officer.

New or altered buildings must meet the appropriate building regulations, which cover various issues including fire safety.

The Government has produced a series of guides, both general and specific to various types of workplace which are free to download. Go to: <https://www.gov.uk/workplace-fire-safety-your-responsibilities?> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fire-safety-law-and-guidance-documents-for-business>.

Further guidance on fire safety is also available from the HSE website at:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/fireandexplosion/index.htm> and

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/fireandexplosion/workplace.htm>; and from the HSE NI at:

<https://www.hseni.gov.uk/articles/fire-safety>

## CHECKLIST

### Risk Assessments

- has an assessment of fire risks been conducted; and
- have the results been acted upon;
- does it need to be reviewed;
- has an emergency plan been drawn up (if required);
- have all the conditions been complied with;
- have there been significant changes and who has been notified of these changes – such as senior management, your joint health and safety committee and any affected teams;
- are safety reps consulted before changes are made to work or to the workplace which could effect the health and safety of employees.

### The Workplace

- are separate storage arrangements for flammable chemicals, gas cylinders, and waste materials available and clearly marked;
- is combustible waste regularly and safely disposed of;
- if smoking is allowed in the workplace, are there satisfactory arrangements for cigarettes and matches to be disposed of safely and separately from other combustible rubbish;
- are clear fire instructions displayed throughout the workplace;
- is electrical equipment serviced regularly to prevent sparks and fires;
- have sources of ignition (e.g. portable heaters) been replaced with safer alternatives.

### Fire Drills

- are they carried out regularly and at least once per year (preferably once every 6 months);
- does their timing and frequency take into account staff turnover, staff working outside of normal hours, or staff in isolated parts of the workplace;
- are non-employees such as patients, residents, pupils, contractors, etc. included;
- are particular arrangements necessary for the evacuation of people with disabilities, the elderly, the sick, and young children;
- are they observed by designated staff who report on how long it took to evacuate the workplace, what went correctly and what went wrong, and are faults put right before the next drill;
- does management keep records of drills and training with details of any problems found and the action taken to put them right.

### Fire Alarms

- are they checked and tested once per week by a trained person and annually by a competent engineer;
- are they capable of warning all employees - for example what about employees in the basement;
- are maintenance and servicing records kept;
- are there other forms of fire warning, such as flashing lights for hearing-impaired staff or visitors, etc.

## Smoke Detectors

- are they checked and tested once per week by a trained person and annually by a competent engineer;
- are maintenance and servicing records kept.

## Fire Fighting Equipment

- are there trained staff who know how and what to use - generally, untrained staff should not waste time trying to make equipment work and even trained staff should not attempt to fight large fires;
- are suitable fire extinguishers provided in vehicles, and are drivers trained to use them;
- are they checked at least monthly, removed and replaced without delay if faulty, with a full check and test by a competent engineer annually;
- are fire extinguishers refilled after use and tested annually by a trained person;
- are maintenance and servicing records kept.

## Training for Employees

- are all employees given information, instruction, and training by a competent person on:
  - fire risks and precautions to be taken to avoid fire,
  - what to do if they discover a fire,
  - raising the alarm, including location of alarm call points,
  - recognising the fire alarm and what to do when it is raised,
  - calling the fire brigade,
  - evacuation procedures, including arrangements for members of the public, and people with disabilities, and
  - escape routes, fire exits, and assembly areas;
- some employees will need additional training about special risks in their workplace, for example staff in:
  - kitchens and laboratories, or
  - electrical and maintenance engineers;
- employees designated in emergency plans to supervise evacuations and fire drills or nominated as persons to use fire fighting equipment will need additional special training for these roles, including:
  - the location, choice, and use of fire fighting equipment, and
  - the means of ensuring that everyone has left the building.

## Fire Escape Routes

- is emergency lighting provided and tested regularly, with a full check and test by a competent engineer annually;
- are maintenance and servicing records kept;
- are they clearly signed;
- are they kept clear and are they wide enough to prevent a crush;
- do they lead quickly and directly to a safe area (within 2-3 minutes - includes a fire resistant staircase), and not for example into an enclosed yard;
- do they take account of elderly, sick, or disabled people or young children who may be on the premises.

## **Fire Doors and Exits**

- are they clearly marked;
- are they kept clear on both sides at all times;
- do they lead quickly to a safe area - and not for example into an enclosed yard;
- do they open in the direction of escape (must not be sliding or revolving);
- are they easily and quickly unlocked in the event of fire, by 'panic bars' for example (they must not be locked by a key or similar device during working hours);
- are they kept closed (fire-resisting doors are specially constructed and placed to hold back fire and allow time for people to escape, so they must never be left or propped open).