

FIRE SAFETY

IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

NEED TO KNOW

Know how to comply with fire safety regulations to protect your properties and keep your tenants safe

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Fire prevention is a field that is continually changing as regulations and methods in construction improve. Following the terrible disaster at Grenfell Tower in London, we are undoubtedly going to see more changes in the future so, whether you are a developer or a landlord, it is your duty to make sure you know what the regulations are and to make your properties safe.

When you're doing this for the first time, or even the second or third, it can often be a minefield trying to understand what you need to do. This guide aims to give you an overview of what you should be looking out for, who you can get to help you, where to get the required documents and some refurb specifics to consider. **Be fire safe. Lives depend on it.**

Risk assessment

The first thing to do is spend some time risk assessing your property. This methodical inspection of the premises is not as difficult as you might think. There are 3 key fire hazards that you need to consider, as identified by the *Fire Safety Principles for Residential Accommodation* document provided by Leeds City Council. Your own council will have their own document that will no doubt say a very similar thing.

"Each property is different and the risk of your property changes as the tenants change. You can have one protocol for a few years, but when your tenant changes you have to review it again"

• VULNERABILITY AND THE SAFETY OF THE OCCUPIERS OF THE PROPERTY

This is by far the most important aspect and it pays to spend some time thinking about this properly. If you've got a single-let then everyone who lives in that property knows each other, so if there were a fire, as a family, they would generally know who was in the house at any one time and make sure that everyone gets out. On the other hand, if you've got an HMO-type property with multiple tenants who don't know each other very well so don't necessarily know each other's comings and goings, then you've got a higher risk occupancy. That's not to say, the people living there are at a high risk. It's just the use of the property that makes it high risk.

You also need to be aware of any disabilities or impairments that may mean they need assistance to escape the property in the event of a fire. As long ago as 25 years, special adjustments could be made to the lights in the building so that every time someone rang the doorbell, the lights in the house flashed for the people who were hard of hearing. You can do exactly the same with smoke detectors and fire alarms. There are many things you can implement when you start to look into it. **You need to think about what is right for your tenants and put the necessary measures in place.**

• SOURCES OF IGNITION

Potential sources of heat that could get hot enough to set on fire such as electrical equipment or faulty electrical appliances or gas installation, overloading electrical points etc.

• SOURCES OF FUEL

Textiles, bedding and flammable liquid-based products, plastics, walls, floor and ceiling coverings etc. All furniture and furnishings need to comply with fire safety and you need to be diligent about items that tenants bring into the building too.

Factors that increase the risk of harm from fire include; the number of occupiers and storeys, the complexity of the escape route, the location of the kitchen, room sizes, exit doors and keys, and a whole host of others. Understanding the key factors that affect your property is essential when carrying out your risk assessment.



Seek out expert support & advice

There are plenty of experts out there who can help you to get a clear understanding of what you need for your particular property. You may not get everything you need from one particular place, so try a few of these to get a fuller picture before taking any action:

LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING OFFICER

They will know that you need to comply with fire safety legislation but they're not always the expert as to what that legislation a) means, and b) how you would actually implement it. So start here and then seek one of the following for further advice.

LOCAL COUNCIL OR HMO OFFICER (IF YOU ARE DOING A HMO)

Check the website for the relevant documents & call them to discuss. There are many documents online so this can be quite a daunting task. Ring up to check which document you should be looking at and then read it in detail pulling out the information that applies to you.

ARCHITECT

If you're doing a bigger project your architect will offer you support and advice making sure that your project complies with the building regulations, adding relevant notes to his drawings to include the right fire safety measures.

BUILDING CONTROL SURVEYOR

Can help on projects that need to comply with building regulations. They will help at the refurb planning stage as well as being required to sign it off on completion.

FIRE SAFETY RISK ASSESSOR

These are companies and businesses that are all there to help and provide support and advice in these matters. They are normally multi-disciplined practises where they bring together people with the right expertise to provide the right support. Definitely useful on bigger, more complex projects.

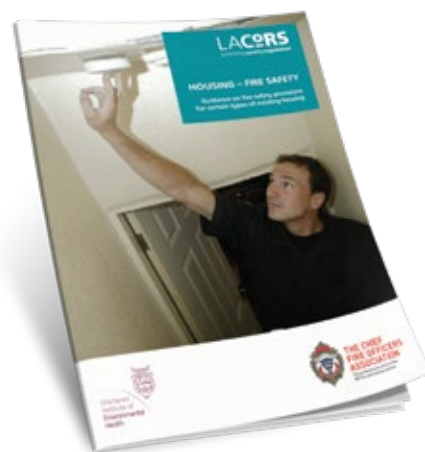
LOCAL FIRE SAFETY DEPARTMENT

Can advise on appropriate measures but they can't help you to implement them. You will still need to check with the council for specifics to your area.

Always take advice from the right specialist. Your builder, electrician or plumber may offer advice and they may know what they are talking about, but they also may be telling you something to make the job easier for them.

"Get the right advice from the right specialist and then you can tell the builder what you want. Not the other way round"

Understand & follow the guidance provided



The internet is full of guidelines and information regarding fire safety. It can be a bit of a minefield so you need to know where to look. A good place to start is the LACORS document, which was put together in August 2008 in connection with the Chief Fire Officers Association and is now well-established as the guide to follow for fire safety.

It's a big document which includes every different style of property including high-rise blocks of flats. You should be able to find a whole host of guidance and support for relevant things relating to your property.

Many local authorities have simplified LACORS to create their own document, which you will want to get hold of too. You may find this easier to digest, plus it will be tailored to your area and will have contact details for any questions you may have. Both documents specify fire hazards to avoid, and specifics that are required for the type of property you are doing and the type of tenants you have.

Intended usage of property affects building regulations

Be aware that the building regulations are different depending on the intended usage of the property. If you are converting or building as a single residential unit the architect and building control will sign off as a single residential unit. If you then decide to use the property as an HMO you could find that your property no longer meets the regulations.

"Make it clear to everyone you seek advice from what you intend to use the building for and you will get the right advice"

Specifics to add to your refurb schedule of works

Here is a list of items you may need to consider when doing your refurb. This is not an exhaustive list and you may need more or less of these items. **Always do your own research for your own project.**

FIRE BLANKETS & FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

You local authority may stipulate the inclusion of a fire blanket and fire extinguisher in the property. You may wish to advise your tenants that unless they are trained to use these items they shouldn't use them and instead should just focus on getting out of the property and calling the fire brigade. Their safety is of prime importance so you don't want them risking their life trying to fight it. Take some guidance on this from a letting agent.



FIRE WINDOWS

Usually the escape route would be through the front or back door, but if for some reason one of these is blocked due to smoke or fire your tenants need another means of escape. Fire windows have to be certain dimensions - usually a minimum of 450mm in height or width, an unobstructed opening of at least 0.33m² and the lowest part of the window should be between 800-1100mm from the floor*. They often need to have fire-rated or resistant glass (depending on location in the building) that breaks safely, if it breaks. Seek some advice to check regulations in your area and help you to decide where and how you need to install fire windows.

ESCAPE ROUTES

Think about the escape route for each bedroom. Most of the time this is quite straightforward, but if there is a fire on the stairwell how will the occupants of rooms that are above the second floor get out? They won't be able to use their window safely from that height, but it will still be useful to have a fire window so they can escape through it with help once the fire brigade arrive.

If you are thinking about converting a basement, the escape route is extremely important, and this is what Building Control will be looking for when they decide whether or not to approve your plans. You have to think to yourself, "What is the risk of living in this room and how might someone get out if there were some kind of emergency?"



FIRE DOORS

Fire doors are designed to create a safe means of escape from the building. In HMOs and most small residential properties a 30-minute fire door is sufficient and meets the guidelines. The door can hold off flames on one side of it for 30 minutes before it starts to burn the whole door. That means, if there's a fire in the bedroom, other people in the property have got 30 minutes to get out before that fire gets to the staircase and the front door. If you have a larger development with more stairs you may need to include 60-minute fire doors, as it could take you a little bit longer to get down through the means of escape.

Consider the quality of the partitions too. There's no point in having a 30-minute fire door when the partition next to the fire door is falling to pieces, as the fire will just come through the partition instead. Consider using fire-lined plasterboard (it's pink on both sides), then the whole area is protected for 30 minutes.

DON'T FORGET TO FIT INTUMESCENT SMOKE SEALS

Designed to expand under heat they fill the gaps between the door leaf and the frame, which prevent the passage of smoke and fire to other parts of the building.

SELF-CLOSING MECHANISM

Always include a self-closing mechanism on the fire doors and add a clause in the tenancy agreement to state that they must not wedge open the fire doors. You cannot enforce this and your tenants will do what they want in the house, but you can do your part and if you need to continually remind them when you do your regular inspection then do. It is especially important that these doors are closed at night while everyone is sleeping.

"Each property is unique so the requirements for each property will be different and need to be looked at separately"

Emergency lighting



Sometimes the documents can include rather woolly phrases, which you need to decipher, eg. *'Emergency lighting is only required in the escape route where the escape route is long and complex. Or where there is no effective borrow of light'*.

Put yourself in the shoes of the person who's living on the top floor of your property. If they have to escape in an emergency where all the lights have gone out because there's a power failure, could they reasonably get down the staircase and out the door in darkness? If yes, as there's a streetlight coming in off the street, which can help to light the way (borrowed lighting) then you won't need emergency lighting. But if you've got an enclosed staircase with no borrowed lighting, then you will need some emergency lighting.

Mains controlled smoke & heat detectors



All landlords should be using these in all properties. Smoke detectors go in the communal areas and heat detectors usually go in the kitchen. They both detect the problem. Ideally, they will be **hardwired**, which means they run off the mains and **interlinked**, which means if there's a fire downstairs and it sets off that smoke detector, the smoke detector downstairs automatically tells the smoke detector upstairs there's a fire and sets off the alarm upstairs as well. In HMOs you may not need to put a smoke detector in every room, but you would put one on each floor.

Sounder

You could consider putting a sounder in every room. A sounder is the way of telling you that there is a problem once the smoke or heat detector has detected the problem. The sounders should also be interlinked so that if there was a fire in one bedroom, everyone's alarm goes off.

Thumb turn locks on exit doors

You need to make sure the exits can be opened in an emergency, so it is no good having a key that can be moved or lost meaning the door will remain locked. Invest in good thumb turn locks on all your external doors, especially in HMOs, to reduce this risk.



Sprinklers

Sprinklers are particular important in commercial buildings. They are not used as frequently in residential buildings, but I suspect this legislation is going to change very soon.

Sprinklers are not in the building to put the fire out, they are in the building to get the people out. Positioned on staircases and by doors they are part of the escape route. Okay, you've got to run through some water to get out, but it's only like a light shower. It's enough to keep a fire at bay and keep the escape route safe, which is key to protecting your tenants.

Sprinklers in flats are very important, particularly in new, modern flats that haven't got entrance lobbies. These kind of micro-apartments that we are seeing more of now haven't got separate lobbies between the main staircase of a block of flats and the main living room of the house, which makes them more of a fire risk, so built-in sprinklers are essential.

Your sprinkler system cannot be connected to the main's water, so you have to have a storage tank. That storage tank would then have enough water in it to last for 30 minutes, while the occupants get out of the building. Of course, putting a tank up in the loft, running some pipes between the floorboards and putting sprinkler heads in isn't a massive job and can be done as part of the refurbishment process. Doing it now will not only save lives, but will save you money in the long run, as installing a sprinkler system retrospectively can be a tricky job.

Make your own choice. Just because it's not in the regulations at the moment doesn't mean that you should leave it out.

It's your responsibility to make sure that people are safe so plan your project with that in mind.

"Sprinklers are known to be a real lifesaver"

Get the right people to do the installation

Here are some of the key people you may need to help you:

ELECTRICIAN – will put in hard-wired smoke alarms, sounders and heat detectors. Certified electricians will be members of the NICEIC (The National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting) or one of a number of smaller associations that allow electricians to test and sign off installations. Before employing anyone, tell them that you expect to have a certificate on completion of the work to sign it all off and check who they are registered with.

FIRE ALARM INSTALLATION COMPANY - If you've got a slightly larger property, perhaps a large, licensed HMO and the HMO officer is asking you to have a zoned fire alarm system with a control panel by the front door, which tells the fire brigade where the source of the fire is, you may need a more complex alarm system.

The most cost effective way to do this is to buy the parts from a specialist, get your electrician to run all the cables and connect them up, then get the specialist in at the end to get the control panel all set up and working properly. The other option is to get the installation company to do it all, but this will cost more and leads to more people on site.



Gas safety

Gas, and the kitchen in general, would be considered the highest risk area of any property, so make sure all gas appliances are installed and inspected regularly (every 12 months) by a Gas Safe engineer. Significantly, when something is noted as being at fault, getting it fixed straight away is essential. **Minor faults can turn into major disasters if you leave them, so be diligent.**

Get your engineer's Gas Safe register number and check with Gas Safe they are approved and on their register.



Always sign off your fire safety measures

If you've got a project that needs to comply with building regulations, then building control needs to come out at the end of the project to confirm everything's been done correctly and sign it all off.

If you've got a project where you specified some fire installation things yourself or you brought in a risk assessor who gave you some advice, then you may be in a position to check it off yourself, eg. Put a fire blanket in the kitchen. If the advice was of a slightly more technical nature, then you need to bring them back in to help you double check that things have been done correctly.

Ask your builder to show you the receipt to say the fire doors are what you specified. Once you've done this a few times you will soon know what the items look like, which will make it easier for you to sign it off.

Make sure you know how the fire alarm works and how to manage, maintain and test it. You may need contact details of the suppliers too. Once the contractors leave site it is your responsibility.

Communicating fire safety protocol with tenants

It is good practice to spell out your fire safety procedures in your letting agreement, to help tenants to understand what to do in an emergency. They will feel more comfortable and safe living in your property and you will feel better having done it. Speak to your letting agent about how to go about this.

Regular testing

Everything mentioned below needs to be tested regularly:

SMOKE ALARMS – you can test yourself or your letting agent can do it. Once a month is good practice. Once a week is even better and you can even get your tenants to check them.

CONTROL PANEL FIRE ALARM SYSTEM – needs to be serviced and maintained once every 12 months

GAS APPLIANCES – get a Gas Safe Engineer to test them all every 12 months.

Fire safety is a matter of life and death and should be at the top of the list when planning your refurbishment. Do a risk assessment with your particular tenants in mind, get advice from the experts and take the necessary precautions to make sure your property is safe. Then sleep easy knowing all your tenants are safe and looked after.

* Always check with your local council about size dimensions, as regulations are changing all the time.



DOWNLOAD THE AUDIO FOR MORE EXAMPLES OF THE ITEMS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

<http://bit.ly/2u0PvI>



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Documents

LACORS – google LACORS or follow this link: http://www.cieh.org/library/Knowledge/Housing/National_fire_safety_guidance_08.pdf