

fire risk assessments for churches and charities

A joint briefing paper produced by
Church Growth Trust and Stewardship

April 2013



Briefing Paper

This publication was originally published by Church Growth Trust in October 2011.

Front page image source: Kratka Photography

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1 Introduction

Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which came into effect on 1 October 2006, there is now a requirement on non-domestic premises to carry out a Fire Risk Assessment and to put into place fire precautions where necessary and to the extent that these are reasonable and practical in the circumstances. Whereas in the past the local fire service would have been happy to advise on fire precautions and risk assessments, they are now the enforcing authority and new legislation places the responsibility with the person/organisation responsible for the building. A detailed paper has been produced by the Home Office for small places of worship (see below for details). In brief, you should consider the following:

2 Fire Risk Assessment

Carry out, or choose someone to carry out, a fire-risk assessment.

3 Identify any possible dangers and risks

For a fire to start, three things are needed:

3.1 A source of ignition e.g.:

- cooking equipment, hot ducting, flues and filters;
- smokers' material, e.g. cigarettes, matches and lighters;
- electrical, gas or oil-fired heaters (fixed or portable), room heaters;
- hot processes, e.g. welding by contractors;
- faulty or misused electrical equipment;
- light fittings and lighting equipment, e.g. halogen lamps or display lighting;
- hot surfaces and obstruction of equipment ventilation;
- central heating boilers;
- naked flames, e.g. candles or gas or liquid-fuelled open-flame equipment;
- flares, fireworks and pyrotechnics; and
- arson.

3.2 Fuel e.g.:

- flammable liquid-based products, such as paints, varnishes, thinners and adhesives;
- flammable liquids and solvents, such as alcohol (spirits), white spirit, methylated spirit, cooking oils and disposable cigarette lighters;
- flammable chemicals, such as certain cleaning products and photocopier chemicals;
- flammable gases such as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and acetylene;
- displays and stands;
- costumes, drapes and hangings, scenery and banners;
- packaged foodstuffs;

- packaging materials, stationery, advertising material and decorations;
- plastics and rubber, such as video tapes, polyurethane foam-filled furniture and polystyrene-based display materials and rubber or foam exercise mats;
- upholstered seating and cushions, textiles and soft furnishings and clothing displays;
- litter and waste products, particularly finely divided items such as shredded paper and wood shavings, offcuts, and dust accumulation amongst lubricated areas; and
- fireworks and pyrotechnics.

3.3 Oxygen

The main source of oxygen for a fire is in the air. In an enclosed building this is provided by the ventilation system in use. This generally falls into one of two categories: natural airflow through doors, windows and other openings; or mechanical air conditioning systems and air handling systems. In many buildings there will be a combination of systems, which will be capable of introducing/extracting air to and from the building. Additional sources of oxygen can sometimes be found in materials used or stored at premises.

4 Consider who would be specially at risk

- employees who work alone and/or in isolated areas, e.g. cleaners and security staff;
- unaccompanied children;
- people who are unfamiliar with the premises, e.g. visitors and customers;
- people with disabilities (including mobility impairment, or hearing or vision impairment);
- people who may have some reason for not being able to leave the premises quickly;
- other people in the immediate vicinity of the premises.

5 Get rid of or reduce risks from fire as far as is reasonably possible

5.1 Remove or reduce sources of ignition e.g.:

- Wherever possible replace a potential source by a safer alternative.
- Restrict and control the use of naked flames, e.g. candles.
- Ensure that sources of heat are kept away from flammable materials such as curtains, scenery and displays.
- Ensure electrical, mechanical and gas equipment is installed, used, maintained and protected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Ensure cooking and catering equipment is installed, used, maintained and protected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Take precautions to avoid arson.

5.2 Remove or reduce sources of fuel e.g.:

- Ensure that all upholstered furniture, curtains, drapes, other soft furnishings, display materials (including artificial and dried foliage), scenery and stands are fire-retardant, or have been treated with a proprietary fire-retardant treatment designed to enhance their fire performance.
- Ensure flammable materials, liquids and gases, are kept to a minimum, and are stored properly with adequate separation distances between them.
- Remove, cover or treat large areas of highly combustible wall and ceiling linings, e.g. polystyrene or carpet tiles, to reduce the rate of flame spread across the surface.

5.3 Remove or reduce sources of oxygen e.g.:

- Closing all doors, windows and other openings not required for ventilation, particularly out of working hours;
- Not storing oxidising materials (including pyrotechnics and fireworks) near or with any heat source or flammable materials.

6 Provide fire precautions where there are still risks

The minimum you should consider will include the following:

6.1 A fire-detection and warning system

You must have a suitable fire-detection and warning system. This can range from a shouted warning to an electrical detection and warning system. Whatever system you have, it must be able to warn people in all circumstances.

6.2 A way of fighting a small fire

It may be acceptable to have multi-purpose fire extinguishers with a guaranteed shelf life. As a rule of thumb you should have one extinguisher for every 200 square metres (m²) of floor space with at least one on each floor.

6.3 Safe routes for people to leave the premises

The ideal situation is when there is more than one escape route from all parts of the premises, although this is not always possible. If only one route is available, you may need to make it fire resisting (protected) or install an automatic fire-detection system. The distance people need to go to escape (the travel distance) should be as short as possible. The travel distance should be measured from the farthest point in a room to the door to a protected stairway or, if there is no protected stairway, to the final exit from the building. If there is only one escape route, the travel distance should not normally be more than 18 metres. This distance should be shorter (12 metres or less) in any parts of the premises where there is a high chance of a fire starting or spreading quickly. The distance can be longer (up to about 25 metres) where the chance of a fire starting or spreading quickly is very low. If there is more than one escape

route, the travel distance should not normally be more than 45 metres. (This can be areas around 25 metres in and are as where the risk of fire is high, about 60m in areas where the risk of fire is very low).

Stairways, corridors and areas near the fire exits should be kept clear of obstructions and material which can catch fire. The escape route should lead to a final exit and a safe place. If the stairway is not protected, the travel distance should be in line with those suggested above for single escape routes and the final exit should be easy to see and get to from the stairway at ground-floor level. High-risk rooms should not generally open directly into a fire-protected stairway.

6.4 Suitable fire exit doors

You should be able to use fire exit doors and any doors on the escape routes without a key and without any specialist knowledge. In premises used by the public or large numbers of people, you may need push (panic) bars or push pads.

6.5 Other things to consider

- Whether you need emergency lighting.
- Suitable fire-safety signs in all but the smallest premises.
- Training for your staff or anyone else you may reasonably expect to help in a fire.
- A management system to make sure that you maintain your fire safety systems.
- Some very small and simple premises may be able to satisfy all these steps without difficulty. However, you should still be able to show that you have carried out all the steps.

7 Take other measures to make sure there is protection if flammable or explosive materials are used or stored

8 Produce a plan to deal with any emergencies

9 Review your findings when necessary

If you employ five or more people, you have an additional responsibility to record any significant findings of the risk assessment.

10 Additional information

There is a downloadable guide for Fire Risk Assessments for Small and Medium Size Places of Assembly at communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/144821.pdf. It can be purchased for £12.00 from

communities.gov.uk or from Fire Safety Guides: PO Box 236, Wetherby LS23 7NB or telephone 0870 830 7099.

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