

Fire Safety in Sheltered Housing

Good practice statement for sheltered housing providers November 2012

There are over 1,000 units of sheltered housing properties in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea housing older residents with varying degrees of disability. This good practice statement has been designed to provide practical information for social housing landlords. It outlines a number of things for you to consider when meeting your fire safety duties.

Legal requirements

Fire safety in buildings is addressed through two pieces of legislation: *The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005* and *The Housing Act 2004*.

The Regulatory Reform Order, which came into effect in October 2006, covers risk to relevant people, which it defines as “anyone in the premises or in the immediate vicinity”. The Housing Act 2004 contains within it a Housing Health and Safety Rating System that provides a framework for landlords and assessing officers from local authorities to assess risks and hazards.

Risk assessments

Who can carry out a risk assessment?

The Regulatory Reform Order states that a “responsible person” should carry out a risk assessment of premises in relation to fire risk and management. The responsible person is defined as:

The person who has control of the premises (as occupier or otherwise) in connection with the carrying on by him of a trade, business or other undertaking (for profit or not); or the owner, where the person in control of the premises does not have control in connection with the carrying on by that person of a trade, business or other undertaking.

The responsible person must have the skills to carry out the assessment appropriately. In a report by Sir Ken Knight, reference is made to ensuring that the responsible person’s “assessment of risk is suitable and sufficient particularly where the premises is of a higher risk”ⁱⁱⁱ.

The Fire Risk Assessment Competency Council has published competency criteria for risk assessors (December 2011) to help you to appoint a specialist risk assessment service. This can be found at:

www.info4fire.com/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=19e2c44f-a4b9-4df2-a29d-8672c54a9ef4&groupId=10606



What should the risk assessment cover?

Dwellings within sheltered housing are considered to be in the “immediate vicinity”, so residents’ needs should be covered by the risk assessment.

The risk assessment should:

- not rely on rescue by the Fire Brigade to evacuate residents in the event of a fire
- make reference to how those that cannot evacuate independently will be assisted where an evacuation of the building is necessary

The risk assessment must be accompanied by a “Significant Findings and Action Plan” outlining what actions must be taken to further reduce the fire risk, and be followed up with regular reviews. These duties are subject to enforcement by fire and rescue or local authorities.

How often should the risk assessment be reviewed?

You should review the risk assessment at least every 12 months and immediately following any material alterations or other significant works or changes within the block.

You do not need to update the risk assessment if the needs of individual residents change only slightly or if a new resident moves in with no additional needs. However if a resident’s needs change significantly you may need to review the risk assessment, especially if the change in need is permanent.

What other duties do landlords have?

You have a duty to develop an evacuation strategy and detail the actions to be taken in the event of a fire. Part of this is to look at the detection and warning system and the compartmentationⁱⁱⁱ. You must also collect information on residents with additional needs. This means it is your responsibility to establish the needs of residents, though it is acknowledged that residents may choose not to disclose this information.

Where a resident cannot independently evacuate and the fire risk assessment requires an evacuation strategy, other fire safety methods should be put in place to reduce the risk, such as sprinklers for high risk dwellings (for example, if the person who lives there is a heavy smoker). Alternatively the resident could be encouraged to move to more accessible accommodation.

Early detection of fire is important. You are advised to install smoke and heat detectors in the common parts and dwellings where required and test them regularly. Fire doors, self closing mechanisms, final exit doors, emergency lighting etc should also be tested frequently (and written records kept). Research carried out in 1983 found that people with physical impairments took two to nearly four times longer to evacuate a residential building in a simulated emergency evacuation exercise^{iv}. You should explore communication aids for residents who are hard of hearing or are heavy sleepers to ensure that they can be made aware if fire alarms are activated.

Communication with residents

Each building should have a general evacuation plan and you should clearly communicate this to staff and residents. You should consider using fire action notices for residents and visitors at key points in the building. Signage should be clear and positioned appropriately.

Notifying the fire brigade of residents' needs

If there are residents in buildings that cannot independently evacuate, have other needs or risks that impact on their ability to evacuate, or if there are increased risks for fire fighters (for example, if residents have mobility impairments or have oxygen cylinders in their homes) then the fire brigade needs to be advised of these in the event of an incident. Local fire stations do not need to be informed but it is good practice for details of residents with additional needs to be kept close to the fire alarm control panel. The information could be stored in Gerda premises boxes or similar less expensive boxes locked with a fire brigade padlock. The box should be marked for the attention of the fire brigade for use in the event of a fire.

Home fire safety visits

The London Fire Brigade is able to carry out home visits to offer advice on how residents can make their homes safe. Older people living in sheltered housing qualify for this service. Further information can be found at www.london-fire.gov.uk/HomeFireSafetyVisit.asp

Housing options for older people

Most residents will wish to remain in their home and therefore risk assessments and fire safety strategies should minimise the risks that could be presented in the event of a fire. Details of the risk assessment should be communicated clearly to residents. Where a resident raises concerns about fire safety that cannot be addressed through the risk assessment and actions, you should encourage residents to contact the Housing Opportunities Team at the Town Hall (020 7361 3008) for advice on alternative housing options.

ⁱ The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 Section 3 part b.

ⁱⁱ Knight, K. 2009. *Report to the Secretary of State by the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser on the emerging issues arising from the fatal fire at Lakanal House, Camberwell on 3 July 2009*. London : Communities and Local Government.

ⁱⁱⁱ Compartmentation is defined in *Fire safety in purpose-built blocks of flats* (published by the Local Government Group in July 2011) as the sub-division of a building by fire-resisting walls or floors for the purpose of limiting fire-spread within the building.

^{iv} Shields, T.J. 1993. *Fire and disabled people in buildings*. Herts: BRE.