



**GREATER
MANCHESTER**
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Covid-19 fire safety advice

Information for Residential Care Premises

October 2022

Introduction

This information sheet has been produced by Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS), to assist residential care premises in understanding their fire safety responsibilities. This information will assist in taking the necessary steps to ensure that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (the Fire Safety Order) is being complied with during a period where normal operating procedures may have changed.

The Fire Safety Order imposes duties on the “responsible person” for premises. In residential care premises this will generally be the employer, but any employees who have specific responsibilities in relation to fire safety may also have responsibilities under the Fire Safety Order.

The purpose of this information sheet is to help those with responsibility for fire safety (referred to as responsible person/s in this document) in ensuring ongoing compliance with the Fire Safety Order despite the social restrictions and changes in routine practice that may have been implemented to help control the coronavirus outbreak.

Fire Risk Assessment

The Fire Safety Order applies to residential care premises and requires the responsible person to make a suitable and sufficient fire risk assessment for their premises. This helps identify the arrangements that are required in order to make sure the risk of fire is minimised and if a fire does occur, that anyone in the premises can evacuate safely, or in some cases be moved to a different area of the premises and remain there safely.

The fire risk assessment should be reviewed regularly and updated to account for any changes that may have been made to the use of the premises. Even where no significant changes have been made, it is good practice to ensure that the fire risk assessment is reviewed at least once a year.

GMFRS recognise that it has been essential to make changes to how premises operate in order to make them COVID-19 secure, but it is important to ensure these changes do not have an adverse effect on fire safety.

If specific risk assessments, servicing and maintenance checks, or repairs need to be carried out, this should be completed in line with strict hygiene and social distancing measures.

The fire risk assessment may need to reflect changes such as:

- Changes to staffing levels
- One-way systems and how they affect the available exit routes
- Changes to building layouts - ensuring there are no obstructions to means of escape, fire signage, fire detection and fire suppression systems
- Fire safety training - if this has not been undertaken for some time, new employees have started, or fire safety measures have been altered, then employees should be provided with appropriate fire safety training

Once the fire risk assessment has been reviewed it is important that any significant findings are acted upon, and changes or updates are communicated to employees and occupants to ensure they are aware of these changes and what to do in event of fire.

Evacuation Procedures

Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) for residents should undergo review to ensure they remain relevant in light of any changes made to the premises. All employees including temporary staff should be aware of, and familiar with, the PEEPs that are in place.

It is essential to ensure that sufficient staffing levels are maintained to allow for effective management of emergency plans.

Where staffing and occupancy levels have changed, this may affect evacuation arrangements in the event of fire. If staffing levels have been affected by COVID-19, it is necessary to review the fire risk assessment and emergency plans.

It is important that employees understand the actions to be taken in the event of fire and that appropriate training has been provided.

Many premises have introduced one-way systems and other changes within their circulation spaces to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. These changes should not impede an evacuation should a fire occur. Potential impacts on the means of escape must be assessed to ensure occupants have a suitable means of escape in the event of fire.

Considerations should be made to any changes impacting the exterior of any premises e.g. temporary structures or queuing systems. These should not obstruct means of escape or compromise assembly points. If the existing means of escape or assembly point is compromised,

alternative suitable arrangements should be in place in accordance with the revised fire risk assessment.

Fire Alarms & Testing

The purpose of a fire alarm is to detect a fire and warn people so they can evacuate. Residential care premises will have an automatic fire alarm system and this must be appropriate for the size and layout of the premises. Your fire risk assessment should have determined the type of system required.

Along with an automatic fire alarm, procedures should be established to follow in the event of an alarm activation, which may include an evacuation of the premises.

To make sure that your fire alarm system works, it should be tested and maintained on a regular basis. The recommended frequencies for testing and maintenance are set out in British Standard 5839 as follows:

- Daily checks – visual check of control panel for faults etc.
- Weekly test – all types of fire alarm systems should be tested once a week. It is best practice to do this at the same time each week. For systems that include manual call points, testing one of these will ensure the link to the fire panel is working and the alarm would be raised if it were activated. It is recommended that a different manual call point be tested each week
- Periodic inspection and test by a competent person – six-monthly or annual servicing by a competent fire alarm engineer should be carried out to ensure the system is working as it should
- Non-routine test – following a fire, ensure an inspection and test of the fire alarm system to ensure it is still working as it should

It is recommended that all tests, and any resulting maintenance of the system, should be recorded in a logbook. This is a way of documenting compliance with the Fire Safety Order and helps with the ongoing management of fire safety arrangements.

Fire Safety Training

The Fire Safety Order requires employers, as the responsible person, to ensure that employees are provided with adequate fire safety training when they are first employed, when procedures have changed, and regular refresher training as appropriate.

Where there has been a change to staffing levels or there are employees who may be working in unfamiliar environments, it is important that steps are taken to ensure they have had appropriate training. This is sometimes overlooked where employees of the same company work at different sites. The responsible person should be able to show that all employees are aware of what to do in case of fire.

The training provided should be appropriate for the risks identified in the fire risk assessment and may vary for different employees depending upon the responsibilities associated with their role.

The training should consider specific features of the premises and should:

- Consider the findings of the fire risk assessment
- Explain the emergency procedures
- Consider the work undertaken on the premises and explain the duties and responsibilities of employees
- Take place during normal working hours, and be repeated at frequent intervals
- Be simple and easy to understand by employees and other people who may be present

Alterations to Buildings

Alterations such as wedging fire doors open, or sealing fire doors in order to prevent air movement between sections of a building, could adversely affect fire safety measures. It is important to ensure that any alterations to the premises do not compromise the measures in place to minimise fire spread and protect escape routes.

Measures to reduce the COVID-19 risk should only be taken if they do not compromise fire safety.

Similarly, premises may have undertaken other measures such as partitioning of rooms or simply locking of doors to create one way systems. Any changes such as these should be carefully considered to ensure they do not compromise escape routes.

Changes to the use or the layout of the building should be reflected in the fire risk assessment, as these changes could impact on the suitability of existing safety arrangements.

Increased levels of oxygen within premises

It is expected that there may increase storage of oxygen cylinders within residential care premises, due to the increased numbers of respiratory related medical conditions associated with COVID-19.

While the presence of oxygen itself does not create a flammable environment, it may, depending on the levels present, allow fire to develop and spread quickly, so it is important to ensure the storage and use of oxygen cylinders is managed safely.

To help reduce the physical risks associated with the use of oxygen within residential care premises, you should consider the following:

- Storage of oxygen cylinders should be kept to the minimum necessary to ensure sufficient supply is available for patients needs
- Preferably the cylinders should be stored outside in a safe and secure location
- Where cylinders are stored indoors, the numbers should be kept to a minimum and be located in well ventilated areas, avoiding storage in passageways/stairways/and areas adjacent to exits
- Oxygen storage areas should be clearly marked
- Existing restrictions on ignition sources such as patient smoking materials should be reviewed and strengthened
- Establish a system to monitor oxygen level in the atmosphere, on at least a daily basis
- Provide guidance for all clinical areas on what to do if oxygen levels exceed 23% including how to seek advice and immediately reduce oxygen levels without compromising infection control
- All employees involved in operating the oxygen equipment should be properly trained and be provided with written procedures

Medical gas and Oxygen cylinders should be:

- Secured when used at bedsides, on trolleys or wheelchairs, to prevent their falling over
- Kept away from sources of heat, fire and naked lights (smoking should be prohibited in the vicinity)
- Not be stored in areas where there is a possibility of being contaminated with oils or greases, e.g. kitchens and garage areas.

Increased levels of oxygen on the premises should be carefully considered and referenced within the fire risk assessment. It should also be highlighted to the Fire & Rescue Service.

More fire safety tips during lockdown

- Ensure fire alarm systems and emergency exits are still accessible and that the alarm can be raised in the event of an emergency. (Fire exits and escape routes may have been affected by temporary one-way systems - all exit routes should remain accessible, unless addressed within your fire risk assessment)
- Continue with testing and maintenance of all fire safety measures
- Avoid propping open fire doors. Keep fire doors closed, unless provided with a suitable approved hold open device that operates on activation of the fire alarm system
- Carry out regular checks to ensure accidental fires are prevented. Separate ignition sources from combustible items and take necessary precautions for residents who smoke

How to Contact Us

For further information or advice on complying with the Fire Safety Order, please do not hesitate to contact us at firesafetyadmin@manchesterfire.gov.uk

Useful Information and Links

It is often simple to take action to stop fires starting or prevent the spread of fire. There is a lot of useful information and advice available free of charge on the [Government website pages for care homes](#).

The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) has produced [advice on managing fire safety during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#).

Information and advice on [carrying out a fire risk assessment, as well as other Health and Safety advice](#), is available on the government website.

The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) has produced [guidance on choosing a fire risk assessor](#).

If you are arranging for someone else to carry out or review your fire risk assessment, you may also want to check they have experience of undertaking fire risk assessments in care facilities.