

Our Reference HighRise/FSA/WWCovid-19

Contact:- highrise@manchesterfire.gov.uk

Housing Providers & Managing Agents

Date: 25th March 2020



Chief Fire Officer: Jim Wallace
Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue
Service
146 Bolton Road
Swinton
Manchester M27 8US
Telephone 0161 736 5866
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Dear Sir or Madam,

****Fire Safety Alert: COVID-19 and Buildings with Interim Measures utilising a 'Waking Watch'****

I am writing in relation to the current Covid-19 pandemic which is set to affect the majority of the Greater Manchester population and the country over the next few months and may impact on the fire safety arrangements for high-rise premises, particularly those with interim measures supported by a waking watch.

The Government has issued guidance in relation to social distancing (link below) as a necessary mechanism to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and this may affect your current arrangements. In addition, the guidance in relation to self isolation (link below) for anyone with symptoms of the virus may introduce challenges to how you maintain a waking watch in a building that you manage.

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) is sympathetic to the situation faced by many building owners, managers and residents and we will continue to support those responsible for fire safety in high rise residential buildings. However, I wish to make it clear that we have a duty to enforce the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order (the Fire Safety Order) and the safety of residents in high rise buildings remains a priority.

The responsible person and other persons with responsibility for fire safety have an ongoing duty to maintain the general fire precautions and fire safety arrangements during this time, however this should be balanced with the risks to health presented from the Covid-19 pandemic.



If you are utilising a waking watch you should ensure that they have received the guidance on social distancing and that there are adequate facilities available to ensure that both social distancing and hand washing routines can be undertaken in accordance with the advice from Public Health England.

It is therefore recommended that you consider your contingency plans and where necessary review your Fire Risk Assessment to consider necessary fire safety provisions to be taken in the event to reflect the current situation.

GMFRS strongly recommends that where a waking watch is currently the only measure to support an evacuation that you consider the installation of a common fire alarm system.

In order to assist those responsible for fire safety in buildings with interim measures we are issuing the following as guidance for immediate consideration;

- Consider the installation of a common fire alarm system in accordance with Appendix 2 of NFCC guidance
- Consider the resilience of existing arrangements liaising with third party contractors where necessary
- The National Fire Chiefs Council has confirmed that they consider that personnel providing waking watch functions should be considered key workers as they are providing key public services and critical safety functions in order to keep homes safe. Please refer to the Government's guidance which expressly states that If workers think they fall within the critical categories above they should confirm with their employer that, based on their business continuity arrangements, their specific role is necessary for the continuation of this essential public service ([link below](#))
- Notify GMFRS where you have concerns about your wakeful watch provision or where you intend to reduce or terminate it.
- Ensure all waking watch staff are taking precautions in line with Government advice
- Review your fire risk assessment to consider any necessary measures to be taken to ensure an equivalent level of coverage can be maintained in the event of staff or personnel illness
- Communicate regularly with residents to inform them of the fire safety arrangements and to ensure they are keeping safe from fire, i.e. test smoke alarms regularly

In the event that you have exhausted all contingency plans and the viability of your wakeful watch is in doubt, then you should immediately do the following;

- Contact GMFRS to discuss your proposals
- Confirm fire safety arrangements with all residents, including advice on what to do in the event of fire
- Consider relocating vulnerable residents, this must be balanced against the risk to health posed by Covid-19

The current situation is unprecedented and extremely dynamic and is under constant review, therefore in all instances we encourage you to have open dialogue with GMFRS and residents, to ensure that the risk from fire remains managed, and that all necessary precautionary measures are taken.

This information is specifically directed to those buildings where a Waking Watch is being used and we are working on providing further information for both housing providers and residents.

If you need to contact the High Rise Team please do so by email to highrise@manchesterfire.gov.uk and a member of the team will contact you.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Hunter', followed by a vertical line.

Tony Hunter
Assistant County Fire Officer & Director of Protection
Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service

Links

HM Government Advice on Social Distancing [COVID-19: guidance on social distancing and for vulnerable people](#)

HM Government Advice COVID-19: guidance for employees, employers and businesses
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>