

Fire Safety Shared Premises

Introduction

All persons controlling, working in, visiting or otherwise using a premises have some responsibility for fire safety, whether it is managing fire safety on the premises or simply adhering to policy and procedures. This document offers guidance, but not exhaustive guidance, on the management of fire safety to those sharing premises with other organisations who may otherwise operate independently.

Who is responsible for fire safety?

Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, responsibility for the overall management of fire safety within a building falls to the Responsible Person. This person may be a Landlord, Owner, Employer, Occupier, or anyone else in charge of the premises such as a Facilities Manager, Building Managers, Head Teachers etc. In most cases, these persons will all work for the same employer, and cooperation should be easy to coordinate.

In some cases however, there will be a number of responsible persons all working for different employers, and in these cases, coordination of efforts and standards can be more difficult. Depending on the size of the organisations, it could require joint procedure writing, regular meetings between representatives, sharing the cost of thorough examinations and maintenance and participation in group training and drills; although sometimes sharing adequate information and joint site inductions may suffice.

Fire Risk Assessment

An integral part of fire safety in any premises is the Fire Risk Assessment. The responsible person must ensure that a FRA is carried out for the premises. FRAs must be recorded if an organisation employs five or more persons. It is also recommended that the FRA be recorded if premises poses any significant risks. A competent fire risk assessor will usually need to be employed to help with this process.

In shared premises, there is a risk that parts of the property will be missed in an FRA, if they are controlled by a different organisation, because offices may be locked or access might not be granted. This limits the effectiveness of an FRA, as there may be high risk factors missed during the inspection. It is important to coordinate FRAs with other occupiers of the premises, so that all areas can be assessed at the same time. This gives a more accurate overall picture than having a number of individual FRAs for different parts of the building. The FRA should be shared with other users of the premises so that they can take action to make improvements or rectify issues that pose a risk to safety.

You may wish to consider commissioning a single FRA, which is jointly paid for by all occupiers.

Maintaining safe escape routes

In shared buildings, there may be escape routes that you need to utilise in an emergency that are in parts of the building you would otherwise not use. Where this is the case, it is important to arrange coordinated checks of these areas, to ensure they are kept clear of obstructions and combustible materials, and to direct persons in the building to familiarise themselves with these routes in case they need to use them in an emergency. You may wish to encourage their use during a drill by blocking a normal escape route.

It is also important to agree who holds the responsibility for ensuring checks (weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual etc.) are carried out on emergency lights, fire detection, firefighting equipment etc. in these areas. As with FRAs, it is practical to have all the equipment examined at the same time and to split the bill accordingly. This is especially true with fire detection systems that may be linked to each other, or even part of the same system.

Fire Drills

Fire drills are an important part of maintaining and improving fire safety. They serve two main purposes.

- They help to familiarise staff with the layout of the property and the escape routes; and with their own roles in the process for evacuation. They can be jointly arranged with the local fire and rescue service, which allows them to test their procedures and offer advice on improving your own.
- They allow you to test the effectiveness of your procedures, and highlight issues that need to be addressed. These could be anything from Fire Wardens being unsure of their responsibilities during an evacuation, to certain escape routes becoming congested. It is important to request feedback from Fire Wardens after an evacuation, which should be recorded for audit purposes, so that issues can be effectively highlighted.

Where a premises is shared between more than one organisation, these drills should be arranged between all responsible persons and followed up with a team debrief. Others may be able to offer valuable feedback, or may have noticed an issue that your own staff have acclimated to.

Communication

There may be occasions where temporary hazards are introduced to the premises. Building works might be taking place, or an exit door may have sustained significant damage. When this happens, it is important to communicate this with all those that may need to use it, even if they never have before and are not a part of your organisation. Losing the use of a fire exit can have an impact on the number of people who can safely use the premises, and additional controls may need to be put in place while the escape route is out of action.

In addition to this, if you make an improvement to fire safety, introduce additional controls, or introduce any new hazards such as LPG, these should also be communicated. They will have an impact of others in the building.

Vulnerable Persons

Some premises may be used by varying numbers of vulnerable persons. “Vulnerable Persons” could be young children, new and expectant mothers, persons with disabilities, or anyone who may have trouble understanding safety information or communicating due to language barriers, hearing or visual impairments or learning difficulties etc.

Additional measures may be required to help these people during evacuations such as visual or vibrating alarms, buddy systems, evacuation aides or translated and braille handouts. An assessment of these needs should be carried out by the responsible person and, where necessary, Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans should be put in place. It may be necessary to share some of this information with those sharing the property, as they may benefit from the additional measures, or may need to help accommodate some of the additional controls. For example, they may need to allow an EvacChair to be stored at the top of a stairwell in their demise so that persons who need them have alternative escape routes.