

# Business Fire Safety

## During the Coronavirus Outbreak

As the UK follows government guidance to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic, it is possible that building owners, managers and staff are making changes to how premises are used, staffed and managed which could, if not fully balanced and considered, adversely impact on fire safety.

The following information, whilst not fully comprehensive, is intended to provide initial support and guidance to ensure residents, staff and premises remain safe throughout this challenging and rapidly evolving period.

Whilst control measures to protect against COVID-19 are crucial, fire safety should also remain a priority. With careful consideration it is possible to balance both hazards.

Detailed guidance documents for different building uses can be found by clicking [here](#).

### Fire Risk Assessment

It is important that, as changes are naturally made to control the spread of COVID-19, they are also considered in the context of your premises fire safety risk assessments to help manage and mitigate the risk of fire as much as possible. Significant changes should be identified and recorded.

Consider asking some simple questions:

- **Risk reduction:** Have you taken all reasonable measures to reduce the risk of fire? E.g. isolating all non-essential equipment and machinery
- **Fire alarm systems:** Is your fire alarm system in a good working order? – ensure it remains tested regularly to ensure this.
- **Interim measures:** If you have had to implement some interim measures do all your staff know and understand why and what they are?
- **New or emerging risk:** Has risk changed? Have things been put in place as a response to the situation that have, on reflection, increased fire risk? (e.g. Introduction of oxygen use / storage)
- **Vulnerable people:** Are the most vulnerable receiving support and are PEEPS being conducted and reviewed to assess individual needs/ changes in their vulnerability? – who is caring for the vulnerable and can they still maintain it?

**During this period, we would advise you to review your fire risk assessment regularly.**

### Evacuation Plans

All staff, residents and visitors must be familiar with the fire evacuation plan (including all temporary and/or bank staff). Maintaining minimum staffing levels to undertake the evacuation plan is very important. Where appropriate, PEEPS must continue to be conducted and reviewed.

## Fire Alarm Actuation and Emergency Procedures

You may wish to consider adopting a version of the following process to reduce disruption, maintain fire safety and minimise the need for external persons (in this case firefighters) to enter your premises at a time when you may be 'shielding' residents from preventable exposure to potential COVID-19 transmission.

- If the fire alarm activates, commence your normal emergency procedures.
- Suitably trained staff should investigate the source of the alarm seeking to establish if it is a fire or a false alarm.
- If, at any point during the investigation a fire is discovered or there is a smell of burning or smoke that cannot be accounted for, dial 999 and ask for the fire service immediately – stating that an evacuation is in progress, advise our Fire Control room of any persons with suspected COVID-19 symptoms.
- If, following the investigation, you are certain that there is no fire, and no suspicion of a fire, then the emergency procedures can be cancelled. Under these circumstances, do not call the fire service.
- The fire alarm system should be re-set by a competent member of staff and the fire alarm log book updated with a record of the event

To prevent any unnecessary disruption, please ensure that any known problems causing false fire alarms are immediately corrected, so that there is a high degree of confidence that fire alarms that do occur are genuine.

## Fire Alarm Systems

### Is your fire alarm system in a good working order?

It is important that fire alarm, emergency lighting and other fire safety systems (e.g. smoke control systems, where fitted) are maintained in good working condition at all times through the continuation of your normal testing regimes.

If your system/s are due maintenance by a qualified engineer, but you want to limit the number of visitors to your premises at this time, you may decide to delay the attendance of the engineer.

**If you take this action, you must record it as a significant finding in the fire risk assessment and highlight the importance of the regular tests you then undertake to ensure the system/s remain fully functional.**

There may still be occasions when engineers/contractors have to attend your premises to maintain essential fire safety systems. You should plan ahead for this eventuality within your business continuity arrangements.

If you are uncertain whether maintenance schedules can safely be extended for the system/s in your premises you should contact a qualified fire safety system engineer.

## Fire Doors

Buildings are fitted with self-closing fire doors to prevent smoke and fire from spreading from one compartment to another and to protect escape routes.

Emerging intelligence suggests some building users are wedging open self-closing fire doors as a COVID-19 control measure (intended to reduce the need to touch locks and door handles etc). Whilst this is understandable in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, it is essential that this hazard is balanced against the risk of uncontrolled spread of fire and smoke when a fire occurs.

If you have decided to wedge fire doors the practice must be fully considered in the fire risk assessment and suitable control measures put in place to ensure fire doors will be closed when needed (particularly in buildings providing sleeping accommodation or care for the vulnerable).

**Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service strongly advises against the practice of wedging fire doors and asks responsible persons to consider other control measures, we have dealt with a number of fire safety concerns over fire doors being wedged open.**

## Buildings Not in Use

If your building is temporarily closed there are some simple measures to safeguard against both accidental and deliberate fires.

- Isolate utilities and machinery that are not required – but ensure your security/fire alarms are still operative.
- Close all fire doors.
- Don't store combustible materials against the building and consider other measures to prevent arson and waste build up.
- Where possible ask your local community to help keep an eye on your premises.

It's important that you continue to do your part to help reduce fire risks in the workplace during these times, so we have highlighted some of the key things to look out for as more buildings become unoccupied.

## Blocks of Flats, Houses In Multiple Occupation and Student Accommodation

Fire safety within dwellings is an extremely important issue, especially in mixed use premises and where unrelated occupiers, who live independently from one another, share common areas of the same building.

### Key considerations should be

- Ensure that safety systems, including your fire alarm, emergency lighting and smoke control systems are in a good working order, are being tested appropriately and are maintained well.
- Ensure that common areas and means of escape routes are clear from combustible items.
- Ensure refuse compounds and other storage areas are not overflowing and are not stored immediately next to buildings – minimum distance of 6m should be maintained where possible.
- Ensure that all occupiers are familiar with the building's evacuation strategy
- Ensure that all fire safety features are maintained, i.e. fire doors are closed and not wedged open

### Any change of strategy needs constant review and robust management

## Coronavirus Outbreak Related Guidance Documents

For those premises that may currently have a waking watch in place, see the link below:

[National Fire Chief's Council Guidance on COVID19 and 'waking watch' premises](#)