Guidance
Note

Fire Industry Association

Guidance on Fire Procedures During the COVID 19 Pandemic

Scope

This guidance document is intended to provide information to:

- The Responsible Person(s) (Primary duty holder) and all persons with duties under the applicable national fire safety legislation.
- Anyone involved in organising, carrying out, and monitoring fire evacuation drills.
- Fire Risk Assessors.
- Enforcing Authorities.

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Introduction

Traditionally, the objective of a fire evacuation drill has been to provide staff and building occupants with the opportunity to practise the established evacuation procedures. These procedures would have been first explained as part of the induction training when a person joined the organisation. The fire evacuation drill provided an opportunity to test and time those procedures under simulated fire conditions, and to identify any anomalies that needed to be addressed.

Owing to the potential risk of contracting COVID 19, the testing of procedures through full building evacuations is, in the case of many buildings, considered to present an unacceptable risk of person-to-person infection. Furthermore, the manner in which buildings are used and occupied is likely to have changed, and might have an impact on the pre-COVID 19 fire procedures.

The guidance in this document is intended to clarify the requirements for ensuring that adequate fire evacuation procedures are in place in reoccupied and partially reoccupied premises. It offers answers to some common questions that have arisen due to COVID 19, and it also provides some suggestions as to how these requirements might be achieved. In addition, this guidance also examines the associated fire safety arrangements that support the evacuation procedures and that will need to be maintained while COVID 19 pandemic controls are in place.

Core requirements

Irrespective of the risks arising from COVID 19, any applicable national fire safety legislation remains valid, and the duties arising therefrom are unchanged. However, fire safety legislation is not prescriptive, so providing that appropriate supplementary or alternative fire safety arrangements are implemented, and that they ensure that the overall objectives of the legislative requirements are met, then the Responsible Person will have discharged their duty.

In all cases, the initial starting point must be a review of the existing fire risk assessment, fire safety arrangements and fire procedures to determine whether they remain valid, when considering the changes in the premises that have been introduced in response to COVID 19. Relevant changes to the premises can include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- Reduced occupancy numbers
- The absence of key personnel, such as fire wardens, assembly marshals and the like
- Reduced ability to record the presence of, and account for, staff, contractors and visitors in the event of an evacuation.
- The implementation of one-way or queueing systems
- The erection of screens and barriers
- Waste collection arrangements
- The size and location of assembly points
- The ability to establish the evacuation status of parts of the building that are under the control of others
- The storage of significant quantities of alcohol-based hand cleanser.

Having reviewed the changes that have been implemented within the premises, it will then be necessary to review the fire safety arrangements and amend them so that they remain suitable and sufficient, and most of all, workable under the prevailing circumstances.

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The following pages provide commentary in response to common questions, and suggestions as to how the issues raised might be addressed.

What changes might be needed to procedures to mitigate the issues of COVID 19?

There are many policies and procedures that impact on the fire safety arrangements in a building or organisation. Any changes to the scope, scale and complexity of the activities being carried out within the building, might require amendments to those policies and procedures and will necessitate a review of the fire risk assessment.

Matters that need to be reviewed include:

- Fire wardens. Are there sufficient present at all material times of the day, do additional wardens need to be appointed, do their duties and responsibilities need to be revised?
- Fire Risk Assessments.   These should be reviewed to ensure that changes in occupancy numbers and working practices have been captured and properly assessed. To reduce the time that risk assessors need to spend on site, alternative arrangements for reviewing documents and records, such as electronic transfer of documents (preferably prior to the fire risk assessment) should be considered.
- One-way systems, safety screens and queuing systems.
    - Do any of these arrangements impact on the escape routes and travel distances?
    - Do screens obstruct fire detectors or sprinkler heads?
    - Are sufficient, suitable fire extinguishers provided on one-way systems?
    - Can fire alarm call points be accessed on one-way systems?
    - In an emergency, can occupants easily leave the one-way system to access the nearest escape route?
    - Does the one-way system lead occupants away from the nearest fire exit?
- Where considered relevant, there should be consultation with interested parties (insurers, fire and rescue authorities)
- Doors should not routinely be propped open to reduce contact points. Where it is considered that this is necessary, door hold-open devices are often acceptable, but care should be taken to conform to the recommendations of BS 7273-4 in this respect.   For example, a "Critical (Category A)" interface between the fire alarm system and the door hold-open devices is necessary in certain circumstances, such as doors to staircases in single staircase conditions, sleeping risks and assembly or recreation buildings; under these circumstances, acoustically activated hold-open devices would not be appropriate.
- Assembly points:
    - Does the current assembly point facilitate social distancing?
    - Does the location of the assembly point bring the assembled people into close contact with passing members of the public?
    - Can people safely disperse from the assembly point after they have checked in?
    - Are a number of assembly points required to enable social distancing?
    - Can you establish virtual assembly points or roll calls using technology?
    - Can Assembly point communications be improved through the use of technology or social media, so that they remain effective but help in maintaining social distancing.
- Where relevant, fire procedure notices need to be amended.

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False Alarm Management.

False alarms are disruptive; they bring the reliability of the alarm system into doubt causing complacency amongst building occupants, and cost organisations time and money. They also cause building occupants to move en-masse, using the same exit routes, thereby creating multiple touch points, and gathering in a group. Clearly, the potential infection risks are justified when a fire is detected in the building, but they cannot be justified where fire alarm systems suffer inordinate numbers of false alarms. The number of false alarms can be reduced by:

- Ensuring the system is properly serviced and maintained.
- Undertaking daily checks of the panel and reporting any faults present.
- Ensuring that every alarm activation is investigated, the probable cause of the alarm is identified and steps are taken to prevent a reoccurrence.

Testing the changes to the procedures

After any changes to policies and procedures have been made, it is important to confirm that the changes not only work but do not present unintended consequences that will only become apparent when they are tested. For example:

Fire Drills

- Yes, you still need to do these, but at what frequency?
- Just for smaller groups or only new starters?
- Limited fire drill? New staff only?
- Everybody should participate in a fire drill, which requires keeping of records as to who has participated.
- More fire wardens?
- Time taken to evacuate not as critical?
- Review existing arrangements for longer term staff but new staff will need more training.
- Review vs Reassessment.
- Low numbers of managers. Will people evacuate if management is not present?

Staff training

- Staff training updated for COVID 19? Any changes to procedures should be communicated to all staff, including those working at home.
- Familiarity with the fire safety equipment (fire alarm call points, fire extinguishers, etc).
  Mini assessment of evacuation arrangement if fire drills are being carried out by external advisers.

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Common questions and issues

1) Is there anything that I should do differently because of COVID 19?

Yes. The first thing to do is review the existing fire safety arrangements. For example, confirm that the presence of fire wardens, routine fire safety checks, arrangements for PEEPs etc, have not been adversely impacted by the measures put in place due to COVID 19. This will include, but not necessarily be restricted to, the erection of barriers, one-way systems, reduced numbers of staff, method of summoning the fire and rescue service, social distancing measures and rearrangement of furniture.

2) Do I still need to carry out fire drills?

While there is no legal requirement to carry out a fire evacuation drill in exactly the form that we have come to know and understand, there remains a legal requirement to train staff in precautions, and actions that they would need to take in order to safeguard themselves and relevant persons on the premises in the event of fire.

Traditionally, fire evacuation drills worked on a one-size-fits-all basis. The alarm sounded, everyone stopped what they were doing, made their work areas safe, left the building by the nearest available exit, and went to the assembly point. This training model is no longer always appropriate, and it is likely that, in many workplaces, evacuation procedure training will need to be modified to take account of the changes to working practices and building occupancy that have come about because of COVID 19.

It has always been acceptable to exempt certain individuals from participating in building evacuation drills, provided supplementary training is given, records are kept of those exempted and it is ensured that the same people are not exempted in every drill Experience has shown that, even if that supplementary training was not of particularly good quality, in an evacuation, everyone left the building at the same time, so those who were unsure of what action to take simply followed the crowd and learned from the shared experience.

In some instances, it would be acceptable to limit participants in an evacuation drill and supplement the drill with additional familiarisation training.

This can be achieved for example by amending the evacuation drills and adopting a more modular approach involving evacuation of only individual floors or departments at any one time. Alternatively, participants in the drill could be restricted to fire wardens, new starters and personnel who would be expected to take a lead in the evacuation. This would ensure that, in the event of a genuine alarm, they would be able to progress the evacuation of colleagues.

The modular approach should also be applied to anybody who is the subject of, or is named in, a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP).

Where alternative escape routes are provided, and limited numbers are participating in the drill, they should walk the alternative routes all the way out to the place of ultimate safety.

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This may require familiarisation prior to the evacuation exercise, so that they are fully familiar with all available exit routes.

3) Do I need to maintain social distancing?

For practice evacuations (fire drills) that are planned in advance, social distancing should be maintained.

For unplanned evacuation events (i.e., resulting from genuine fires), social distancing should be maintained so far as is reasonably practicable. However, the immediate risk to life from a fire would exceed the risk from COVID 19, so the objective is to minimise person-to-person contact without unduly delaying the evacuation. If possible, social distancing measures should be reintroduced as soon as possible after leaving the building and at the assembly point.

4) Do staff need to report to fixed assembly points?

The objectives in an evacuation are to clear the building and be able to advise the fire and rescue service of the building's evacuation status.

A secondary business continuity objective is to be able to advise evacuated persons of the situation and the actions required of them. To this end, providing that someone has been appointed to collate status reports from the fire wardens, to liaise with the fire and rescue service and there are means of communicating with those who have been evacuated, there is no specific requirement for designated assembly points.

5) Can I wedge or prop open fire doors to reduce contamination contact points?

No. Fire doors form a vital element of the building's fire safety arrangements and protect the means of escape. However, it might be acceptable to hold-open some fire doors using appropriate hold-open devices (see page 4). Hold-open devices should only be fitted by a suitable competent person.

It should also be noted that there are other measures that can and should be put in place before the need to hold open fire doors becomes necessary. These would include increased cleaning regimes, hand washing and the provision of hand sanitiser at the doors in question.

6) Do I stop to put on my mask or other PPE?

In the event of an unplanned fire evacuation, if you do not wear COVID 19 PPE as part of the general working practices, you should not delay your evacuation to collect or don these items.

7) Should I review PEEPs due to COVID 19 control measures?

Yes. You should confirm that established PEEPs are still operable and that all named "buddies" will be present at all times, as they might be working from home. Where emergency voice communication systems form part of the PEEPs, you should confirm that they remain fully operational and that the base station will be manned.

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Where PEEPs include the need for close contact (e.g., escorting or assisting. someone with impaired vision or mobility), it might be necessary to incorporate the use of PPE in the PEEPs procedures. Suitable PPE should be made available at the designated refuge point.

8) ## Should I reconfigure the building's fire detection and alarm system to introduce an investigation period?

While it is possible to reconfigure a fire detection and alarm system to incorporate a delay and investigation period, this is a complex matter. Any change will involve software, and possibly hardware, changes to the fire detection and alarm system, and will result in changes to the established fire procedures, additional staff training, and practice evacuation drills. It is advised that such significant alterations will require input from fire safety consultants, building control bodies and possibly the fire and rescue service.

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