

## Fire Safety Guidance Note:

**GN58**

# Fire Precautions in Places of Public Worship

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The London Fire Commissioner (the Commissioner) is the fire and rescue authority for London. The Commissioner is responsible for enforcing the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, as amended by the Fire Safety Act 2021, (The Order) in London.

This Guidance Note provides general fire safety advice in respect of places of worship, including churches and cathedrals, synagogues, mosques, temples and religious centres.

This Guidance Note is one of a series produced by London Fire Brigade (LFB) to provide advice on various aspects of fire safety. If you require any further guidance on the advice given or require advice on another topic, please visit the LFB website at <http://www.london-fire.gov.uk> or you can telephone or visit your local Fire Safety Office (telephone 020 8555 1200 and ask for your nearest Fire Safety Office).

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 This Guidance Note has been prepared by the Fire Safety department, London Fire Brigade (LFB).
- 1.2 The purpose of this document is to provide basic fire safety advice for any person responsible for managing a place of public religious worship.

## **2 Fire Safety legislation**

- 2.1 The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (the Fire Safety Order) is the main piece of legislation governing fire safety in buildings in England and Wales. It is enforced by several organisations, the primary enforcer being the local Fire and Rescue Service (FRS).
- 2.2 The Fire Safety Order requires that the Responsible Person (the person having control of the building, or a degree of control) takes reasonable steps to reduce the risk from fire and to ensure people can be alerted to a fire and escape safely in the event of a fire.
- 2.3 In the context of the Fire Safety Order, anyone who is lawfully on the premises (employees, customers, visitors, contractors, people who live in the building etc.) are "Relevant Persons". This includes anyone in the immediate vicinity of your premises who is at risk from a fire on the premises.
- 2.4 Further advice on the Fire Safety Order can be obtained from the LFB website and Guidance Note No 66.

## **3 Fire Safety documentation**

- 3.1 Fire Safety documents for non-domestic premises, including places of worship and historic buildings, should include the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA), Evacuation Strategy (ES), Emergency Evacuation Plan (EEP) and where appropriate, Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP). Together, these documents form part of the fire safety arrangements for the premises. Depending on the size and complexity of the premises, the amount of information these records contain will vary.
- 3.2 All fire safety documents for the premises should be easy to understand, regularly reviewed and kept up to date. They should also be accessible and made available to any authorised person who needs to use them.

## 4 Fire Risk Assessment

- 4.1 The FRA is the foundation on which fire safety measures in your premises are built and involves a careful look at your premises and the people who use them from a fire prevention perspective. It's about understanding the potential risks, and then removing, reducing or managing those risks to improve your fire safety precautions and to keep people safe.
- 4.2 A Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) is mandatory for all premises falling within the scope of the Fire Safety Order. Further information about fire risk assessments can be found here: [Fire risk assessments – your responsibilities](#)
- 4.3 The obligation to ensure the safety of occupants, and the moral duty to protect the building from fire often leads to conflict. The FRA can be a valuable tool in striking a balance between life safety requirements and the need for property protection. It may be appropriate to apply a more flexible risk assessment process that ensures property protection and business continuity is achieved. This approach may require the expertise of specialists from various disciplines and early engagement with a Conservation Officer and /or Historic England, especially where it is an historic listed building.
- 4.4 At no point should any variation to a premises take place without a full and detailed review of the FRA and/or the fire strategy. Any significant change to the building or deviation from current guidance or British Standard must be fully documented within the FRA.
- 4.5 When existing premises are converted from their current/original use to a place of worship the existing fire safety measures within the premises may not be suitable or sufficient and a full review of the measures incorporated within the premises should be carried out. This may require planning and building regulation permission and the local authority building control offices should be contacted in this regard.

## 5 Fire strategy

- 5.1 A fire strategy is a complex document specifically tailored to a building, reviewing all aspects of the building's fire safety features including construction, compartmentation strategy, means of escape and other fire safety features/measures - including management arrangements.
- 5.2 The fire strategy document serves as the basis for more detailed fire protection provisions such as the FRA, ES, EEP and PEEP and other relevant building strategies (such as a building's security strategy).

## 6 Common causes of fire

- 6.1 Understanding and mitigating the causes of fire is crucial in protecting life and buildings and their contents from loss or damage. Addressing these fire risks through proactive monitoring, robust maintenance practices and appropriate safety measures, are essential components in the management of fire safety in any building.

### Building works and maintenance

- Hot work activities like soldering, roof repairs, paint-stripping, sparks from cutting and plumbing works can ignite nearby combustible materials.
- Loss of fire separation (compartmentation), including removal or repair of doors, partitions or ceilings, can compromise fire containment allowing fire and smoke to spread.

- Isolation of fire detectors, by temporarily covering detectors or disabling alarm zones to prevent false alarms caused by dust, increases risk.
- Fire loading is the amount of combustible material stored in a building or space. Buildings under construction or renovation often have high fire loads due to construction materials, packaging, solvents and fuel for generators.
- Temporary lighting and contractor's power tools are potential sources of ignition.
- Water supply issues, such as hidden hydrants, can adversely affect fire-fighting activities.
- Restricted access from erected hoarding and site huts can lead to blocked entries and exits.
- Lack of fire precautions or safety measures not yet implemented.

## Electrical faults

- Aging wiring, where the insulation and protective layers of wiring deteriorates over time, can cause short circuits, overheating and electrical fires.
- Using too many appliances can overload circuits causing equipment and wiring to overheat.
- Electrical appliances not regularly maintained or cleaned can lead to malfunctions and fire.
- Electrical system upgrades may be needed to ensure systems remain safe and effective, such as replacing outdated fuses with modern systems featuring Residual Current Devices (RCDs) as per BS7671 Wiring Regulations.
- Depending on the type of building, an Arc Fault Detection Device (AFDDs) or thermography testing may be appropriate.

## Alternative heating systems

- Open Fires, Stoves, Grates, Hearths and Flues
- Chimneys pose significant potential for fire spread if not swept regularly.
- Cracks and faults in hearths and defective flues allow fire to reach timber joists and brickwork.
- Obstructions such as bird nests in flues or on chimneys are a frequent cause of fires.

## Vandalism and malicious damage

- 6.2 Arson is a leading cause of fire, particularly in remote or vacant properties. Adequate security measures are vital, especially for buildings that are unoccupied or empty. For LFB instruction on arson reduction, see [guidance on our website](#). Additional guidance can also be found in an [NFCC leaflet](#).

### Arson Reduction Measures

- 6.3 **Assess the risk:** Are there weak points in the security of the building or are attacks likely. The answer to these will help to identify next steps. If there is arson/arson attack, would this compromise an escape route or exit point, what would be the contingency for this and how would this be communicated to others on site. This should be included in the emergency evacuation plan.
- 6.4 **Keep buildings secure:** At night, all doors, windows and gates should be locked. Security lights, intruder alarms and CCTV (that provides continual monitoring to an alarm receiving centre) should be installed, keeping the exterior well-lit and monitored may deter intruders. There should be a signing in and out procedure for all visitors and change door codes regularly.
- 6.5 **Report suspicious activity:** Buildings that appear empty or derelict may be more of a target for arson, as the perpetrators may think they would go unnoticed. If you or regular users of the building notice any suspicious activity, this should be reported to the police immediately. If any damage to the building or grounds is noticed, this should be reported to the police and insurers.

If there are worries about calling the police, there are other agencies such as Crimestoppers (0800 555 111) where crimes can be reported anonymously.

- 6.6 **Waste management:** Make sure that bins are sited away from the external walls and windows. Rubbish should be stored appropriately, securely and regularly disposed of. Escape routes should not be blocked by rubbish. Do not allow rubbish to pile up, as this can affect evacuation in the event of fire. CCTV could be installed in these areas as part of the arson prevention strategy. Plan ahead for busy periods where there will be more visitors and more waste.
- 6.7 **Assembly point:** The assembly point should be accessible and a sufficient distance away from the premises. Consideration should be given as to where this information is displayed. If an arson attack occurred, it is essential that attackers could not easily identify the assembly point and use it as a second point of attack. Another option could be to introduce a dispersal order in the event of an emergency, where attendees do not assemble in one place, instead they would leave the area separately and only return when it's reported as safe to do so by the Responsible person / Faith Leader.
- 6.8 **Contact information:** It would be helpful to have out of hours contact information displayed somewhere obvious within the building (perhaps adjacent to the fire alarm panel), as this would allow fire crews/police etc. to contact key holders.
- 6.9 **Additional fire safety measures:** Arson reduction letter boxes could be used at entry/exit doors where there is a letter box. Additional smoke detectors could be placed near entry/exit points to enable early detection of a fire. If there is a high risk of an arson attack, overnight security officers could be considered.
- 6.10 **Training:** In addition to fire safety training, all staff should have regular training to help identify suspicious behaviour, odours such as petrol, items that could be used to cause harm or suspicious items. Staff should know how and who to report this too and initial actions they should take in the event of an arson attack.
- 6.11 **Engagement with the local community:** Being involved with the local community, community police officers, or neighbourhood watch etc. would allow information sharing on anti-social behaviour. It may also encourage the community to report any suspicious activity when the premises is empty.
- 6.12 **Helpful contacts:** For further advice or support, they can contact the Local Authority, specifically the licensing team, planning, environmental health etc. Further information can also be found in this [leaflet](#).

## Candles/Incense

- Candles, incense and matches should be kept in a secure store when not in use. Candles and incense should not be left burning when the premises are not in use or in any unsupervised part of the building. LFB's Fire Safety in the Home booklet available from our website has additional information.
- Have candles/incense in a proper holder, they need to be held firmly upright by the holder so they will not fall over and the holder needs to be stable as well.
- Position candles/incense away from curtains, fabrics and furniture, keep them out of draughts
- Keep candles/incense away from clothes and hair, If there is any chance you could lean across a candle put it somewhere else, it could set fire to clothing or people's hair.
- Keep candles/incense apart, leave at least 10 centimetres between two burning candles
- Don't move candles/incense when they are alight and extinguish them before moving the candle.

- Use a snuffer implement or a spoon to put the flame out. It's safer than blowing them, which can send sparks and hot wax flying
- Double check the candle/incense is completely extinguished. Candles/incense that have not been put out properly can go on smouldering and start a fire.
- Where possible, consider using battery powered candles instead.

## **Accidental causes of fire**

- Smoking materials carelessly disposed of can cause fires. We would recommend that smoking is not permitted on site.
- Sunlight hitting mirrors or glass can focus sunlight onto combustible materials, such as curtains and furnishings, causing ignition.

## **Other considerations**

### **Sleeping accommodation**

6.13 If there is permitted legal living/sleeping accommodation on site, consider:

- The Fire Risk Assessment should include fire safety measures specifically for sleeping accommodation and should be appropriate for the number of people in the building.
- The fire alarm system should be adequate for sleeping accommodation.
- Emergency lighting should be installed to BS 5266, or equivalent.
- All doors and gates that form part of the escape routes should be easily opened from the inside, without the use of a key.
- Ensure you do not exceed occupancy in sleeping accommodation and rooms are fit for purpose.

### **Heating systems**

- All heating systems must be maintained in accordance with manufacturer's instructions.
- Radiant heaters should be adequately guarded and storage not allowed in close proximity to these heaters.
- Portable heaters are not recommended for use in places of worship. If they are used, wherever possible they should be fixed in position and guarded, to ensure they cannot be inadvertently moved to come into contact with drapes, furnishings or other combustibles. They should not be left unattended and should not be used when people are sleeping.

### **Seating**

- Seating in large halls should be fixed in position with seats interlocked together in rows. There should be not less than 305mm between rows and gangways to be 1100mm wide. No seat should be more than 3.5m from a gangway.
- Additional spacing may be required to provide accommodation/access for wheelchair users or other disabled or vulnerable people

## **7 Escape and evacuation**

- 7.1 All persons should be able to safely leave the premises by moving away from a fire to a place of safety. An emergency evacuation plan (EEP) is required for the premises which may need to be adjusted for other types of event. Generic or individual evacuation plans, known as Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) may be required as part of this plan.
- 7.2 The premises should have sufficient exits which are capable of accommodating the maximum congregation. These means of escape should take account of the loss of the largest exit or route

as a result of any fire and therefore the other remaining escape routes and exits must be able to accommodate the safe exit of all occupants. The FRA will be required to detail these arrangements, and the RP will need to ensure that the outcomes of the FRA are put in place for the safety of people.

- 7.3 During services, there are likely to be large numbers of people. Ensure that the space is large enough to accommodate the attendees and there are a sufficient number of exits. Crowding and evacuation plans should consider the fluctuation of attendees and plan for safe exit from the premises.
- 7.4 If sleeping is permitted at the premises, a higher standard of fire safety will be necessary. The RP will need to ensure that the building has sufficient exits available and signed appropriately, a full detection and warning system is installed, emergency escape lighting is available and the FRA for the premises provides the details of these arrangements.
- 7.5 All exit routes must be left free of obstruction, floors/floor coverings should be maintained in good condition, and these routes should be adequately lit, especially where there is a change of floor level.
- 7.6 Wherever possible, exit doors should open outwards and be clearly signed. Inward opening doors may be appropriate providing that:
  - There is less than 60 people required to use the exit door (s)
  - those supervising the activity and others assisting them are trained in the action to be taken in case of fire and the evacuation procedure for the building, and can perform the role as door wardens by opening the doors before people need to use them
- 7.7 When the premises are occupied, all doors from the area in use must be easily openable without the use of a key, they should preferably be fitted with a 'push bar' type of fastening unless the numbers of people required to use them is less than 50, in which case a single, simple fastening available without the use of a key may be acceptable.
- 7.8 Exit routes should be clearly identified (usually by fire exit signs) to enable people unfamiliar with the premises to locate the final exit door and make their escape in the event of a fire.
- 7.9 In a single stairway building, it is necessary to ensure that a fire on the lower floor(s) could not prevent people escaping from an upper floor. This can be achieved by the provision of an additional stairway to the upper floors (totally independent of the first stairway) or by ensuring that the existing stairway is enclosed by materials, having a fire resistance of at least 30 minutes and that all doors opening onto the stairway are fire doors rated at 30 minutes fitted with a self-closing device.
- 7.10 Powered stair-lifts should not be installed without the appropriate fire safety advice as they significantly reduce the width of stairs when in use.
- 7.11 All areas used by people in the building must be adequately lit. It is also recommended that stairways, passages and large halls are provided with simple emergency escape lighting in case of a power failure to the normal lighting system. Buildings with no natural light, or those that are used during the hours of darkness, should be provided with an Emergency Lighting (EL) system conforming to British Standard BS 5266-1. These lights are typically powered by battery packs and only illuminate when the mains or local lighting sub-circuit fails. If this type of lighting is not feasible, an alternative method must be identified and assessed as part of the FRA.

- 7.12 Fire drills to test the evacuation plan are required to be undertaken to ensure that people can escape where necessary in case of a fire. Those persons who are tasked to assist in any evacuation on behalf of the RP should be trained in the process of how to undertake this role.

**Action to take on discovering a fire.**

- Raise the alarm, instructing everyone to leave the building immediately by the nearest available exit.
- Call the Fire Brigade using 999 or 112.
- If the fire is small, a trained person may attempt to fight the fire using the portable extinguishers, but only if this can be done without risk.
- Do not allow people to re-enter the building until the Fire Brigade have checked and confirmed that it safe to do so.
- A responsible person should meet the Fire Brigade and advise them of the situation.

## 8 Fire detection and alarm systems

- 8.1 Fire detection and alarm systems are highly effective safety measures for buildings. They can be installed to provide life safety or property protection or both and should comply with the latest edition of British Standard BS 5839 parts 1 and part 6, depending on building type and use.
- 8.2 Alternative types of detection are available and may be suitable depending on the type of premises:
- **Aspirating smoke detectors:** operate by drawing air through a network of pipes to a sampling chamber capable of detecting the slightest trace of smoke.
  - **Wireless detectors:** provide high reliability and are unobtrusive. However, thick walls of brick and stone are much more difficult for Wi-Fi signals to penetrate thereby potentially reducing the effectiveness of a wireless system. It is therefore crucial to conduct a signal strength investigation before any installation work is undertaken.
  - **Visual and thermal image fire detectors (camera software fire detection):** can be used in large indoor spaces from well-hidden locations. Thermal detectors register heat sources and will raise an alarm based on pre-set temperature limits thereby reducing the possibility of a false alarm.
  - **Beam smoke detectors:** can be used where there are very high ceilings (approximately 12m+) and in large rooms with ornate ceilings.
- 8.3 Some Fire and Rescue Services may not always respond to an automatic fire alarm (AFA) unless it has been confirmed via a 999 call. It is therefore crucial to evaluate the frequency of false alarms to assess whether filtering measures are needed to prevent false alarms from reaching the emergency services. To maintain a robust early-warning alarm capability, during periods when the premises is unoccupied, consider employing the monitoring services of an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC). Frequent false alarms are an indication of failures in fire safety management, which may lead to enforcement action by the relevant FRS or result in charges from the FRS who are entitled to recover some attendance costs.

## 9 Fire-fighting equipment

- 9.1 All staff members expected to use firefighting equipment should receive appropriate training.
- 9.2 The types of fire extinguisher on a premises should reflect the potential fire risks in each area. It is recommended that an appointed competent person should liaise with the fire extinguisher technicians during installation to ensure the extinguishers are placed in the appropriate areas.

- 9.3 It is sometimes not advisable to install fire extinguisher brackets on certain walls, especially those with historic value or protection. Instead, consider using fire extinguisher stands to prevent any compromise or damage to the walls.
- 9.4 Maintaining all fire protection systems and facilities is crucial. They must always be available and in good condition. Neglecting this aspect endangers, the building, its occupants and firefighter's lives. It could also lead to legal consequences rendering the RP liable to prosecution.
- 9.5 Depending on the risks and hazards identified within the fire risk assessment, an automatic fire suppression system may be required within the premises to lower the risk or hazard to a tolerable level. This could be either a sprinkler system, water mist system or oxygen reduction systems. If a bespoke suppression system has been installed, it should be fully accounted for in the fire risk assessment.
- 9.6 Sprinklers have been proven to reduce the impact of fire and are potentially a lifesaving tool that brings many benefits. London Fire Brigade fully supports the use of Automatic Fire Suppression Systems (AFSS) to protect property and to reduce fire deaths and injuries. Comprehensive information on AFSS and useful links are available on the [LFB website sprinkler page](#).

## 10 Salvage

- 10.1 If there are important, historic or significant items to be salvaged in the event of an emergency such as a fire or flood, these should be included in the Fire Safety Manual as an emergency response/salvage/damage control plan. Further information on salvage plans can be found in [GN80](#).
- 10.2 Templates and examples of documents that should be included in a salvage plan can be found on [the LFB website](#).
- 10.3 Fire crews will need access to simple floor plans and salvage plans that are easy to understand. The salvage plans provide useful information, including priority 'salvage grab sheets', which will assist the fire crews to undertake salvage procedures.
- 10.4 Salvage grab sheets display important information about priority items that need to be salvaged in an emergency. Both the salvage plan and any salvage grab sheets should be developed and readily available before the FRS arrive on-site. This allows action to commence promptly upon arrival, subject to the FRS Incident Commander's approval.
- 10.5 Salvage grab sheets should ideally include the following information:
- Location of the item alongside a clear floor plan.
  - Priority rating, 1, 2, 3 (with 1 being the highest importance).
  - A picture of the item that needs to be salvaged.
  - A description of the item.
  - The dimensions & weight of the item.
  - How the item is fixed and whether tools or security keys are required to remove it.
  - The number of people required to safely move the item.
  - Is the item at height and are ladders required?
  - If any items cannot be moved, what measures are required to protect them in situ?
- 10.6 It's best practice to place salvage grab sheets in a designated folder and group them by location or area instead of in order of priority.

### Making London the Safest Global City