



ADVICE NOTE

FIRE SAFETY IN FLATS

A general guide to fire safety in blocks of flats



Note:

As the leading trade body for residential leasehold management, ARMA is also an important resource for leaseholders. Our Advice Notes cover a range of topics on the leasehold system to help leaseholders understand their rights and responsibilities and ultimately get the most out of living in their flat.

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SUMMARY

This Advice Note gives general guidance about fire safety in blocks of flats. Specific advice for individual blocks will differ, so you should read this in conjunction with the guidance that's in place for your own building. That could be a leaflet or a fire safety notice posted in the communal areas.

The information in this advice note is important — taking a little time to read it now may save your life!

THE MAIN CAUSES OF FIRE

Most fires in blocks of flats start within the individual flats themselves. Electrical faults from overloaded sockets are the main cause.

Cigarettes are another major problem. Fires can start when they're not put out properly, or when someone smoking out of a window throws the butt away and it falls through a neighbour's open window below.

Chip and frying pans are particularly dangerous when someone forgets to turn off the hob. So are fragranced candles when they're left unattended.

PREVENTING FIRES IN YOUR FLAT

The best protection from fire is prevention. Your landlord and managing agent have a duty to take steps to prevent fires breaking out in the communal areas, but you can still ensure your home is as safe as possible. Remember, most fires in blocks of flats start within the flats themselves, not in the communal areas.

Smoke detectors are the most effective way of preventing fires. They also give vital early warning and extra time to escape in the event of one breaking out. So if you don't have smoke detectors, you should seriously consider installing them. Mains wired detectors are the safest.

You should check your smoke detector weekly to see if it's working. If it's not a mains wired one, change the battery every year or when you need to. You should change your smoke detector every 10 years.

It's important to check the doors in your flat are in good condition and that they shut properly. Never remove internal doors or wedge them open; make sure they're closed at night. You should also make sure everyone knows where the keys are kept for the main door.

If you're planning alterations to doors and the internal layout of your flat, think about the implications on fire safety. Always contact your landlord or managing agent first.

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FRONT DOORS OF FLATS

Believe it or not, your front door is a secret weapon against fire in your block. And not just for you, but your neighbours too. It prevents fire and smoke from spreading to the communal areas, and cutting off the escape routes.

So you should never alter your front door without taking advice on the implications it would have on fire safety. It should have a self-closing device fitted to meet current fire safety guidance for flats — you should never remove this. Even altering the letterbox or adding a cat flap can affect the fire safety of your building and the communal escape routes. Always ask permission from your landlord or managing agent first.



FIRE SAFETY IN COMMUNAL AREAS

Your landlord or managing agent has a legal duty to arrange for a fire risk assessment to be carried out on the communal areas of your building, and for it to be kept under review. But there are a few things you can do to help:

- Don't obstruct the communal areas, which often form the fire escape route for the block
- Don't prop open fire doors in communal areas
- Don't clutter the stairs, corridors and landings with personal items or things that can set fire easily
- Don't store prams, bicycles or mobility scooters in communal areas without the permission of the landlord or managing agent. You won't get permission if the fire safety of the block is put at risk
- If you see anything in the communal areas that doesn't belong there, remove it or tell your landlord or managing agent
- Don't store flammable materials in cupboards that have electrical circuits
- Make sure you put all rubbish in the bins provided — don't leave it lying around in the refuse area as this can easily be set on fire

PRINCIPLES OF FIRE SAFETY IN FLATS

Most purpose built flats and modern conversions are designed with fire safety in mind. It's important to be aware of these principles:

- There's a high degree of compartmentation between each flat, and between the flats and the communal areas — so each flat is effectively a fire resisting box
- There's a low probability of fire spreading beyond the flat where it broke out
- There's a low fire risk in communal areas

If these design principles are in place then the following fire safety principles will apply, subject of course to the risk assessment of each block:

- A stay put policy will apply. This means that unless the fire breaks out in your flat, it's safest to stay in your flat unless you're asked to leave by the fire brigade
- There's no need for simultaneous evacuation or for fire drills
- Residents in the flat where the fire broke out should evacuate and call the fire brigade; other residents are safe to stay in their flats
- There's no need for fire alarms in communal areas or to be linked into flats
- There's no need for fire extinguishers in communal areas except for plant and service rooms
- Emergency lighting is generally required in communal areas including stairs and corridors and plant and service rooms

Fire risk assessments of communal areas

It's a legal requirement for all blocks of flats (including houses converted into two or more flats) to have a fire risk assessment of the communal areas only. But this must include the front doors of individual flats. The responsibility to arrange the assessment lies with the landlord. This could be a Residents' Management Company or Right to Manage Company.

A basic fire risk assessment will look at the communal areas and examine the main doors to the flats. If there's reason to doubt the structural fire protection of a block, a more intrusive assessment may be required. This may include opening up the structure of the building to check its fire resistance.

Reviewing fire risk assessments

Your landlord or agent should keep the fire risk assessment for your block under review. This is not necessarily the same as repeating the assessment; a shorter review can be made with a repeat at longer intervals.

There are no legal requirements set for the timing of reviews and repeat assessments; it depends on the individual circumstances. General guidance is:

- For low risk modern low rise blocks, a review every two years with a new assessment every four years
- For higher risk blocks, an annual review with a new assessment every three years

A review should also be carried out after the completion of any work to the building to address fire safety concerns.

Fire action instructions

Your landlord or agent should inform all residents about the fire safety arrangements for the block.

In simpler blocks, a standard fire safety notice in the communal areas would be enough. Otherwise a bespoke document may be needed, which is copied to all residents.

If you're not sure of the fire safety plan for your block you should contact your landlord, Residents' Management Company or agent.



FURTHER INFORMATION

The current national guidance on fire safety in flats can be downloaded from ARMA's Leasehold Library. Visit: www.arma.org.uk

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Note:

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