

Grey Paper No. 16 - Fire Risk Assessment

Since October 2006, premises, including theatres, have not been subject to Fire Services inspection for the purpose of issuing fire certificates. Instead, your management committee, Trustees if you are a charity, or Board if incorporated, are responsible for fire precautions including having an up-to-date fire risk assessment. This Grey Paper draws on advice issued by the previous government which can be found on the website www.communities.gov.uk/fire and is intended to help theatres through the process by pointing out what needs to be done and how to go about doing it.

1. What needs to be done

- Appoint a 'responsible person', usually your building manager, to be in control of your building and to carry out the fire risk assessment.
- Ensure that the responsible person is competent, normally through training, to do the job.
- Make sure all fire hazards and persons who may be at risk are identified
- Evaluate the results of your enquiries
- Draw up your risk assessment
- Train your volunteers in action to be taken both to minimise fire risk and in what to do if there is an outbreak of fire
- Review the assessment regularly, and in particular when any changes are made to the building.

2. Identifying hazards

Fire can break out only when certain conditions are met. It needs heat (the source of ignition), contact with fuel (anything that burns) and oxygen (contained in air). So first examine your theatre and list the sources of heat. These will include heaters, lighting fitments, naked flame, electrical equipment and any process, particularly when set building, which produces heat. For theatres stage lighting systems and electrical intakes can be very hot. Then do a similar exercise to identify sources of fuel. As well as the obvious contents of your paint store, these will be any furniture, costumes, flats and wood and plastics stored for set building as well as paper and general rubbish. As part of your plans to minimise the hazards you will wish to ensure that the flammable materials are kept separate from the sources of heat as far as possible and that all set making materials are properly fire proofed.

3. Identifying people at risk

Those at risk will fall into two general categories. Those working in the building, all of whom, even if volunteers, will be regarded as employees, and visitors to the building, including your audience. You have a duty of care to all of these and will need consider whether there are likely to be people within these categories who will be at greater risk than others, for instance wheelchair users or set construction volunteers working on projects that might involve, for instance, the use of a blow torch. You will need to decide what needs to be done to minimise the risk to them, and means of isolating them from fire if it does break out.

Once you have identified both the hazards and the people at risk you can draw up your fire risk assessment.

4. The Assessment

As with all risk assessments a fire risk assessment is a means of ensuring that what you want to do can be done as safely as possible. Your whole building will need to have an assessment. Small theatres can probably produce one document covering the whole of the building while larger theatres will probably need to divide the building into discrete areas, each of which is fire secure from the others (i.e separated by fire doors or fire breaks). You will need to include in the assessment the various states of occupancy of the building(s) – empty, in use by members and guests only, in use by members of the public – and the extent to which regular users of the building(s) are trained in both fire precautions and evacuation procedures. Always remember that the aim of the assessment is to minimise the risk to people. The side effect is to make the building as safe as possible from fire.

Each part of the assessment will need to consider two things only. First the likelihood of a fire occurring in categorised as High (certain or near certain) Medium (reasonably likely) or Low (very seldom or never). These are given marks of 3,2 or 1.

Secondly you need to consider the severity of the risk if a fire does occur again categorised as High (Fatality or Major injury), Medium (Injury causing short term disability) or Low (Other injury or illness). Again, marks of 3, 2 and 1 are awarded. The overall risk in the building is calculated by multiplying the Severity score by the Likelihood score. Scores of 3 or below indicate a low risk and no action needed to be taken.

Given that the severity score is likely to be 3 in all cases because fire must be regarded as life threatening, it is important to take action (or confirm that action has been taken) to ensure that the likelihood score is always 1.

These actions will include:

- Smoke alarms (with a maintenance schedule)
- Fire extinguishers (with a maintenance schedule)
- Trained staff on duty
- Written evacuation procedure
- Controls over location of flammable materials
- Fire doors
- Illuminated exit signs
- Regular fire inspections
- Regular practice evacuations
- Schedule showing review procedure

Separate documentation will need to be kept of all the above in a single file open for inspection in a secure fire-proof location in the building.

A fire assessment pro forma is attached to this grey paper, with a checklist taken from the website referred to in the preamble.

5. Enforcement

The enforcing authority for fire safety is your local fire and rescue authority, who have power to check that you are complying with the legislative requirements. It is therefore important to ensure that all of your documentation – the fire risk assessment and supporting documents – are kept in a safe and fire proof place within your building, that a record is kept of all fire drills and fire inspections as well as records of training sessions for your volunteers, including a note of the actual training given, such as action to be taken by FoH staff in the case of emergency.

In the unlikely event that the fire and rescue authority is not satisfied following an inspection, they can issue an enforcement notice requiring improvements to be made in specific areas or, in extreme cases a prohibition notice restricting the use of your premises until improvements have been made. Failure to comply with an enforcement notice can result in prosecution.

Further information about fire risk assessment can be found on the following websites, which have downloadable documents:

For Theatres, cinemas and similar premises www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/firesafetyrisk8

For Open Air Events www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fir/firesafetyassessment

For Offices and Shops www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/firesafetyrisk2

This Grey Paper has been prepared by Ian Thompson and Tom Williams