



Property Management Periodical – Fire Safety

January 2016



Cardinus Risk Management currently looks after 15,000 developments across England, Wales and Scotland and as such we are in a unique position to report and deliver important information about Fire Safety.

With the use of our electronic risk reporting software (PACE) we are able to capture and analyse management information enabling us to provide practical and constructive advice to our clients. This information can then be used to cost effectively direct resources where they will deliver the greatest impact.

The Government releases fire statistics annually, with the most recent covering the period from April 2014 to March 2015 (reference below).

258

This was the overall number of fire fatalities in England.

63%

of all fire fatalities were in accidental dwelling fires this equates to 163 deaths.

30%

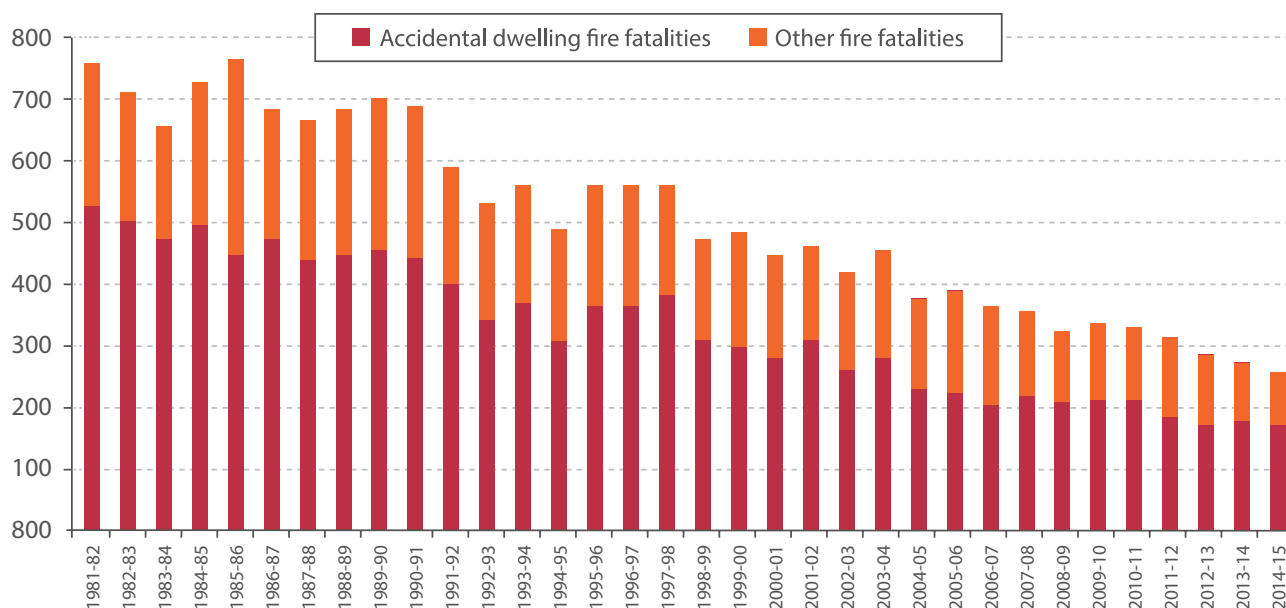
The decrease in fire fatalities from ten years ago. We should also bear in mind that the population has risen dramatically in the last 10 years.

5m

The increase in population since 2001.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 is now 10 years old. What changes have we seen during this time, and more specifically, how can we use this information to improve fire safety standards?

It can be seen from this graph that the implementation of the fire risk assessment process has had a direct impact on reducing fire fatalities.



A robust fire risk assessment, along with good fire safety management, will help to prevent fires and when they do occur ensure that everyone can escape safely.

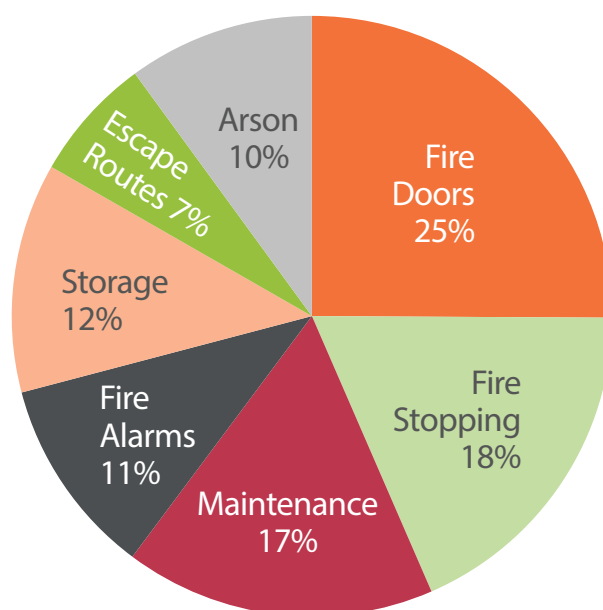


Fire Risk Findings 2015

In this section we will take a look at our significant findings from fire risk assessment across the residential property sector during 2015. The graph below shows the comparative frequency of the 6 most commonly identified hazards during assessments carried out by Cardinus.

These statistics reveal trends relating to recommendations made generally and as such are not necessarily relating to the risk of fire but more so with items that require attention.

Many properties will have recommendations made relating to more than one section and the average number of recommendations made to an individual property is five.



Fire Doors

Fire Doors are doors which have been specifically designed and manufactured to prevent the spread of fire for a specified duration of time. They are required in almost every building. Their main purpose is to protect escape routes, such as corridors and staircases, thereby allowing people time to escape safely. In most situations, a 30 minute fire door (FD30S) is acceptable unless a higher fire resistance is required which can be anywhere from 1 hour to 3 hours or more.

It is almost unheard of to visit a property and not find some issues around fire doors. Issues can be anywhere from residents replacing existing fire doors on their individual flat entrances to a simple lack of inspection and maintenance regimes.

The most common issues noted with fire doors are:

- Not closing effectively
- Poorly fitting into frames
- No intumescent strips or cold smoke seals
- Plastic letterboxes
- Cat flaps or ventilation grilles cut into doors
- Residents replacing doors
- No periodic inspection





A fire door is only effective when it forms part of the fire resisting construction of an existing wall or partition.

75% of all assessments found issues with fire doors at a property.

As soon as the integrity of a fire door is lost it becomes of little or no use as a restriction to the spread of smoke and or flame. This will directly affect the safety of people in the building.

These problems can usually be simply rectified by a planned protective maintenance program which identifies and repairs defects.

Fire Stopping

Fire stopping is a specific term used to describe fire resisting construction between floors, walls and/or compartments.

It is not unusual for our assessors to identify issues in areas which are less commonly accessed, such as services riser cupboards, under-ground car parks and plant rooms.

Worryingly it is not uncommon to come across some significant issues with relatively new buildings where the fire stopping has not been properly completed at construction stage.

The most common issues noted with fire stopping are:

- New audio visual cabling installations
- Areas around existing cables and pipe-work
- Unfinished works from construction stage
- Voids above cross corridor fire doors
- Excessive use of expanding foam

Fire stopping plays an important role in protecting the fabric of the building from the spread of fire, from one floor or compartment to another. If a fire can be contained in the room of origin then the risk to the building occupants becomes greatly decreased.



Ventilation grille in fire door



Example of good fire stopping



Example of bad/no fire stopping



55% of all assessments found issues with fire stopping at a property.

It is recommended that periodic visual inspections of these areas is carried out as there can often be damage caused by contractors installing media cabling or other such services.

Fire Alarm and Detection Systems

A sophisticated fire alarm system or indeed a simple stand alone smoke detector is designed with one purpose; to provide early warning of a fire situation to people who may be in danger.

A fire alarm system should not be confused with a fire detection system. The fire alarm system being the one that provides a warning while the fire detection system will not provide an audible warning but will operate other fire protection systems and equipment.

It is always a cause for concern when we identify incorrectly specified fire alarm systems in residential purpose built blocks of flats. It must be said that there appears to be, in general, a complete misunderstanding regarding fire alarm types and their appropriate use in certain types of properties.

The most common issues noted with fire alarm systems are:

- Incorrect specification
- Inappropriate types of detector heads
- Insufficient test and maintenance

Fire alarm systems are fundamental in giving an early warning of a fire to allow people to escape before a fire becomes fully developed.

32% of all assessments found issues with fire alarm systems at a property.

We are often in a position of recommending the removal of fire alarm systems from the common parts of residential purpose built blocks of flats. This can sometimes generate concern from residents and be a costly exercise.

The main issue here is that there has never been a requirement for fire alarm systems in these types of properties and all guidance suggests removal to prevent confusion.

Although purpose-built blocks of flats are not normally provided with communal fire alarm systems, there are exceptions. The most common example is a sheltered housing scheme, but this is a special case, and, even then, a 'stay put' policy is normal.

In some blocks there may be fire detection systems installed which will operate smoke ventilation systems, fire door closers and other fire protection equipment however these are not designed to give warning by way of bells and sirens.

Within individual flats early warning of a fire is an essential component of ensuring that residents can evacuate safely. This is usually achieved by the installation of smoke and heat detectors within the flat.



Test and Maintenance of Fire Safety Provisions

All fire safety systems and equipment need to be maintained in effective working order. It is therefore necessary to have in place arrangements for routine inspection, testing, servicing and maintenance.

The inspection and testing of some items can often be carried out by non-specialist contractors, such as cleaners or property managers, provided they are suitably competent.

A competent person can be defined as:

“A competent person is someone with enough training and experience or knowledge and other qualities to be able to implement these measures properly.”



It is important that there is access to a suitable contractor to follow up and address deficiencies identified through the testing. In particular it is important to attend site at short notice to carry out emergency repairs resulting from the tests, for example in the event that a smoke vent will not close or a fire alarm system will not reset.

The most common issues noted with testing and maintenance are:

- Emergency lighting – no monthly test
- Fire alarms – tested from panel only
- Smoke ventilation – no monthly test
- Fire doors not adequately inspected
- Poor or no record keeping

It is imperative that any fire safety equipment is maintained in good working order. This ensures that the equipment does not fail when it is needed most.



52% of all assessments found issues with tests and maintenance at a property.

We are commonly confronted with a lack of proof regarding the test and maintenance of fire safety systems and equipment within a premises. The problem arising from this is two fold, the first being that we are duty bound to make a significant finding recommendation, which can be time consuming for the responsible person having to clear the issue once it has been checked. Secondly, and more importantly, where a case goes to court if there is no recorded proof of a competent test and maintenance regime a judge will consider that it was not done at all.

Means of Escape

Obstructed escape routes are reasonably common place in blocks of flats. Although it is very unusual to find a completely blocked route, the day to day use of a building will quite often find us encountering items such as bicycles, push chairs and other resident's belongings.

How can you best address this?

It is not reasonable to expect that a person responsible for a property can at all times monitor the common part escape routes. However it is possible to make periodic checks and to inform residents of the importance of keeping these areas clear.

22% of all assessments found issues with escape routes at a property.

The extent to which formal fire safety inspections need to be carried out will vary. It depends on how successfully standards are being maintained. However, frequent inspections are likely to be necessary in blocks where there are particular concerns over anti-social behaviour and the consequent threat of arson.

Unauthorised Storage in Services Risers

Where there are services cupboards accessible from the common parts it is quite often seen by resident's as handy additional storage space.

The issue with storing items is that many of these cupboards contain electrical equipment and are designed to be kept clear of combustible items.

37% of all assessments found issues with unauthorised storage at a property

Even where the cupboards are locked, typically with a FB2 key, residents will often buy a key and utilise the cupboards as a dumping ground.

The only way to deal with the issue is to carry out periodic checks and change the locks where the problem is persistent. Property Managers can help educate residents about this important issue.



Example of stored items



Arson

This figure is for all types of properties, both commercial and residential, but it certainly indicates how important it is to be vigilant against arson.

Simply removing the hazard can be sufficient, such as locking bin stores and removing combustible materials from the exterior of a building.



44% the percentage of deliberate fires attended by the fire service.

Another important point is to note the position of any shared wheelie bins, if they are directly under a window this can lead to an external fire quickly becoming an internal fire with a threat to life.

Summary

It is pleasing to see that the current trend across the country shows a decline in fire fatalities. It must be assumed that since the introduction of the fire safety order in 2006 that people and organisations that are responsible for the management of fire safety have become used to the idea that the best approach is to be pro-active.

Despite all of the statistics it is apparent from our findings on the ground that there is still much which can be done to improve the overall fire safety of properties.

Cardinus only employ highly experienced assessors with a wide range of qualifications. It is also an important part of our ethos that we consider the cost versus benefit of any recommendations we make in your fire risk assessment.

If you are the Responsible Person (or Duty Holder in Scotland) you hold the responsibility for the adequacy of your company's fire risk assessment by law.

It is of upmost importance that your fire risk assessment company can prove competence; Cardinus has achieved certification for the BAFE SP205 Life Safety Fire Risk Assessment scheme to the NSI Gold standard. We are one of only 8 companies to achieve this prestigious award.

For more information or no obligation advice please contact us at property@cardinus.com or **call 0207 469 0200**.



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