

# Fire Safety: Don't get burned!



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A report released by London Fire and Rescue Service in February has again raised concerns about fire safety in care homes. The report stated that of 177 care homes inspected by the Service in late 2018, over half were found to have fire safety failures and 57% received a formal notification from the Service to address failings.

In light of these findings and against the backdrop of a number of high profile fires within the sector over the last two years, care home providers should take this opportunity to review their fire risk assessments and evacuation strategies to ensure that they are sufficient. In particular, the Fire Service highlighted that it often finds that fire risk assessments have not been carried out by the appropriate people and key considerations have not been included in them.

## Who should carry out the fire risk assessments?

Fire risk assessments are a legal requirement under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and must be carried out (and reviewed regularly) in premises with over 5 members of staff or residents. The responsibility for complying with this order lies in the “responsible person” who must ensure compliance with all fire safety precautions.

The report states that 45% of the care homes investigated had unsuitable or incomprehensive fire risk assessments, which had been carried out by managers who lacked basic fire safety understanding. Care home providers should ensure that they are familiar with who their “responsible person” is and ensure that they have the proper skills, training and experience for the role.

## What to consider before and after a fire risk assessment

Special consideration should be taken to ensure that all risks are evaluated and included within the risk assessment. For example, the Service found that roof voids (which have increased the severity of fires in care homes in recent years), were not being included in many assessments. With vulnerable residents under their roofs, care home providers need to consider how capacity, disabilities and mobility can also increase fire safety risks.

It was also found that there was widespread confusion about fire safety evacuation plans, with some of the homes investigated lacking the sufficient number of staff to implement them. Care home providers need to ensure that they have sufficient staff levels throughout day and night shifts, in order to properly carry out their evacuation plans. The “responsible person” should be communicating the evacuation strategy to all relevant staff members to avoid any confusion.

The “responsible person” is also responsible for implementing and maintaining appropriate fire safety measures after carrying out the fire risk assessment. Despite this, the report states that 29% of the 177 care homes investigated had inadequate or poorly maintained fire doors, in breach of safety regulations. The Service has suggested that poor training is the cause of these issues and suggest that they should be checked by Fire Risk Assessors

## Impact on ratings

CQC will also consider fire safety arrangements during its inspections, the premises and equipment, records of fire safety training and fire drills, fire risk assessments, fire safety inspection reports and it will also check whether actions have been taken to comply with any recommendations of those reports. CQC will also consider the adequacy of personal emergency evacuation plans.

Failings regularly reported by CQC include irregular fire safety checks, emergency evacuation plans not being regularly reviewed, faulty fire doors, locked or blocked fire exits, obstructed fire safety routes (e.g. equipment or other obstacles in corridors), staff fire safety training not up to date and fire detection systems which are faulty or not regularly maintained.

Failings of this nature may not only lead to potential enforcement action by the fire authority but also will impact on CQC’s rating of whether the care home is safe, effective and well led. Fire safety shortfalls will also pose a risk to residents and may result in enforcement action by CQC.

If care providers have any concerns about their legal obligations in respect of fire safety compliance in their care homes, they should seek advice from competent professionals. In the event of any failed safety audits or enforcement action they should seek legal advice at the earliest opportunity.