

Fire safety information sheet

Introduction

This information sheet is designed to give our safety representatives a basic understanding of fire safety and fire risk assessments under the current law. This information will enable you to ensure that BECTU members' are not left at risk from a lack of emergency procedures in the workplace.

Fire certificates

Under the *Fire Precautions Act 1971*, offices, shops, and factories must have a fire certificate

- If there are more than twenty people at work,
- If there are more than ten people working other than on the ground floor,
- If it is within a shared building where the total number of people at work fulfil either of the previous two criteria,
- If explosive or highly flammable materials are stored, or used in or under a factory.

A fire certificate will specify what fire precautions must be taken for the workplace concerned, including escape routes, signs, emergency lighting, alarms, fire fighting equipment, the number of persons allowed on the premises at the same time, and any requirement for training workers. Safety representatives are entitled to see a copy of the fire certificate and should ensure that the employer is meeting all of its statutory duties.

Fire risk assessments

Virtually all workplaces must now have fire risk assessments conducted, in accordance with the *Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997* (as amended in 1999) and the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999*. Employers must carry out fire risk assessments (specifically or as part of their general risk assessments)

- To identify fire hazards (combustible materials or sources of ignition, for example);
- To assess the risks of fire.
- Considering all workers and others who may be affected by a workplace fire and in particular those who might be especially at risk, and structural features which might promote the spread of fire (such as ducts and flues, openings in floors and walls).
- To check whether existing arrangements are satisfactory or need improvement (for example can a fire be detected in a reasonable time, and can all the people at risk be warned).
- To put into place measures to remove or reduce the risks identified, including adequate provision for people with disabilities or special needs who use or may be present at the premises.

The findings of the risk assessment must be recorded if more than five people are employed. The risk assessment must be reviewed whenever there is reason to suspect that it is no longer valid, or if there has been a significant change in the matters to which it relates. A significant change would include a structural alteration, a change in the route of fire escapes, or industrial action by the Fire Brigade. Employers must also

- Provide and maintain such fire precautions as are necessary to safeguard those at work, as

determined by the fire risk assessment. The fire precautions may include fire-fighting equipment, detectors, and alarms. Non-automatic fire-fighting equipment must be readily accessible, easy to use, and indicated by signs.

- Nominate and train workers to be responsible for implementing fire fighting measures and for undertaking any special roles which are required under the emergency plan for the workplace.
- Provide a suitable system of regularly servicing and maintaining fire equipment, keep emergency routes clear, and comply with specific criteria relating to routes, doors, and signs so that those in the building can get out;
- Provide information, instruction, and training to all workers about fire risks and precautions in the workplace so that they know what to do in the event of a fire.
- Consult with safety reps about the nomination of 'responsible' persons, proposals for improving fire safety, and fire risk assessments;
- Inform other employers in the same building of any significant risks they have identified which might affect the safety of their workers, and co-operate on proposals to reduce and control these risks;
- Establish a suitable and easy means of contacting the emergency services;
- Notify the fire authority before making changes to the workplace fire precautions after a risk assessment, if the workplace requires a fire certificate and the proposed change affects the terms and conditions of this certificate. Examples include extensions or structural alterations, alterations to the internal arrangement, or to the arrangement of furniture or equipment which effect the means of escape.

Safety rep action

Remember your rights to consultation under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997, and do not be afraid to use them.

- Ask to see a copy of the Fire Certificate, and the Fire Risk Assessment - have the requirements in both been met?
- Liaise with fire officers when they visit your workplace and ask for a copy of any report they produce.
- Remember to speak to the members – they often know far more about potential hazards.
- Use the attached checklist to check both the Fire Certificate and the Fire Risk Assessment, and also to carry out a workplace inspection.

Fire safety checklist

Fire Risk Assessments and Fire Certificates

- Has an assessment of fire risks been conducted?
- Have the results been acted upon?
- Does it need to be reviewed?

- Has an emergency plan been drawn up (if required)?
- Is there a fire certificate?
- Have all the conditions of this been complied with
- Have there been significant changes which should be notified to the local fire authority?
- Are safety reps consulted before changes are made to work or to the workplace?

The Workplace

- Are separate storage arrangements for flammable chemicals, gas cylinders, and waste materials available and clearly marked?
- Is combustible waste regularly and safely disposed of?
- If smoking is allowed in the workplace, are there satisfactory arrangements for cigarettes and matches to be disposed of safely and separately from other combustible rubbish?
- Are clear fire instructions displayed throughout the workplace?
- Is electrical equipment serviced regularly to prevent sparks and fires?
- Have sources of ignition (e.g. portable heaters) been replaced with safer alternatives?

Fire drills

- Are they carried out regularly and at least once per year (preferably once every 6 months)?
- Does their timing and frequency take into account staff turnover, staff working outside of normal hours, or staff in isolated parts of the workplace?
- Are non-workers included?
- Are particular arrangements necessary for the evacuation of people with disabilities?
- What went correctly and what went wrong?
- Are faults put right before the next drill?
- Does management keep records of drills and training with details of any problems found and the action taken to put them right?

Fire Alarms

- Are they checked and tested once per week by a trained person, and annually by a competent engineer?
- Are they capable of warning all workers?

- Are maintenance and servicing records kept?
- Are there other forms of fire warning, such as flashing lights for hearing-impaired staff or visitors?

Smoke Detectors

- Are they checked and tested once per week by a trained person and annually by a competent engineer?
- Are maintenance and servicing records kept?

Fire Fighting Equipment

- Are there trained staff who know how and what to use?
- Are suitable fire extinguishers provided in vehicles, and are drivers trained to use them?
- Are they checked at least monthly, removed and replaced without delay if faulty, with a full check and test by a competent engineer annually?
- Are fire extinguishers refilled after use and tested annually by a trained person?
- Are maintenance and servicing records kept?

Training for Workers

Are all workers given information, instruction, and training by a competent person on

- Fire risks and precautions to be taken to avoid fire?
- What to do if they discover a fire?
- Recognising the fire alarm and what to do when it is raised?
- Evacuation procedures, including arrangements for members of the public, and people with disabilities?
- Escape routes, fire exits, and assembly areas?

Some workers may need additional training about special risks in their workplace, for example staff in theatres working at height, using special effects, or working with hazardous substances, etc, or electrical and maintenance engineers workers designated in emergency plans to supervise evacuations and fire drills.

Fire Escape Routes

- Is emergency lighting provided and tested regularly, with a full check and test by a competent engineer annually?
- Are maintenance and servicing records kept?
- Are they clearly signed?
- Are they kept clear and are they wide enough to prevent a crush?
- Do they lead quickly and directly to a safe area (within 2-3 minutes)?

- Do they take account of elderly, young, sick, or disabled people who may be on the premises?

Fire Doors and Exits

- Are they clearly marked are they kept clear on both sides at all times?
- Do they lead quickly to a safe area - and not for example into an enclosed yard?
- Do they open in the direction of escape (must not be sliding or revolving)?
- Are they easily and quickly unlocked in the event of fire, by 'panic bars' for example (they must not be locked by a key or similar device during working hours)?
- Are they kept closed (fire-resisting doors are specially constructed and placed to hold back fire and allow time for people to escape, so they must never be left or propped open)?