Fire safety advice for businesses restarting and premises reopening as COVID-19 restriction are lifted

FAO: Business owners, persons responsible for fire safety, estates and facilities managers and their teams:

As the UK follows Government guidance in relation to relaxation of lockdown restrictions, businesses will restart and premises will reopen. It's important to plan how fire safety will be managed during the reopening process, and beyond, as fire safety systems will need to be checked and fire risk assessments and emergency procedures may need to be adapted as consequence of changes brought about by Covid-19 control measures, and associated changes to how the business needs to operate. Whilst additional control measures to protect against Covid-19 are crucial, fire safety must remain a priority.

Fire risk assessments should be reviewed to ensure they are suitable and sufficient. If in doubt, Responsible Persons (RPs) should seek advice from a competent fire risk assessor.

As a minimum, the following areas should be considered:

Fire risk assessments

As staff return to work and/or members of the public enter your premises, it will be necessary to review the fire risk assessment to ensure that it is current and reflects the way your business now operates. Small changes can have a big impact on fire safety. Consider whether changed working practices and staffing models mean that refreshed fire safety procedures and training is now required. Consider whether storage of stock and the need for one way or queuing systems might have adversely affected fire escape routes. It is essential that assessments are undertaken and reviewed where there are any significant changes to ways of working, processes or building layout.

Remember – Access to fire escape routes and the distance people can travel to reach a place of safety, are carefully regulated and vary by premises use. General guidance is available on the UK government website

Permanent changes may require building control approval.

Means of escape

Ensure that escape routes remain available and any doors and gates on the route open quickly and easily without the use of a key – remember locks and hinges may have seized up whilst not in use so all escape routes should be thoroughly checked along their full length. If you share an escape route remember that other businesses may not be open and arrangements may need to be made to ensure shared fire escape routes are fully available. If temporary barriers and queuing systems have been introduced, these must not compromise means of escape from fire.

Fire safety systems and equipment

Whilst you have been closed, have you maintained your premises fire safety systems e.g. fire alarm, fire extinguisher and emergency lighting? Ensure all weekly and monthly testing that you and your staff can undertake are in place and fully recorded in the premises fire safety log book. Ensure that any system maintenance that should be undertaken by a competent and qualified engineer are booked – particularly if such work has been postponed during lockdown. If you are in any doubt over which tests you can undertake, and what level of maintenance that should be undertaken by a competent and qualified engineer, read the appropriate guidance document for your business, seek further guidance if you are still unsure.

Emergency procedures and staff training

If staff training hasn't been undertaken for some time, you should ensure that all staff (including bank and temporary) are aware of what to do in an emergency situation – this is particularly important if procedures have changed. If staffing levels have been reduced it is important to ensure sufficient numbers of trained staff are available to undertake key roles (such as fire marshal etc).

Maintaining social distancing at the fire assembly point during an emergency evacuation or fire drill

When you review your emergency procedures consider how Covid-19 control measures, such as PPE and social distancing, can still be applied so far as reasonably practicable. In the case of assembly points can these be modified to support social distancing? In most cases sensible pre-planning will allow Covid-19 control measures to remain effective.

Preventing false fire alarms

Take care when implementing Covid-19 control measures not to make changes which might increase the likelihood of false fire alarm actuations. For example, if you are considering changing where hot drinks are made always ensure this is in a room or location which is suitable for this as steam from kettles and urns can activate fire alarms. The location of toasters and grills is even more important as not only can these be a source of false alarms but also of fires.

Fire doors
Buildings are fitted with self-closing fire doors to prevent smoke and fire from spreading from one compartment to another and to protect escape routes.

Emerging intelligence suggests some building users are wedging open self-closing fire doors as a Covid-19 control measure (intended to reduce the need to touch locks and door handles etc). Whilst this is understandable in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, it is essential that this hazard is fully balanced against the risk of uncontrolled spread of fire and smoke when a fire occurs. If you have decided to hold open fire doors the practice must be fully considered in the fire risk assessment and suitable control measures put in place to ensure fire doors will be closed when needed (particularly in buildings providing sleeping accommodation or care for the vulnerable).

LFRS strongly advises against the practice of wedging fire doors and asks responsible persons to consider other control measures.

Arson and deliberate fire risk
Due to impacts in supply chain, and other services, the amount of stock you hold and the amount of waste your business accumulates may have increased. When such accumulation is against your buildings and security fencing the potential for arson increases and so too does the extent of damage that may result from a fire.

More information
Further advice and guidance can be found on the following websites:
Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service business safety pages
UK Government website

If you would like further advice, and the opportunity to discuss fire safety in your premises in more detail with one of our business safety advisors, please get in touch by sending your name, address and contact details to BSA@lancsfirerescue.org.uk