

Independent Guide

Fire Evacuation Drills

- what do I need to know?



Independent workplace compliance

Introduction

If you are the responsible person and know that your fire evacuation drill is coming around again, it is worthwhile taking some time out to evaluate the objectives of the fire drill and why we carry out fire drills. The guidance states that fire drills should be carried out at least annually to make sure that all occupants are aware of building evacuation procedures. However, should you have staff within the building working of a night or different shift patterns, you will need to carry out more frequent fire drills to make sure that all shift patterns are covered at least annually.

1. Plan

Often your employees and customers, whether business units, tenants or both, will see a fire evacuation drill as an inconvenient interruption, therefore planning each event well in advance is very important. You may wish to give at least three months' notice and one or two gentle reminders thereafter. We don't recommend you inform employees though, as this may not provide a true reflection of their behaviour in an emergency evacuation.

For a fire evacuation drill to be as effective as possible, it is imperative that only a few people know about it in advance. How many times have you seen people with jackets on, and coffee in hand waiting in reception moments before the evacuation begins? This type of fire drill really does just waste time and is not a true picture of how all occupants can evacuate a building. Liaise with the key people who need to know about the date and collectively choose one that will be least inconvenient for the business. There is then no excuse for double booking. Once agreed, the date should be stuck to and only moved in exceptional circumstances. The chances are if the date changes more than twice the fire drill is unlikely to happen.

2. Check

Before any evacuation drill, you should take the opportunity to review your existing procedures to check they remain relevant and up to date. Review whether anything has changed, i.e. evacuation routes, risk assessment findings, number of employees etc. If necessary, update and re-issue these well in advance of the drill. It will also help with the on-going provision of information to employees and others.

3. Assess

Evacuation methods will vary depending on the type and usage of the premises you occupy, and can be:

- Single stage/Simultaneous - total building evacuation
- Horizontal - evacuation from fire affected areas to a place of relative safety within another escape route away from the fire area (only in the initial stages of the fire incident)
- Staff alarm – discreet alarm visible to staff only to allow for a controlled evacuation by staff once the evacuation signal is activated (shops, theatres cinemas etc.)
- Two staged/Double Knock – warning/alert signal given allowing investigation time by staff, followed by an evacuation signal, if necessary
- Phased - evacuation of the building in a controlled sequence

Your fire strategy and/or risk assessment should have considered the most appropriate method of evacuation.

Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) are a must. These will typically be produced for people who may need additional help or support during evacuations. Under a PEEP, arrangements are put in place to assist others, for example, those that require the use of a wheelchair or those with a visual impairment, to safely evacuate. Your fire wardens must be suitably trained in the safe evacuation of these people, and the agreed process documented within the PEEP. The responsibility for evacuation lies with the person in charge of the building in combination with the employer if different, not the fire and rescue services. This means it is your duty to make adequate provision for the safe evacuation of all.



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4. Do

The key for planning and future improvements is to consider the evacuation drill as an audit. There needs to be a method, objectives, records and reviews. The evacuation drill is not only a test of the evacuation strategy, but the effectiveness of those with special responsibilities such as the fire wardens. On the day of the drill, fingers crossed for clear skies, ensure you have support in observing the evacuation. If you have four emergency exits, have people positioned on each, checking for backlogs, overuse, under use etc.

Observe how well each area of the building reports to the chief fire warden at the final assembly point and the times each part of the building has been confirmed as "clear". Are they reporting any areas they couldn't access/check or any observed areas of smoke or fire (these can be mimicked for drill purposes)? Other considerations are:

- Have any occupants refused to leave?
- Is there any feedback from tenants/occupants?
- Are all visitors/contractors accounted for?
- How well are the employees supervised at the assembly point?
- Have there been any issues with PEEPs?

On completion of the evacuation drill you should have observed and recorded, start time, time of each floor/area confirmed as clear, lift(s) successful grounding time, overall completion time, time (in minutes, seconds) of successful evacuation and any other observations.

5. Review

Immediately after the evacuation drill you should review the performance of the evacuation with your fire wardens, security personnel, tenant representatives etc. Make comment on both positives and areas for improvement on your next drill. The areas of improvement should be implemented immediately but should also be considered in reviewing your procedure ahead of your next drill. Publicise the post evacuation report to everyone involved and keep the findings under continuous review i.e. health and safety meetings or tenants meetings. This also provides a great opportunity to thank everyone involved and remind them of the importance of their continual support.

If you need our support with your fire evacuation drills, just ask.

Key points

- Plan a convenient date at least three months in advance
- Review your existing procedure before the evacuation and update as needed.
- Try to keep the drill as realistic as possible by only planning it with those essential for its delivery.
- PEEPs should be in place for anyone needing one (employees or others)
- Consider the evacuation drill as an audit and record as much information as possible
- Feedback positives and areas for improvements to all involved

For further information visit, www.assurityconsulting.co.uk or <https://www.gov.uk/government/fire-prevention-and-rescue>

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting. Assurity Consulting is the UK's leading independent compliance consultancy specialising in workplace health, safety and environmental solutions. We have over 35 years' experience of helping customers of all sizes, from across all sectors, manage their compliance responsibilities, making sure that their organisation is compliant, their employees are safe, their processes are cost effective and their management team is in control.



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