Independent Guide
Fire Evacuation:
Assembly Points vs Dispersal Systems
– the pros and cons of each

Assurity Consulting

Independent workplace compliance

Introduction

The primary objective of an evacuation plan is to make sure that in the event of a fire, the occupants of a building can reach a 'place of ultimate safety' outside the building. This is defined as a place in which there is no immediate or future danger from fire or from the effects of a fire.

What is an Assembly Point?

An assembly point is an allocated safe area outside of a building where people are asked to gather after evacuation. This area should be clearly marked with appropriate signage and should be identified both in the fire evacuation plan and on fire evacuation notices. The fire assembly point should provide enough space for all of the building occupants to assemble and should not disrupt or obstruct roads or public right of ways. The assembly point should also be of sufficient distance to make sure that the attending fire-fighting services are not disrupted in their efforts to tackle the building fire. The benefit of using a designated assembly point is that it is easier to make sure everyone is accounted for and to communicate with staff to let them know when it is safe to re-enter the building, or to go home.

We have found that in a post-COVID world, many members of staff are not familiar with the location of the designated assembly point and instead choose to congregate near the building. Finding a suitable assembly point to provide safe refuge for buildings with large numbers of staff may not always be easy, especially in densely populated areas and cities. Instead, you may consider implementing a 'dispersal system'.

What is a Dispersal System?

With a dispersal system, occupants are told to leave the building either for a set period (20-30 minutes), or until they have been instructed that it is safe to return (via a mass communication system) when the nature of the alarm is determined. A mass communication system is especially important when having to notify occupants that the building is not safe to re-occupy and they need to go home.

Are there alternatives?

An alternative option is a hybrid of both systems, by organising building occupants into small groups, each one assembling in a different location. If you opt for this method you'll need to make sure there is a procedure in place to make sure that everyone is accounted for. Communication is key here, whereby your fire marshals are responsible for liaising with each other to check that staff have safely evacuated to the correct location.

Key points

Both methods of evacuation can be effective if implemented correctly, and your decision may even be based on your security arrangements e.g. terrorism response plan. However, the key focus should be on providing suitable training to staff, having the plans well documented, and carrying out regular drills to make sure that staff know where to go and how to check-in and let you know they have safely evacuated the building.

For further information visit, www.assurityconsulting.co.uk

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting.

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