

An effective fire safety prevention strategy

Doug Agnew, business development manager, Abbot Fire Group, provides tips and information on how to reduce the risk of fire by carrying out a care home risk assessment and taking the appropriate measures to keep residents safe from harm

A fire risk assessment should be the starting point for any fire prevention strategy within a care home. It is a legal obligation and is required as part of fire safety legislation under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order, also referred to as the RRO.

It is a requirement for all premises to have a fire risk assessment that looks at existing fire precautions, as well as other factors and how these can be adjusted to help reduce the risk of fire. For example, ensuring plug sockets are not overloaded and that fire exit doors are kept clear from obstruction.

A fire risk assessment in your care home will:

- highlight any areas that might be missing or are not covered by suitable fire precautions
- provide suggestions on how to rectify any problem areas
- ensure all areas of fire safety within your care home have been assessed by an expert.

The key to ensuring you have a thorough fire risk assessment undertaken is making sure you use a competent risk assessor; this is not just based on qualifications, experience is crucial.



Any shortfalls in your fire safety precautions that are highlighted by a fire risk assessment need to be addressed and rectified immediately. You should instruct an established company, ideally with ISO and BAFE accreditations (where relevant) to undertake this work for you. Third party approval provides an indication of processes, staff qualifications and training, and gives you peace of mind that you are using a competent person, as stipulated in the RRO, from a professional company for the work.

Fire safety signage

In order to comply with current legislation, a care home requires the correct use and placement of fire safety signage. This includes:

- fire action signs, ie instructions on what to do in the event of a fire
- fire equipment and fire extinguisher signs to show and identify fire fighting equipment
- fire exit signs to show emergency exits
- signs to show the location of fire assembly points.

All signage must be placed appropriately so that residents, staff and visitors can identify what it relates to. Ensuring all emergency exits are clearly sign posted is crucial. In the unlikely event that a care home needs to be evacuated, residents, staff and visitors need to be able to clearly follow emergency exit signs to reach a place of safety. This place of safety is usually the assembly point, which should also be clearly identifiable by signage.

Emergency lighting

In a care home, there are always people around, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is vital to be able to evacuate quickly, calmly and safely if required to do so.

There are two types of emergency lighting: maintained and non-maintained systems. Maintained systems do as the name suggests and provide lighting that remains permanently on, even in the event of a power failure. They are generally used in public areas, such as corridors or reception. Non-maintained lighting is the type of emergency exit

lighting that operates when there is a power cut, highlighting the emergency evacuation route. Emergency lighting provides illumination of the emergency exit signs and can provide guidance down corridors for safe evacuation.

If you're not sure about the best type of emergency lighting for your care home, speak to a professional who can provide advice on the design of the system and the options available to you.

Emergency lighting should be tested monthly by the designated trained person within your care home, which is likely to be your lead fire warden. Bulbs should be changed if required. The emergency lighting must also be serviced annually by a competent person, and records of this service kept. The company will check battery levels and ensure that the battery is charging correctly and units aren't faulty.

Fire safety training

All care home staff should have, at a minimum, basic fire training, which is the most common type of fire safety training undertaken by businesses. Basic fire training is designed to educate staff on how to spot fire risks and how to avoid unnecessary fires. It does this by helping widen the team's understanding of safety and identifying fire risks. It also covers what to do in the event of a fire, from raising the alarm to evacuation. Crucially, staff will also learn about the different types of fire, and the different extinguishers available for fighting these different fire types.

Practical hands on training in handling a fire extinguisher is also useful for staff, helping them feel more confident should they need to use one. Practical sessions take place outside; providing your care home has space outdoors, this training could take place at your premises.

For those designated as a fire warden or fire marshal, training is imperative. Training covers basic fire safety and also identifies the additional responsibilities that a fire warden undertakes in the event of a fire. These responsibilities will vary, but are likely to include details of the evacuation plan, and the specific responsibilities of different team members in the event of an emergency evacuation. All care homes are required to have a fire warden, although it can be useful to have a staff member with fire warden responsibilities on shift at all times.

Emergency evacuation

Ensuring you have an emergency evacuation plan in place is a crucial part of your health and safety responsibilities



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to your staff and residents. Your detailed personal emergency evacuation plan, also referred to as PEEPS, will take into account any mobility or hearing issues that your residents may have, and the difficulties you may encounter within your building when moving residents should a fire break out. As staff know residents and their needs, it is important that they are involved in developing your specific personal emergency evacuation plan procedures.

Ensuring all your staff are aware of fire risks, what to do in the event of a fire and your fire evacuation procedures, can ensure that should a fire break out, they will be well equipped to act calmly and safely. This will reassure residents and help reduce any anxiety that they may be experiencing.

Kitchen safety

It can be easy to overlook the risk of fire in a care home kitchen. With constant use and high demand to ensure food is delivered in a timely manner at meal times, kitchen appliances are regularly put through their paces.

Does your care home kitchen have sufficient fire safety measures in place? For larger care home kitchens, an automatic fire suppression system that responds within seconds should a fire break out, should be considered.

These systems provide round the clock protection, even when the kitchen isn't manned. Responding automatically to the rise in heat and temperature if a fire breaks out, a special liquid is automatically dispensed to suppress the fire, cool hot surfaces and smother flames.

Kitchen fire suppression systems, depending on the size of the care home, can often lead to a reduction in insurance premiums, not only keeping staff and residents safer, but reducing costs too.

If your care home has a smaller kitchen, fire precautions are still vitally important. They are likely to include a wet chemical fire extinguisher and fire blankets. Ensuring kitchen staff are aware of fire risks and confident in using fire extinguishers and fire blankets, will reassure staff and residents when the kitchen is in use.

Legal obligations

It is important to know what your legal obligations are when it comes to fire safety. In addition to a fire risk assessments, fire safety products also require regular servicing. This includes a weekly fire alarm check during which the sounders must be tested and recorded. It is worth letting residents and visitors know when you are undertaking a test

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so as not to cause any undue anxiety. Of course, it is also important to let them know when the test is concluded, so that if the alarm then sounds, they are aware that it is time to take action to evacuate.

Other fire safety measures include the requirement for a competent person, usually the lead fire warden, to carry out visual checks of fire safety equipment. This includes monthly visual inspections of fire extinguishers. It can be useful to conduct this visual inspection on the same day each month, for example on the first Tuesday of the month.

Fire extinguishers should also be serviced annually by a competent fire protection company; the industry standard is one that is BAFE registered. It is crucial to keep a record of visits from the fire protection company that services your fire protection equipment. A fire safety log book can be used for this purpose, and you can also record your weekly fire alarm tests and fire extinguisher visual inspections in it.

Conclusion

Care home owners and operators should keep a copy of the certificates their staff receive after completing fire safety training. It is also recommended that

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businesses keep a copy of their fire risk assessment in a safe place so they can keep track of when they last had one done and when it is time to carry out another fire risk assessment.

When it comes to fire safety, prevention is key, so ensuring you have

undertaken your legal responsibilities is crucial. In doing so, your fire risks are minimised and fire fighting equipment is available. You can then rest assured that in the unlikely event of a fire, staff know what to do, which in turn will reassure residents and their families.

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