FIRE & SAFETY
BULLETIN

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SEVEN MOST COMMON SOURCES OF FIRES IN BLOCKS OF FLATS

1. COOKING-RELATED FIRES (MOST COMMON)

- Unattended cooking
- Chip pans / frying with oil
- Items left on the hob
- Dirty or grease-filled ovens and extractor fans

2. ELECTRICAL FAULTS

- Overloaded sockets or extension leads
- Faulty or damaged appliances
- Old or poorly maintained wiring / consumer units
- Arcing in meter rooms or riser cupboards

3. SMOKING MATERIALS

- Cigarettes not fully extinguished
- Smoking in bed
- Matches/lighters falling onto soft furnishings
- Discarded cigarettes on balconies

4. ARSON / DELIBERATE FIRES

- Fires started in stairwells or corridors
- Intentional ignition of rubbish bins or bulk waste
- Deliberate fires in entrance lobbies

5. CANDLES AND OPEN FLAMES

- Candles left unattended
- Tea lights placed directly on surfaces
- Incense and oil burners
- DIY open flames (e.g., small torches, lighters)

6. LITHIUM-ION BATTERY FIRES (RAPIDLY INCREASING)

- E-bike and e-scooter batteries
- Power banks
- Cheap or counterfeit chargers
- Batteries charged in escape routes or near combustibles

7. FIRES ON BALCONIES

- Smoking materials
- BBQs
- Faulty electrical items left outside
- Storage of combustibles or fuel

INADEQUATE FIRE RISK ASSESSMENTS (FRAS) ARE COMMON

COMMON ISSUES:

- FRA outdated or superficial
- Completed by incompetent assessors
- Not reviewed regularly by the property manager or risk assessors
- No action plan or incomplete remedial work
- Failures not communicated to the Responsible Persons

HOW OFTEN SHOULD DRY RISERS BE INSPECTED?

Inspections are a legal requirement dictated by BS9990:2015 which is the British Standard that details requirements for dry riser testing and maintenance in the UK.

The 6 monthly visual check is primarily an anti-theft or anti vandalism check.

The annual water test or pressure test should be carried out to 12 bar for 15 minutes. This test ensures that there are no leeks in the system and that it is fit for use.

WHAT IS THE DUTY TO MANAGE ASBESTOS IN BUILDINGS?

The duty to manage asbestos in buildings covers:

- all non-domestic premises, like factories or shops
- 'common parts' of multi-occupancy domestic premises, like purpose-built flats

The duty to manage asbestos is part of the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012. It requires the person who has the duty (the 'dutyholder') to:

- assess if there are asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) present, the amount, where they are and their condition
- presume materials contain asbestos unless there is strong evidence that they do not
- make, and keep up to date, a record or register of the location and condition of the ACMs or presumed ACMs
- assess the risk of anyone being exposed to airborne fibres from the ACMs
- write an asbestos management plan to manage the risk, put the plan into action, monitor it and review it every 12 months or sooner if necessary
- monitor the condition of any ACMs or suspected ACMs
- provide information on the location and condition of the ACMs to anyone who may work on or disturb them, including the emergency services

The Approved Code of Practice: Managing and working with Asbestos has more information to help you comply with the duty to manage asbestos and is available on the Health & Safety Executive website www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos essentials.

You can use that website to check that you are taking the right steps and there are also examples of how asbestos risks can be managed.

HOW FLAMMABLE CLEANING CHEMICALS SHOULD BE STORED IN BLOCKS OF FLATS

In a block of flats, cleaning chemicals must be stored safely to protect residents, visitors and contractors, and to comply with fire safety and health & safety regulations. Here is how they should be stored:

KEEP QUANTITIES TO THE ABSOLUTE MINIMUM

- Only store small amounts needed for routine cleaning.
- Do not stockpile flammable liquids (e.g., alcohol-based cleaners, solvents, aerosols, decorative materials).

STORE IN A DEDICATED, SECURE, FIRE-SAFE CUPBOARD

- Use a lockable metal or fire-resistant cupboard that is:
  - Clearly labelled: “Flammable – No Smoking / No Ignition Sources”
  - Located in a non-residential area (e.g., plant room, cleaner’s store, service corridor)
- Never store flammable chemicals:
  - In escape routes
  - Under stairs
  - In riser cupboards or electrical cupboards
  - Near boilers, heaters, or ignition sources

FOUR KEY SIGNS OF A GOOD RISK ASSESSOR

Analytical Thinking

A good risk assessor can break down complex systems, identify dependencies and spot vulnerabilities. They are comfortable with data, probabilities and “what-if” scenarios.

Attention to Detail

Risks often hide in inconsistencies or overlooked factors. Good assessors catch what others miss—incorrect assumptions, unusual patterns or incomplete data.

Consistency

There is no substitution for consistency. Completing risk assessments to the same quality again and again is important.

Clear, Structured Communication

They can translate complex risk models into plain-language for decision-makers. This includes:

- concise reporting and visual risk summaries
- clear explanations of uncertainty with actionable recommendations

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FLAT FIRE – HARROW

23RD NOVEMBER 2025 – 3.23PM

Four fire engines and around 25 firefighters tackled a fire at a flat above a range of shops and offices on Station Road in Harrow. Part of a third-floor flat was damaged by fire. One man was assessed on scene for smoke inhalation.

The Brigade's Control Officers took the first of six calls to the fire at 1523 and sent crews from Harrow, Stanmore, Northolt and Southall fire stations to the scene. The fire was under control by 1606. The fire is believed to have been accidental and caused by an electrical malfunction in a desk fan.

FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

Fire extinguishers are not typically required in the common areas of blocks of flats because residents are not expected to fight fires and the priority is to evacuate safely. However, fire extinguishers are often necessary in higher-risk areas with specific fire risks, such as plant rooms, boiler rooms, laundry rooms. This should be determined by the fire risk assessment. Residents can choose to keep their own fire extinguisher and fire blanket for use inside their own flats.

COMMON FIRE ISSUES WHEN CONVERTING COMMERCIAL UNITS TO A BLOCK OF FLATS; FIRE DOORS, COMPARTMENTATION AND SIGNAGE.

FIVE WAYS TO IMPROVE FIRE SAFETY STANDARDS IN YOUR BLOCK OF FLATS….

1. COMPROMISED FIRE COMPARTMENTATION

Blocks of flats rely heavily on compartmentation: each flat should act as a fire-resistant 'box'. Major issues include:

- Gaps or breaches around service penetrations (cables, pipes, ductwork).
- Poorly maintained fire-stopping materials.
- Damaged or removed fire-rated walls/ceilings during renovations.
- Inadequate separation between communal areas and flats

2. FAULTY OR INADEQUATE FIRE DOORS

Fire doors are essential for delaying fire spread. Common problems:

- Fire doors not closing properly or fitted with incorrect hardware.
- Damaged, warped, or propped-open doors.
- Poorly installed or uncertified replacement doors.
- Missing or damaged intumescent strips/smoke seals.

3. SINGLE ESCAPE ROUTE VULNERABILITIES

Many older blocks rely on a single staircase. Risks include:

- Combustible materials stored in escape routes.
- Smoke logging of stairwells due to poor ventilation.
- Rubbish dumping or obstructions blocking exits.
- Lack of emergency lighting.

4. INADEQUATE DETECTION, ALARM, AND SUPPRESSION SYSTEMS

Issues often seen:

- Smoke alarms missing or not maintained inside flats.
- No communal fire alarm where required (depending on building design).
- Faulty emergency lighting.
- Lack of sprinklers or mist systems in high-risk or tall buildings.

5. EXTERNAL WALL AND CLADDING RISKS

Post-Grenfell, external façade risk is a major focus. Issues include:

- Combustible cladding or insulation.
- Poorly designed cavity barriers allowing vertical fire spread.
- Lack of up-to-date fire risk appraisal of external walls (FRAEW).

URGENT ACTION NEEDED
TO TACKLE LITHIUM-ION BATTERY FIRE RISKS

Lithium-ion battery fires are becoming more frequent, placing increasing operational and resource pressures on Fire and Rescue Services, who are usually the first to respond when these batteries ignite. Between January 2021 and September 2023, a search of free text inputs to the Government's Incident Recording System identified 139 fire records mentioning 'e-bike' and 124 mentioning 'e-scooter'. However, the Government has acknowledged that the quality and completeness of this data cannot be guaranteed. The National Fire Chief Council (NFCC) believes the true scale of the issue to be significantly higher.

The London Fire Brigade alone attended 179 fires involving e-bikes or e-scooters in 2023, while in 2024 the Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS) received reports of 211 such fires, nearly half of which occurred indoors. As reporting to the OPSS is voluntary, these figures are also likely to represent an underestimate.

The Product Safety and Metrology Act 2025, which recently received Royal Assent, affords the Government new powers to make enforceable safety rules for products such as e-bikes and e-scooters, including those sold online. These rules could help reduce fire risks from lithium-ion batteries.

In addition to the lithium-ion batteries issue, the NFCC is urging policymakers to recognise the wider fire safety risks posed by the full spectrum of emerging energy technologies. Ensuring fire safety means that regulatory frameworks must be flexible and responsive to keep up with the rapid pace of energy technology innovation.

While these technologies are crucial for a low-carbon future, fires involving these batteries are complex, producing toxic and potentially explosive vapours, and pose a serious risk of reignition.

BATTERY FIRES ARE ON THE RISE

Lithium-ion battery fires are on the rise across the London and the South East area, so it is more important than ever that you only buy and use safe electronic products.

FOLLOW SOME TOP TIPS:

- Buy from reputable retailers
- Ensure the product is certified by checking for a UKCA or CE symbol
- Register products online to be informed of product recalls
- Use the charger your device came with, or purchase a replacement designed for the product from the same manufacturer
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions of the batteries become damaged.

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