Fire Drills and Evacuation Planning: Getting Everyone Out Safely

Fire Safety · Published 28 September 2026 by Integral Safety Ltd · integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/fire-drills-and-evacuation-planning-getting-everyone-out-safely



Why Drills Matter More Than Paperwork

In a real fire, people do what they have practised, not what a document says they should do. Smoke, noise, alarms going off in several places at once and the general confusion of an unplanned event strip away anything that has not become habit. That is why the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 does not stop at requiring a written emergency plan. It requires the responsible person to establish procedures, appoint enough competent people to help implement them, and give staff adequate safety training when they start and when their risks change. In practice that training should include evacuation drills, not just a briefing on arrival.

A fire risk assessment tells you what could go wrong and what controls need to be in place. A drill tells you whether those controls actually work when people are moving, doors are propped, phones are ringing and someone is halfway through a delivery. Many businesses have a perfectly good plan sitting in a folder that has never been tested against real behaviour. That gap is where evacuations fail.

Who Is Responsible Under the Law

The duty sits with the responsible person, usually the employer, but it can also be the owner, occupier or managing agent of a building depending on who has control of the premises. Where several employers share a building, such as a serviced office or an industrial unit split between

tenants, the Order requires them to cooperate and coordinate on fire safety, including evacuation arrangements that work for everyone in the building, not just one tenant's staff.

Day to day, responsibility is usually delegated to a named manager or health and safety lead, supported by trained fire marshals or wardens. That delegation needs to be explicit. If nobody has been told in writing that they own the evacuation plan, review dates slip and drills get forgotten, often only noticed when a fire and rescue inspecting officer asks to see records. An independent fire risk assessment will usually pick up this kind of gap before it becomes a problem, and a periodic health and safety audit can check that ownership and review dates are actually being followed through.

Building an Evacuation Plan That Works

Your fire risk assessment should shape the plan, not the other way round. As a minimum it needs to cover:

- How a fire is raised and how the alarm sounds in every part of the building, including areas where background noise or machinery might drown it out
- Escape routes and alternative routes if the primary one is blocked, with routes kept clear and signed at all times, not just when someone remembers
- The assembly point, far enough away to be safe, out of the way of fire engines, and known to every occupant, not just staff who have worked there a long time
- Who does what: fire marshals, whoever calls 999, whoever checks the signing-in book or an electronic equivalent
- Arrangements for visitors, contractors and delivery drivers who do not know the building and may not have heard the induction briefing
- How you will account for everyone once outside, including people working from a different floor or area that day

These arrangements need reviewing whenever anything material changes: a new layout, a new tenant, a change of use, new storage that blocks a route, or simply the passage of time. A formal review once a year is a sensible minimum even if nothing obvious has changed, because small changes accumulate.

Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs)

Anyone who may need help to evacuate, whether because of a permanent disability, a temporary injury, pregnancy, or a hearing impairment that means they may not hear the alarm, should have a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan. A PEEP is agreed with the individual, not imposed on them, and sets out exactly who assists them, by what route, and using what equipment, such as an evacuation chair where stairs are involved.

A refuge point is a place to wait for assistance that is coming. It is never an instruction to wait indefinitely and hope someone remembers. Whoever is responsible for collecting a person from a refuge needs to be named, trained, and have a backup if they are off sick or away from their desk

that day. This is a common weak point in care settings and in any building with visitors who may have mobility needs. Staff may have PEEPs, but the general evacuation plan must also cope with people who were never assessed in advance, such as a visiting relative in a care home.

How Often You Need to Drill, and Why

At least once a year is the widely accepted minimum for most workplaces, and many premises benefit from running a drill every six months. You should drill more often where staff turnover is high, where you operate shifts, since night workers need their own drill on their own shift rather than being told about the day shift's results, or where the premises are higher risk, such as care settings, buildings with sleeping accommodation, or sites with complex escape routes.

New starters should walk the escape routes and learn the alarm sound as part of induction, rather than waiting months for the next scheduled drill. Where a business operates across several sites in the East Midlands, it is worth checking that each site runs its own drill rather than assuming lessons from one building apply everywhere, since layouts, occupancy and risk differ even between similar premises.

Running a Drill That Actually Teaches You Something

- **Vary the conditions.** Occasionally block a primary escape route, safely and with a marshal explaining, so people practise using the alternative rather than only ever rehearsing the easy route.
- **Time it.** Note how long full evacuation takes and track the trend over successive drills rather than treating each one in isolation.
- **Watch behaviour.** Who finished a phone call first? Who went back for a coat or laptop? Who propped a fire door open on the way out? These are the habits that need fixing through further training, not just a note in a file.
- **Test the roll call.** Accounting for everyone is where many drills quietly fail, especially with flexible working, visitors signed in on paper, and contractors who were never told where the assembly point is.
- **Debrief honestly.** Gather the marshals straight afterwards, capture what worked and what did not, and write it down with named actions and deadlines. A drill that finds problems is a success. A suspiciously perfect drill has usually just failed to look hard enough.

Fire Marshals, Records and Common Failures

Well-trained fire marshals turn a plan into an orderly evacuation: sweeping their areas, assisting those with PEEPs, closing doors behind them, and reporting to the assembly point coordinator so nobody is left searching a smoke-filled building unnecessarily. You need enough marshals to cover annual leave, sickness and every shift pattern, and their training needs refreshing periodically rather than treated as a one-off box ticked at induction.

Keep a simple but complete record for every drill: date, time, duration, who took part, what went

wrong, and what action was taken as a result, signed off by whoever owns the plan. These records matter for two reasons. They demonstrate compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 if your premises are inspected, and they are the only honest way to tell whether your evacuation arrangements are actually improving or just being repeated unchanged year after year. The most common failure we see is not a missing plan, it is a plan that was written once, never drilled properly, and never updated as the building and the people in it changed.

Integral Safety, based in Coalville, is an IOSH approved training provider and delivers Fire Awareness training, alongside independent fire risk assessments for businesses across the East Midlands. Contact us to make sure your evacuation plan works when it actually matters, not just on paper.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

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This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/fire-drills-and-evacuation-planning-getting-everyone-out-safely.