Fire Risk Assessments: What Every Business Owner in England and Wales Needs to Know

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Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, as amended by the Fire Safety Act 2021, almost every non-domestic premises in England and Wales must have a suitable and sufficient fire risk assessment in place. This covers offices, shops, warehouses, schools, care homes, churches and the communal areas of blocks of flats. It is not a paperwork exercise. It is the document that

determines whether people can get out of your building safely if a fire starts, and whether the fire is likely to spread and cause serious harm.

What a Fire Risk Assessment Actually Covers

A fire risk assessment is a systematic review of your premises to identify fire hazards, work out who could be harmed, and put in place measures to reduce that risk to a reasonable level. The Fire Safety Act 2021 clarified that the assessment must also consider the structure and external walls of a building, including cladding, and flat entrance doors in multi-occupied residential buildings, which is particularly relevant for housing associations and almshouses managing older stock.

Responsible persons in England must now record their fire risk assessment in full, whatever the size of the business; the old threshold of five employees no longer applies. We recommend that every business in Wales does the same. An undocumented assessment is very difficult to defend if something goes wrong, and it gives staff nothing concrete to work from.

Who Is the Responsible Person

The Order places duties on the "responsible person", who is usually one of the following:

- The employer, where the workplace is under their control
- The owner or landlord, for shared or common areas
- The occupier, where they have control of the premises
- Any other person with a degree of control over the premises, such as a managing agent

In shared or multi-let buildings there can be more than one responsible person. The Order requires each of them to cooperate and coordinate with the others, so fire doors, escape routes and alarm systems that cross tenancy boundaries are managed consistently rather than falling into a gap between landlord and tenant. The responsible person must also appoint one or more competent people to help them meet their fire safety duties. This is where a competent person service is often used, particularly by smaller organisations without an in-house fire safety specialist.

The Five Steps of a Fire Risk Assessment

1. Identify Fire Hazards

Look for ignition sources such as heaters, faulty electrical equipment, hot works and naked flames, fuel sources such as packaging, stored chemicals and textiles, and anything that could allow a fire to spread, including unprotected openings and poor housekeeping around escape routes.

2. Identify People at Risk

Think about everyone who could be in the building, not just during normal hours. This includes employees, contractors, visitors, lone workers and cleaners working out of hours, and anyone who might need extra help to evacuate because of a mobility, sensory or cognitive impairment. Where someone cannot self-evacuate safely, they need a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP),

agreed with them, not assumed on their behalf.

3. Evaluate, Remove and Reduce Risk

Assess how likely a fire is and how serious the consequences would be, then work through the hierarchy of control: remove or reduce fuel and ignition sources first, then rely on physical measures such as fire doors, compartmentation and suitable detection and alarm systems, and only then on management controls and training. Means of escape need to be wide enough, clearly signed, and genuinely usable, not blocked by stored stock or locked for security.

4. Record, Plan and Train

Write up your findings, produce an emergency plan that covers what staff should do on discovering a fire and on hearing the alarm, and make sure people are trained to follow it. This should include fire warden duties, use of extinguishers where relevant, and regular evacuation drills. Our Fire Awareness training course gives staff a practical grounding in hazard recognition and evacuation procedure, and is a sensible addition to any fire safety management arrangement.

5. Review and Update

A fire risk assessment is a living document, not a one-off exercise filed away and forgotten.

What Commonly Goes Wrong

In our experience carrying out fire risk assessments across the East Midlands, the same issues recur. Fire doors are wedged open for convenience and lose their protective value entirely. Escape routes are gradually colonised by stored furniture, pallets or stock.

Extinguishers are present but have not been serviced, or staff have never been shown how to use them. Assessments are carried out once, usually when a business first opens, and never revisited even after a refurbishment, a change of layout or a change in what is stored on site.

- No PEEPs for staff or residents who cannot self-evacuate
- Fire doors held open with wedges, hooks or fire extinguishers
- No record of fire drills, or drills that never actually happen
- Emergency lighting and alarm systems that are not tested or logged
- Contractors and out-of-hours workers left out of the emergency plan entirely

How Often to Review, and What Records to Keep

There is no fixed legal interval, but good practice is to review the assessment at least annually, and sooner after any of the following: a fire or near miss, significant building work or a change of layout, a change in what is stored or manufactured on site, a change in the number or needs of occupants, or enforcement action by the fire and rescue authority.

Keep the written assessment itself, a dated action plan showing who is responsible for each remedial item and when it was closed out, training and drill records, and maintenance records for

fire alarms, emergency lighting, extinguishers and fire doors. These records are what demonstrate, after the fact, that the responsible person was managing fire safety properly rather than simply holding a document.

Enforcement and the Cost of Getting It Wrong

In most premises the fire and rescue authority enforces the Order and can inspect without notice. Where they find serious failings they can issue an enforcement notice requiring improvements by a set date, an alterations notice where the premises present a serious risk, or a prohibition notice closing part or all of the premises until the risk is addressed.

Failing to comply with the Order can be a criminal offence, punishable by an unlimited fine and, in the most serious cases, imprisonment. Beyond the legal exposure, an inadequate fire risk assessment puts lives at risk, including the people you employ and the people who visit your premises every day.

Getting Help With Your Fire Risk Assessment

You can carry out a fire risk assessment yourself if you have the competence to do so, but many organisations, particularly those running care homes or other premises with vulnerable occupants, prefer an independent, competent assessment that they can rely on and evidence to insurers, regulators and commissioners. A professional fire risk assessment brings an objective eye, current knowledge of the regulations, and a clear, prioritised action plan rather than a generic checklist.

Integral Safety carries out fire risk assessments for businesses and organisations across the East Midlands, and can act as your appointed competent person for ongoing fire safety support. If your premises need specialist structural work, such as a cladding survey, you should use a qualified fire engineer or surveyor for that specific task; our assessments will tell you clearly when that is the case. Get in touch to arrange a fire risk assessment for your premises.

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-risk-assessments-what-every-business-owner-needs-to-know.