church growth trust

your experts in church properties

Fire Risk Assessments for churches and charities

A Church Growth Trust Briefing Paper (November 2022)

CONTACT DETAILS

Church Growth Trust
1 Manor Farm Barns, Baines Lane, Seaton, Oakham, Rutland, LE15 9HP
01536 201339
enquiries@churchgrowth.org.uk
www.churchgrowth.org.uk

Church Growth Trust is the operating name of Church Growth Trust Limited, a registered charity no. 1138119, and a company limited by guarantee no. 07352319, registered in England

CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction

Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which came into effect on 1 October 2006, there is a requirement on non-domestic premises to carry out a Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) and to put into place fire precautions where necessary and to the extent that these are reasonable and practical in the circumstances. Whereas in the past the local fire service would have been happy to advise on fire precautions and risk assessments, they are now the enforcing authority and the legislation places the responsibility with the person/organisation responsible for the building. A detailed paper has been produced by the Home Office for small places of worship (see Additional Information below for details).

2.0 What is a Fire Risk Assessment (FRA)?

An FRA looks at a building and assesses the risks of a fire starting, the risks to the building and, more importantly, people in the event that a fire were to start and considers the measures to reduce or eliminate the risk of fire.

3.0 Who is responsible for making sure an FRA has been done?

The responsible person is the person responsible for the building. In the case of tenanted non-domestic properties accessed by the public, the responsible person is the occupier, not the building owner or Trust.

4.0 Do I, as the responsible person, have to produce it or can I get someone else to do it for me?

The FRA should be carried out by a competent person who understands the relevant fire safety legislation and has knowledge as to how to produce fire risk assessments. You can either produce one yourself or you can employ an expert to produce one. Dependent on the size of the property, getting a suitably qualified person to do this can be at a modest cost.

5.0 What do we do with the FRA?

The FRA will usually result in your identifying fire safety measures and actions required to minimise the risk to life from fire. These need to be implemented as soon as possible.

6.0 Is this a “one off” report?

No, the FRA must be kept up to date through a regular review. CGT recommends that you review your FRA at least every six months. This is because it will keep it in the forefront of everyone’s mind and also any alterations or uses of the building that may impact on the FRA can be identified and responded to quickly.

7.0 Is there anything else we need to do?

Yes, users of buildings, whether they do so frequently or as a one-off event, need to know what they should do if there is a fire. For this reason, measures need to be put in place to ensure that this

happens, particularly if the building is hired out to third parties. The measures will be proportionate to the size of the building and the numbers of people likely to be in the building at various times. The FRA helps you to make sure you think about and address these issues. Some of the measures to be put in place include:

- Appointing fire officers from amongst the congregation or the other users of the church building.
- Making sure through signage and regular safety briefings that users know where the exits and assembly areas are and that they have identified their fire officers.

8.0 Are there things we have to do with the assembly/congregation?

Yes, for example there is a need to carry out regular fire drills. This will be at your main church meetings (usually on Sunday morning). In the event of a real fire some people will panic, people with accessibility issues will not be able to move fluently, and many people will not know what to do or where to go. Practising when there is not a fire will help people react calmly and correctly if there is a fire.

9.0 Is there a quick way of doing an FRA?

There is no shortcut document or method to an FRA. Each area of a building must be fully assessed and any mitigating measures evaluated.

10.0 Where do I start?

CGT has produced an FRA Template for those who believe they may be competent to carry out an FRA. However, it is advised that should a church feel that they do not have the in-house expertise to undertake the FRA themselves, that they should seek the services of a suitably qualified person to help. In addition, the government has produced a helpful one-page checklist which will help to establish your progress and identify action points. It can be found at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/14899/fsra-5-step-checklist.pdf

11.0 Identify any possible dangers and risks

11.1 A source of ignition:

Examples of sources of ignition are as follows:

- cooking equipment, hot ducting, flues and filters;
- smokers' material (e.g. cigarettes, matches and lighters);
- electrical, gas or oil-fired heaters (fixed or portable), room heaters;
- hot processes (e.g. welding by contractors);
- faulty or misused electrical equipment;
- light fittings and lighting equipment (e.g. halogen lamps or display lighting);
- hot surfaces and obstruction of equipment ventilation;
- central heating boilers;
- naked flames (e.g. candles or gas or liquid-fuelled open-flame equipment);

- flares, fireworks and pyrotechnics and
- arson.

Further Guidance on regular testing of electrical and gas installations, together with maintenance and testing of portable electrical equipment is given in the Church Growth Trust Briefing Paper: Electrical Tests and Gas Safety Checks for Church Buildings (April 2016).

11.2 Fuel

Examples of fuel are as follows:

- flammable liquid-based products, such as paints, varnishes, thinners and adhesives;
- flammable liquids and solvents, such as alcohol (spirits), white spirit, methylated spirit, cooking oils and disposable cigarette lighters;
- flammable chemicals, such as certain cleaning products and photocopier chemicals;
- flammable gases such as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and acetylene;
- displays and stands;
- costumes, drapes and hangings, scenery and banners;
- packaged foodstuffs;
- packaging materials, stationery, advertising material and decorations;
- plastics and rubber, such as video tapes, polyurethane foam-filled furniture, polystyrene-based display materials and rubber or foam exercise mats;
- upholstered seating, cushions, textiles, soft furnishings and clothing displays;
- litter and waste products, particularly finely divided items such as shredded paper and wood shavings, offcuts and dust accumulation near lubricated areas and
- fireworks and pyrotechnics.

11.3 Oxygen

The main source of oxygen for a fire is in the air. In an enclosed building this is provided by the ventilation system in use. This generally falls into one of two categories: natural airflow through doors, windows and other openings; or mechanical air conditioning systems and air handling systems. In many buildings there will be a combination of systems, which will be capable of introducing/ extracting air to and from the building. Additional sources of oxygen can sometimes be found in materials used or stored at premises.

12.0 Who is at Risk?

You should consider who would be specially at risk. Examples of people who may be especially at risk are as follows:

- employees who work alone and/or in isolated areas (e.g. cleaners and security staff);
- unaccompanied children;
- people who are unfamiliar with the premises (e.g. visitors and customers);
- people with disabilities, including mobility impairment, or hearing or vision impairment;
- people who may have some reason for not being able to leave the premises quickly;
- other people in the immediate vicinity of the premises.

13.0 Remove or reduce risks

You should consider what reasonable action can be taken to remove or reduce risks from fire.

13.1 Remove or reduce sources of ignition

Some examples of removing or reducing the sources of ignition are as follows:

- Wherever possible replace a potential source by a safer alternative (e.g. using an induction hob rather than a gas hob).
- Restrict and control the use of naked flames (e.g. candles).
- Ensure that sources of heat are kept away from flammable materials such as curtains, scenery and displays.
- Ensure electrical, mechanical and gas equipment is installed, used, maintained and protected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Ensure cooking and catering equipment is installed, used, maintained and protected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Take precautions to avoid arson (e.g. with security lights or an alarm).

13.2 Remove or reduce sources of fuel

Some examples of how to remove or reduce sources of fuel are as follows:

- Ensure that all upholstered furniture, curtains, drapes, other soft furnishings, display materials (including artificial and dried foliage), scenery and stands are fire-retardant, or have been treated with a proprietary fire-retardant treatment, designed to enhance their fire performance.
- Ensure flammable materials, liquids and gases are kept to a minimum and are stored properly with adequate separation distances between them.
- Remove, cover or treat large areas of highly combustible wall and ceiling linings (e.g. polystyrene or carpet tiles), to reduce the rate of flame spread across the surface.

13.3 Remove or reduce sources of oxygen

Examples of how to remove or reduce sources of oxygen are as follows:

- Closing all doors, windows and other openings not required for ventilation, particularly at times when the building is not being used.
- Not storing oxidising materials (including pyrotechnics and fireworks) near or with any heat source or flammable materials.

14.0 Provide fire precautions

Where there are still risks you should consider additional fire precautions. The minimum you should consider will include the following:

14.1 A fire detection and warning system

You must have a suitable fire-detection and warning system. This can range from a shouted warning to an electrical detection and warning system. Whatever system you have, it must be able to warn people in all circumstances. Should you wish to discuss the type of fire detection and warning system that you need to install to your premises, it is recommended that you speak with your Local Authority Building Control Department who should offer a Duty Surveyor service that will be able to assist with this query.

14.2 A way of fighting a small fire

It may be acceptable to have multi-purpose fire extinguishers with a guaranteed shelf life. As a rule of thumb, you should have one 9 litre water extinguisher for every 200 square

metres (m^2) of floor space, with at least two on each floor.

Other types of extinguisher may also be required, such as those suitable for electrical fires, together with a fire blanket for liquid fires, typically located in the church kitchen.

More detailed guidance on the types of extinguishers and the type of fires for which they are suitable is given in the government publication Fire Risk Assessments: Small and Medium Places of Assembly, details of which are given in Additional Information below.

14.3 Safe routes to leave the premises

The ideal situation is when there is more than one escape route from all parts of the premises, although this is not always possible. If only one route is available, you may need to make it fire-resisting (protected) or install an automatic fire-detection system. The distance people need to go to escape (the travel distance) should be as short as possible. The travel distance should be measured from the farthest point in a room to the door of a protected stairway or, if there is no protected stairway, to the final exit from the building.

If there is only one escape route, the travel distance should not normally be more than 18 metres. If there is more than one escape route, the travel distance should not normally be more than 45 metres. Where seating is arranged in rows, the travel distances should be reduced to 15 metres if there is only one escape route or 32 metres if there is more than one escape route.

Travel distances are the actual distance along the route which needs to be taken, including any necessary allowance for going around furniture or other obstructions. Where the internal layout of furniture etc is not known or varies for events, a straight-line distance can be measured from the furthest part of each room and this will be assumed to be only two thirds of the actual travel distance.

More detailed guidance on travel distances and escape routes is given in the Church Growth Trust Briefing Paper: Fire Exits and Escape Routes in Church Buildings (March 2016).

Stairways, corridors and areas near the fire exits should be kept clear of obstructions and material which can catch fire. The escape route should lead to a final exit and a safe place. If the stairway is not protected, the travel distance should be in line with those suggested above for single escape routes and the final exit should be easy to see and get to from the stairway at ground-floor level. High-risk rooms should not generally open directly into a fire-protected stairway.

14.4 Suitable fire exit doors

You should be able to use fire exit doors and any doors on the escape routes without a key and without any specialist knowledge. In premises used by the public or large numbers of people, you will need push (panic) bars or push pads.

More detailed guidance on fire exit doors, their ironmongery and locks is given in the Church Growth Trust Briefing Paper: Fire Exits and Escape Routes in Church Buildings (March 2016).

14.5 Other things to consider

There are a number of other matters to consider, including the following:

- Whether you need emergency lighting.
- Suitable fire exit signs in all but the smallest premises.

- Training for your staff or anyone else you may reasonably expect to help in a fire.
- A management system to make sure that you maintain your fire safety systems.

Some very small and simple premises may be able to satisfy all these steps without difficulty. However, you should still be able to show that you have carried out all the steps.

15.0 Take other protection measures

You should consider taking other measures to make sure there is protection if flammable or explosive materials are used or stored.

16.0 Produce a plan for emergencies

You should produce a plan to deal with any emergencies. The plan should outline the necessary action required and who is responsible for the action in the case of fire, including evacuation procedures. All staff or key volunteer workers, such as caretakers or administration staff should be made aware of the plan, together with group leaders of the various church activities, to ensure the responsible persons in the building are aware of the agreed action and procedure in the case of fire.

17.0 Review your findings

If you employ five or more people you have an additional responsibility to record any significant findings of the risk assessment. These should be reviewed at regular intervals of perhaps every other year.

18.0 Assistance with undertaking a fire risk assessment

Advice on how to undertake a risk assessment is given in the government publication Fire Risk Assessment: Small and Medium Places of Assembly (see details in the next section). However, this document does not just cover church premises.

Church Growth Trust have prepared a "Fire Risk Assessment Template for Churches", available as a separate document and which churches may find of assistance when carrying out a fire risk assessment. The document takes the format of a questionnaire with spaces and tick boxes to fill in responses to the questions asked. The template also includes some advisory text to accompany the questions. Completing the fire risk assessment will enable the church to identify where the situation falls short of recommendations or current standards and to prepare an action plan to reduce or remove risks to a reasonable level.

19.0 Is there any other advice CGT thinks important or helpful?

Yes.

- Ensure that there is one person appointed within the church who is the responsible person for producing and maintaining the FRA. Make sure the responsible person is well supported by the church and that from the leadership downwards there is a strong and visible commitment to act safely.
- Ensure that if hiring of the building takes place **all** users of the property are told about the fire precautions, that they acknowledge this in writing and that they commit to acting

safely. This can often be done with a hiring agreement (CGT have produced a Hiring Agreement Pack that can be purchased from the office).

- Ensure that proper funds are made available where necessary for recommended alterations and fire safety measures.

Remember that fire kills and that it is essential for everyone's safety that a Fire Risk Assessment is carried out and kept up to date.

20.0 Additional information

Fire Risk Assessment: Small and Medium Places of Assembly
ISBN 9781851128204 148 pages
Available as a free download from www.gov.uk/government/publications or
hard copy £16 from The Stationery Office
PO Box 29, Norwich NR3 1GN Tel: 0870 600 5522

Church Growth Trust Briefing Paper: Fire Exits and Escape Routes in Church Buildings (March 2016).

Church Growth Trust Briefing Paper: Electrical Tests and Gas Safety Checks for Church Buildings (April 2016).

Church Growth Trust Fire Risk Assessment Template for Churches (November 2016).

The Building Regulations: Fire Safety Approved Document B Volume 2: Buildings other than dwelling houses. ISBN: 9781859464892 170 pages
Available as a free download from www.planningportal.gov.uk