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COVID-19 contingency planning: Fire safety considerations for building re-occupation post COVID-19

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Just as we considered reviewing control measures and procedures when buildings became less occupied and, in many cases, vacant, the same is now true with remobilisation.

Most organisations appear to be adopting a phased approach to their return (i.e. empty/vacant building, to part occupied to fully occupied premises). A similar mindset is also going to be needed for your fire safety requirements. There will be:

• The core activities you need in place regardless:
• Those that returning staff will affect or be affected by; and
• Those that may to need change.

The latter will of course be influenced by "COVID-19 Secure" and these can have both direct and indirect knock on effects to your fire safety management. It is vital therefore that you make sure your processes reflect the needs of both in remaining safe and compliant. By way of example, two such areas are:

• Avoiding contact points; and
• Emergency evacuation.

Avoiding contact points

There will be a need to reduce unnecessary touch points during the re-mobilisation of offices once occupancy is re-introduced, however measures introduced should avoid propping open or removing fire doors completely. Fire doors need to be in place to reduce travel distances, reduce fire and smoke spread and maintain compartmentation within the building and office areas as per your fire strategy document.

The installation of automatic door holding devices, such as magnetic devices, which are connected to the fire alarm should be considered, however this may have a large cost incurred and therefore may not be so practical as this stage. An alternative option would be to install acoustic fire door retainers which can be attached directly to the door and operate on sound (i.e. the fire alarm activating). These could be located to areas of high traffic, and re-located as and when the occupancy changes etc. Again, these can be purchased in each stage of occupancy to stagger costs etc. Any other areas which are of lesser traffic could then have wall mounted/stand mounted antibacterial hand gel similar to that of a hospital.

Hands-free door openers/foot operated door openers are also a good low-cost solution to reducing contact points and have already been implemented at a number of commercial properties on doors such as leading to washrooms and lift lobbies.

Emergency evacuation

The GOV.UK 'Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19)' sector advice (we have used the Offices and contact centres document as our reference states:

"3.6 Accidents, security and other incidents

Objective: To prioritise safety during incidents.

In an emergency, for example, an accident, provision of first aid, fire or break-in, people do not have to comply with social distancing guidelines if it would be unsafe.

People involved in the provision of assistance to others should pay particular attention to sanitation measures immediately afterwards including washing hands."

While the process therefore remains as was previous, procedural changes as a consequence of COVID-19 Secure (such as adopting a dispersal and/or "all out") will need to be reflected. So, review your evacuation and other fire safety related procedures, to make sure they are relevant and reflect how the building is now operating. This should include:

- Reviewing documented roles and responsibilities to make sure they are accurate and achievable;

- Reviewing staffing levels for fire marshals and wardens against any changes;

- If a dispersal procedure is implemented have you considered implementing a mass emergency notification system to instruct staff when it is safe to re-occupy to the building or not;

- Communicating changes to those returning (through inductions and updates etc.); and

- Updating information for staff in procedures/posters etc.

This is a good example where there may be several review stages required as staffing levels increase;

Depending on the length of time you've been away from the office and the extent to which it was used over and after "lockdown" there are several other items you need to consider. These should include:

- Immediately check escape routes are free for use, suitably signed, including any changes required to fire action notices, with sufficient emergency lighting along all escape routes;

- Confirm all life safety equipment and firefighting equipment is fully operational and fit for purpose;

- Confirm all relevant testing and inspections needed for all life safety and firefighting equipment is compliant and up to date;

- Visually inspect all portable electrical equipment for damage before switching back on or plugging back in (this is especially important if electrical equipment was unplugged when vacating the premises);

- Recommence routine fire safety and maintenance inspections, for example the weekly audible fire alarm test, at the earliest opportunity;

- Make sure all statutory inspections for equipment, such as decommissioned lifts, are up to date before being put back in to use;

- Review your fire risk assessment at each stage of re-occupation. Not only is this a change in occupancy, but additional fire risks could be introduced as part of the mobilisation process. The bulk volumes of hand sanitiser provided in workplaces now is introducing additional fire risks in many office buildings and schools due to the majority of it being flammable. You should review the siting of the hand sanitisers, make sure they aren't located near any ignition sources, and to use floor/wall mounted stations where possible to avoid them being moved. This will also allow you to document the locations e.g. on a floor plan, which can then be provided to your local fire service in the event of a fire. Bulk volumes of flammable substances should be stored in a well ventilated and secured area i.e. within a cage which will allow for ease of access, but also prevent unauthorised entry. Hazardous materials such as flammable liquids must be stored appropriately to minimise health and safety risks and prevent the acceleration of flames in the event of a building fire.

- Confirm you have enough fire wardens or equivalents. This may mean training others to fulfil these roles in the short-term;

- Confirm all returning new fire wardens/marshals have been updated and trained as required in any new, changed or modified procedures;

- Perform evacuation drills at the varies stages, so you know everyone can safely evacuate, has had refresher training and you have evidence of these drills. This may result in more evacuations than you would typically carryout in a set time period. You may also still need to pay attention to Government guidance on gathering and operate a dispersal method, rather than the typical designated assembly point and considering the implementation of a mass emergency communication system. Other considerations maybe only for fire wardens, new members of staff, and staff who have relocated to the building and who have not previously participated in a drill in the building, should be asked to respond to the alarm as they normally would;

- Reviewing Personnel Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEP's) when these persons return to work, have 'buddy's' returned to work and consider if they will they be in the workplace at the same time; and

- Actively communicate with all staff (preferable via verbal communication) the changes to your fire procedures and the expectations you have of them when they return to the office.

This guide was produced on the 25th September 2020.