

David Sugden, Chairman of the Passive Fire Protection Federation advises those responsible for 'places of assembly' to pay particular attention to fire prevention and protection at this time of the year.

New fire laws put onus on 'responsible persons' in organisations

Many of those who operate from non-domestic premises still do not understand how to comply with The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (RRFSO) ¹ which became law on 1 October 2006. Many more are unsure whether it even applies to them.

The new legislation (which supersedes previous fire safety regulations and renders previous fire certification defunct) has been barely communicated. The private sector is only just getting to grips with it; with SMEs struggling to understand and implement this fundamental change. Some public sector organisations, especially smaller ones, may not be up-to-date with the new responsibility imposed on them.

Which buildings are affected?

Although government clearly states that all non-domestic premises; which include; hospitals, hostels, care homes, schools and council and community buildings are affected by this legislation, the public sector may not recognise its impact.

One category of premises with increased use at this time of year is 'places of assembly'. These can range from the small village hall and the local community centre to the town hall all of which host festive events. Add up all the Christmas lunches, carol concerts, nativity plays, pantomimes, New Year's Eve parties and other seasonal spectacles held in non-domestic premises and you get an idea of all the new risk assessment plans that need to be in place.

Whose job is it?

If you run an organisation, manage premises or are an appointed agent (like a facilities manager) you are now personally responsible for fire safety. The law has changed fundamentally, with greater emphasis on prevention, using a risk based approach.

¹ S.I. 2005 No. 1541.

Responsibility for compliance rests with the 'responsible person' or persons who may work as a team. The legislation even affects tents and marquees, so if you've hired extra space for upcoming festivities, those will have to be assessed too.

As in the private sector, small public sector organisations may have heard of the responsibility for fire risk assessment but may believe they are exempt from it. There has been lack of clarity over the 'five employee rule', with some believing exemption from the law for micro-organisations. In fact, those employing fewer than five are bound to carry out a risk assessment but are not obliged to have a formal written report recorded and updated regularly. Organisations employing more will have to create and maintain a fire safety document with risk assessment results and written logs of improvements to fire protection and prevention. For 'employees' also read 'volunteers' or 'committee-members'. Individuals running a village hall for example, will need to appoint a 'responsible person' for fire safety.

Hidden Safety

Fire safety in this case not only refers to active prevention and protection measures like smoke alarms and fire extinguishers, but to passive measures too. These constitute protection 'built-in' to the property at construction stage. For free advice and downloadable PDFs please see The Passive Fire Protection Federation's website www.pfpf.org.

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Editors notes: The Passive Fire Protection Federation (PFPF - www.pfpf.org) is dedicated to growing awareness and giving advice on fire protection, and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (RRO). Our members include the Chief Fire Officers Association, the Department of Communities and Local Government (previously the ODPM), the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and the Building Research Establishment. Our website carries advice on what to check and best practice in all passive fire protection measures

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