



Strategic Intention COVID-19 – Protection

19 March 2020

Interim arrangements

The information contained within this document is of a temporary nature in response to the current Covid-19 situation, to support Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in their approach to Protection activities. It is designed to assist FRS in taking a risk-based approach to all Protection activities.

This information note primarily covers activities of full-time fire safety personnel. However station based personnel are also advised to take a risk-based approach to their protection activities (including for lower risk fire safety checks, compliance checks and similar activity) in line with NFCC's advice to protect the integrity of front-line response capacity by scaling back and/or stopping this activity unless it is essential and a significant high risk exists.

These arrangements reflect the government advice and the NFCC strategic intentions. The information will remain under review as the situation and advice changes. However, as there may not be a clear distinction between the escalation phases, the NFCC will monitor the interventions from Government and may adjust this advice accordingly. This could include ceasing further protection activity unless a significant high risk exists which could lead to the loss of life.

The NFCC Building Safety Team BuildingSafetyTeam@nationalfirechiefs.org.uk can provide support to services to assist in these unique times.

COVID-19 versus fire safety

This is an unprecedented time and there is a need for services to have a balanced approach to fire safety on a case by case basis, where buildings are re-purposed for health and social care or other reasons associated with the emergency.

Some buildings, such as hotels, may already have relative levels of fire protection in-built (such as alarm management systems and multiple stairs). Whilst clearly any make-shift arrangements will not meet the same level of fire safety as purpose built hospitals, we encourage FRS to consider the broader level of medical risk to the public and take a practical approach to enabling health partners to respond to the emerging situation as they need to, whilst aiming for as safe a level of fire safety as is practicable. Some existing buildings may be more suitable than others.

Prohibition or Restriction notices (Article 31)

Where dangerous conditions exist and/or a serious risk to life in event of fire is identified, or information is received indicating this is the case (see below), due to the seriousness of the situation the FRS should respond as usual and as best it is able in the circumstances.

Complaints or information received about risks to relevant persons from fire.

Any information received should be robustly challenged and filtered by a suitably competent Protection Officer to ascertain whether it meets the criteria for a response considering the current situation. If attendance is deemed necessary then normal procedures should be followed, and in all circumstances the information and any peer review recorded.

Buildings with temporary change to a simultaneous evacuation strategy

These will generally include purpose-built blocks of flats but may include other premises where a similar temporary measure has been implemented. These buildings pose a specific temporary risk and should, where possible, continue to be regularly contacted/visited to ensure the fire risk is mitigated in accordance with the temporary measures.

It is important to assess the need to maintain targeted auditing and 72d activities towards higher risk premises, and particularly buildings with temporary simultaneous evacuation strategies in place. The FRS should determine, based on a risk assessment and their wider business continuity plan, whether the contact or visit is carried out by fire station staff or inspecting officers. FRS should consider carrying out pre-visit screening calls (as per the advice below) to ascertain if there is any increased risk for older or vulnerable residents.

Where, due to COVID-19, waking watch (and other) staff are not at the required level, the fire safety risk needs to be balanced against the broader health and social impact to the residents due to the wider emergency. The NFCC guide "*Guidance to support a temporary change to a simultaneous evacuation strategy in purpose-built block of flats*" is available here:

https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/NFCC%20Guidance%20publicatio ns/Protection/01052018NFCC_simultaneous_Evacuation_guidance_final_doc.pdf

NFCC is developing some further specific guidance for those premises with a temporary waking watch in place, which we will share through protection colleagues and NFCC in due course.

Existing enforcement work

Prosecution investigations and statutory notice follow ups should continue subject to a risk-based approach and the general advice in this note.

Risk Based Inspection Programmed Work

It is recommended FRSs adopt a risk-based approach to planned Protection activity, including restricting their access to premises where there may be potential risk to the occupancy (see below).

Protection staff are asked to avoid visiting healthcare premises including hospitals, care and nursing homes, and any other similar premises where vulnerable people reside, without express permission (a specific request) from the business/homeowner, unless information of a potential fire risk has been received. This is due to the vulnerability of occupants and requests from healthcare providers that we do not attend unless deemed risk critical.

The risk-based approach should also be considered for premises with the potential for a large number of people being placed at risk in the event of fire such as transport hubs, shopping centres, hotels and places of assembly. The risk-based approach should also consider the current situation of many premises being closed or operating with a significantly reduced occupancy and level of associated risk.

FRSs should consider carrying out pre-visit screening calls to ascertain:

- Any risk to staff or the public from COVID-19.
- Whether the organisation is following government advice, and whether the current situation and risk assessment for the organisation permits an appointment to be arranged.
- Any potential fire risks.
- Give reassurance and advice to business owners and relevant people.

Based on the information collected, Protection departments should determine whether a visit is necessary, or whether a desk-based audit is sufficient in the circumstances. Where planned inspection activity is cancelled, the opportunity should be taken to provide advice to the premises' occupier/owner and state that their fire risk assessment and emergency procedures should be reviewed and updated accordingly.

Where appointments do not take place, or where any audit deviates from your normal process, we recommend FRS keep careful records of any decisions made, with the reasons why, and consider if there is a need to follow up within a reasonable period.

Statutory Consultations

This activity should continue but be subject to services' advice around staff travelling with alternative ways of working/engaging/communicating explored. Inspecting officers should engage with their statutory partners to consider how this will operate in their own areas.

Other enforcement activities

Some FRSs are the enforcing agencies for other legislation such as petroleum, explosives and sub surface railways etc., the above advice is also relevant to these activities.