



COVID-19 – Simultaneous Evacuation Addendum

25 March 2020

Waking watches and COVID-19

Building owners, managers, or responsible persons with any doubt about the suitability of a waking watch should please immediately contact the local Fire and Rescue Service (FRS).

This advice is applicable only to the use of waking watches in buildings where a stay put strategy has been temporarily suspended, and the situation has changed due to the current COVID-19 situation. Due to the ever-evolving situation it should be acknowledged this advice is under continuous review.

It is the responsibility under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (FSO) of the Responsible Person (RP) to ensure the provision of the waking watch is maintained until fire safety issues are fully remediated. Where the need for a waking watch has been identified, these will be essential for maintaining the viability of the premises for continued residential occupation. The need to implement and maintain a waking watch is one which RPs need to do in order to safeguard residents due to specific fire safety issues with the building.

The coronavirus situation may result in potentially higher rates of occupancy and vulnerability, due to people staying home, some potentially unwell, for an extended period of time. Ensuring their safety is paramount. Firefighters are typically called to a larger number of domestic fires during times where there is traditionally an increase in cooking – in the evenings and weekends. With increased numbers of people at home during the day, there is potential for more fires as people adapt their daily routines. Common causes of fires in the home such as [cooking](#), [smoking](#), [electrical items](#) and [heating sources](#) could become even more prevalent as people are spending more time indoors.

If due to the coronavirus there are challenges maintaining waking watch coverage, those responsible will need to implement suitable alternative interim arrangements. Dependency on numbers of staff can be reduced through the installation of a Common Fire Alarm.

Competent Persons, RPs and Fire Safety Officers should familiarise themselves with the social distancing guidance from Public Health England, to ascertain how this might be applied to enable waking watches to remain in place.

This is an unprecedented time and there is a need for fire services to have a balanced approach to fire safety on a case by case basis. We encourage FRS to make all reasonable efforts to support RPs, recognising the potentially higher risk to public health arising from the threat of coronavirus. However, FRSs have a positive duty to enforce the FSO. FRS should not to step into the role of the Competent Person and are encouraged to keep careful records of any audits and discussions related to waking watches.

In the first instance

- This guidance should be read in conjunction with NFCC's "Guidance to support a temporary change to a simultaneous evacuation strategy in purpose-built block of flats": https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/NFCC%20Guidance%20publications/Protection/01052018NFCC_simultaneous_Evacuation_guidance_final_doc.pdf
- Where one is not yet in place, RPs should install a Common Fire Alarm as per Appendix 2 in guidance above.
- Every effort should be made to maintain the waking watch at any premises in accordance with the above guidance.
- The National Fire Chiefs Council consider that personnel providing waking watch functions should be considered key workers as they are providing key public services and critical safety functions in order to keep homes safe. Please refer to the Government's guidance which expressly states that If workers think they fall within the critical categories above they should confirm with their employer that, based on their business continuity arrangements, their specific role is necessary for the continuation of this essential public service:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>.
- To be proactive, any premises with a waking watch should review their fire risk assessment and be in regular communication with the waking watch and residents.
- Responsible persons, where possible, should be considering the resilience of their waking watch.
- Every premises will be different and the assessment and impact of a reduction in the waking watch on each premises will differ. There may be alternative ways of achieving a similar outcome, albeit on a further temporary basis, and considering the current situation.
- Those utilising a waking watch should ensure personnel have received the Government guidance on social distancing and that there are adequate facilities available to ensure that both social distancing and hand washing routines can be undertaken.
- All waking watch staff should follow advice at:
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

Difficulties maintaining waking watches

Where difficulties are encountered in following the guidance above then there may be alternative options for maintaining provision, for an interim period, which will need regular review.

Responsible persons should:

- Make all efforts to maintain waking watch provision in their buildings.

- Consider contingency plans and where necessary review Fire Risk Assessments to consider necessary fire safety provisions to be taken in the event of staff illness.
- Consider the resilience of existing arrangements, liaising with third party contractors where necessary.
- Advise FRSs of any changes to waking watch provision so FRS may review their pre-determined attendance arrangement to fires and other operational response and consider allocation and location of resources.
- Consider the use of local partnerships, alternative providers, or other volunteers to provide or supplement the waking watch.
- Undertake initial and then potentially future engagement with your local fire service Fire Safety Inspecting Officers to provide advice.
- Where appropriate and balanced against the risk from the coronavirus, consider the feasibility of re-locating vulnerable residents to a place of greater safety, inside or outside of the building, to reduce the risk.
- Increase the information provided to residents about the evacuation strategy, and communicate regularly with residents to inform them of the fire safety arrangements and ensure they are keeping safe from fire, i.e. test smoke alarms regularly.
- Provide additional information on what to do in event of a fire - call 999 at once and get out (being prepared to get out e.g. dressing gowns/clothes/shoes immediately available) knock on neighbours' doors on way out (the provision of additional manual means to raise the alarm e.g. Air Horns on every level, whistles etc.).
- Provide pre-prepared information on what to tell 999 operators, as per current guide.

The above advice must be considered alongside Government issued COVID-19 advice and availability of FRS during this time.