



COVID-19 Simultaneous Evacuation Guidance

(This guidance includes advice on Waking Watch and Evacuation Management)

29th January 2021 – Issue 4

Simultaneous Evacuation Measures and COVID-19

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

This advice note¹ is applicable only to the use of waking watches in buildings where a stay put strategy has been temporarily suspended and that premises is affected by restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. The government brought into force national lockdown measures on 05/01/21 and has also provided advice and guidance regarding COVID-19 which can be accessed via the GOV.UK [website](#). These restrictions currently consist of a national lockdown across the UK as well as the use of COVID Alert Levels as defined by HM Government. It should be read in conjunction with the 'Simultaneous Evacuation Guidance' (SEG) Third Edition which was issued on 01/10/20 and can be viewed [HERE](#). This advice is reviewed on a regular basis.

The Simultaneous Evacuation Guidance Third Edition, draws a distinction between waking watch personnel and those responsible for evacuation management. Where a waking watch is present there will be an additional need for a person to fulfil the duties outlined for evacuation management. There may also be a need for evacuation management in premise where a common fire alarm is installed (this need should be identified in the premises' fire risk assessment). For the purposes of this guidance, all references to waking watch include the need to make the same considerations for evacuation management personnel.

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 for as long as it is required to provide an adequate level of detection and warning of fire.

There may be higher rates of occupancy and vulnerability, in premises due to:

- working from home
- higher levels of unemployment
- self-isolation and those ill with COVID-19

¹ *The purpose of this non-statutory guidance is to provide fire and rescue services with general advice to assist with a consistent, standardised approach across all services. The guidance does not constitute legal advice. Fire and rescue services' legal duties will remain those specified by law, in particular article 26 of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, during the COVID-19 pandemic, but if any fire and rescue services consider that difficulties arise in relation to compliance with those duties, they should take legal advice.*

- restrictions related to the current national lockdown or, when applicable, COVID Alert Level.

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 are [cooking](#), [smoking](#), [electrical items](#) and [heating sources](#).

Where there are challenges maintaining waking watch coverage, due to COVID-19, those responsible will need to implement suitable alternative interim arrangements. For example, the installation of a Common Fire Alarm can remove the dependency on a waking watch (although there may still be a need for evacuation management on site).

Competent Persons, RPs and Fire Safety Officers should familiarise themselves with the prevailing Government advice on working with the relevant premises types and ascertain how this will be applied to enable waking watches to remain in place.

There is a need for FRS to have a balanced approach to fire safety on a case-by-case basis. We encourage FRSs to make all reasonable efforts to support RPs, recognising the potentially higher risk to public health arising from the threat of coronavirus. Specific guidance on undertaking a range of Protection activities while under restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be found [here](#).

FRSs have a duty to enforce the FSO. FRSs should not step into the role of the Competent Person by accepting responsibility or risk beyond their legislative requirements. Fire Safety Inspecting Officers are encouraged to keep careful records of any audits, discussions and decisions related to waking watches that are impacted by COVID-19.

In the first instance

- This guidance should be read in conjunction with NFCC's 'Simultaneous Evacuation Guidance' (SEG) Third Edition which was issued on 1/10/20 and can be viewed [HERE](#). This advice is reviewed on a regular basis.
- Where one is not yet in place, RPs should install a Common Fire Alarm as per Appendix 2 of the above SEG guidance.
- To be proactive, any premises with a waking watch should review their fire risk assessment and be in regular communication with those undertaking the waking watch and residents.
- Responsible persons, should have plans in place to maintain the resilience of their waking watch against COVID-19 infection, test and trace isolation and restrictions placed upon them by the national lockdown or, when applicable, local COVID Alert Level.
- 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, the use of PPE 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 provided at the following website: <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. Changes to the waking watch provision should only occur after risk assessment and the local FRS have been notified for additional guidance.

Responsible persons should:

- Make all efforts to maintain waking watch provision in their buildings while this is the most appropriate method of detecting fire and raising the alarm.
- 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, isolation through test and trace or Government measures in place to reduce the spread of COVID.
- Consider the resilience of existing arrangements, liaising with third party contractors where necessary. They should ensure that those contractors have suitable measures in place that will not result in the loss of waking watch.
- Advise FRSs of any changes to waking watch provision so FRS may review their predetermined attendance arrangement to fires and other operational response and consider allocation and location of resources. In addition, they will also be able to determine levels of fire safety compliance and take action where necessary.
- Consider the use of local partnerships, alternative providers, or other volunteers to provide or supplement the waking watch. Such approaches must ensure that those taking part are competent to do so as per the principal guidance including Appendix 4.
- Where appropriate and balanced against the risk from COVID-19, consider the feasibility of re-locating vulnerable residents to a place of greater safety, inside or outside of the building, to reduce the risk.
- Ensure residents are fully informed about the evacuation strategy. Regular communications with residents to inform them of the fire safety arrangements and ensure they are keeping safe from fire, i.e. test smoke alarms regularly, is essential.
- Provide 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), knocking on neighbours' doors on way out. The role of Evacuation Management should already have been provided for by the Responsible Person.

- While reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission is important at all times, the risks present from COVID-19 are secondary to safely evacuating the building in the event of fire. Once in a place of safety away from the building, appropriate social distancing can take place.

The above advice must be considered alongside Government issued COVID-19 advice relevant to the prevailing COVID Alert Level or national lockdown measures (where applicable).