

Fire Safety in Churches

A Guide for PCC Members

Fire Safety Legislation

A church engulfed in flames is a very sad and tragic sight, besides the serious risk to life in and around the building. A serious fire results not only in the loss of physical historical buildings and interiors, often of national importance, but also in the loss of the spiritual focus of the community. People feel strongly about these special buildings even if they are not active members of the worshipping congregation. Country churches, especially, are the embodiment of rural life and rural pride.

The loss of such a building can be devastating as it is a repository for the collective sacred memories of a local community where people have worshipped, been baptised and married, often over many generations; a historical place of burial.

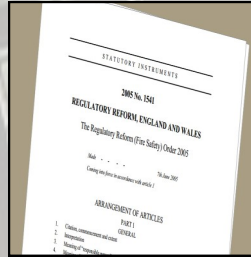
Shocking statistics show that every year, there are over 2,000 fires in churches and chapels in England and Wales, costing many millions of pounds in repairs and an incalculable cost in lost heritage. Most of these fires are thankfully discovered early and put out before they develop further. Some, however, are serious and destructive; a few are catastrophic. Fire totally destroys about 20 churches every year - history lost forever. In every one of those churches, the PCC believed they had their fire safety covered. It could never happen to them!

Fire safety legislation has applied to

churches, chapels and other places of worship and public assembly since The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 ("FSO") came into effect in

England and Wales in 2006, followed soon after by similar legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Even if you have no employees, if your congregation is small or if you have only one or a few services a year, you must still comply with the requirements of the FSO. It is enforced by the Fire and Rescue Authority and failure to comply can result in criminal prosecution for individuals and the penalties can include fines and even imprisonment for the most serious failings.

The primary aims of the legislation are to prevent fires, protect the life of anyone in, or near your premises who could be affected by a fire on the premises and to control or limit the spread of fire. The FSO imposes a duty on a "Responsible Person", someone who has control of the premises, to ensure that sufficient preventative and protective measures are in place. In a church or place of worship the Responsible Person is not usually an individual but the "Body Corporate", that is the PCC, or Board of Trustees.



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No hazard can threaten your church as totally, rapidly and destructively as fire. In addition to the serious risk to life, a fire is capable of fully consuming and destroying a building, its contents and historic fabric in a matter of hours. Areas not engulfed by flames are seriously damaged by smoke or by the volumes of water used in the fire fighting operation.

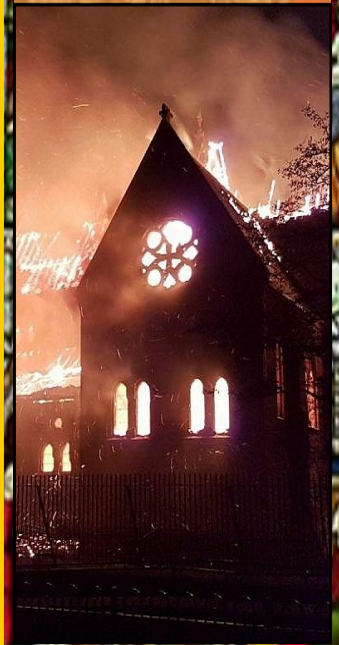
Fire Risk Assessment

The extent, or lack, of suitable fire precautions is determined by a process called Fire Risk Assessment. It is an organised, methodical look at the premises, the activities and likelihood that a fire could occur. It helps to determine the dangers and precautions needed to protect people and prop-

erty. Every church or place of worship is different and every congregation has different needs. What works well in one church might not work in another. That is why a fire risk assessment cannot be generic and must always be unique for your church building. The precautions to be put in place need to

be determined and tailored individually.

Having a comprehensive fire risk assessment conducted on your church is not only mandatory in law, it is also expected by your fire insurance company, in the same way a valid MOT is a requirement for motor insurance.



Who Can do a Fire Risk Assessment?

The FSO also applies to heritage churches, and the protection of historic buildings from fire is often even more technically complex. Buildings of cultural heritage are from another age, built under different rules and with few or no standards of fire safety. We often use them in different ways than they were used in the time of their construction and modern equipment has been installed in many of them so they can be used for different purposes, all of which increases the risk of fire and the potential for its spread and a higher risk to life. The level of fire protection in your church needs to be high, but without destroying the historical value. Balancing those priorities makes the fire risk assessment a complicated process.

So, who can undertake this fire risk assessment? The FSO says that anyone can do it as long as they are a "Competent Person" – someone with sufficient training



and experience or knowledge and other qualities to enable them properly to undertake the preventive and protective measures. Fire safety is a specialist discipline and the risk assessment must not be a simple "tick-box" exercise. In all but the smallest and most straightforward premises, it is unlikely that a person "in-house" will have detailed and expert fire safety training and knowledge or experience to deal with a building as complex as a heritage church. Even ex-fire-

fighters, with 30 years experience in the Fire & Rescue Service, may not possess the sufficient knowledge and skills, unless they received extensive and specific training in a specialist fire safety department during their career. In the aftermath of a fire in an historic church it is often discovered that it was the actions, or inactions, of the guardians of the building that caused the fire to start, or that allowed the fire to spread. In other words, the fire risk assessment was not *suitable and sufficient*. How would you feel if that was your church?

Managing your Fire Safety

Fire prevention and fire risk management must be your priority as the guardian of an historic church. Remember that a fire risk assessment is not an optional extra, it is **mandatory** in law. Not only are you responsible for the protection and safety of your congregation and visitors, you are also the protectors of a building that has national cultural importance and is the historic spiritual focus of your community. It is likely to be the oldest building in the village or town and is your responsibility to protect it for future gen-

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erations. That is a **lot** of responsibility ... but you don't have to do this alone!

Help is at hand if you employ the services of an expert heritage fire safety management company to assist you in

achieving fire safety compliance and protection of your special and unique building. You need someone who understands and is passionate about churches, chapels and historic buildings.

These unique buildings demand a skilful and knowledgeable fire risk assessment applied in a sympathetic, holistic and balanced manner, with full regard for the historic fabric and spiritual ambience of your building and interior.

Arson in Churches

Many believe that the greatest risk of fire in a church is from arson, but most fires in churches in the UK are actually caused by accidental reasons, and could therefore have been preventable if properly risk assessed beforehand. Most accidental fires are caused by electrical faults, contractor carelessness, candles and even lightning.

However, arson is still a worrying reality in churches, and a fire caused by arson usually results in significantly more damage than an accidental fire,

taking on average three years to rebuild.

You might feel helpless and believe that arson cannot be prevented, and it is true that it is almost impossible to entirely avoid. Nonetheless, the risk of arson can be appreciably reduced if a thorough and detailed arson assessment is undertaken as part of your fire risk assessment. Therefore, you should ensure that any fire risk assessment includes a full and compre-

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hensive arson risk assessment, specifically for church and heritage buildings, that will guide you in how to manage the fire security of your building to protect you from this devastating crime.

During Building Works

Your church is at particular risk of fire during repairs or restoration works. Many major fires in churches and heritage buildings have happened at this time. Every change to your building or its use, even external works, can affect your fire safety strategy and protection and it will need continual monitoring, appraisal and recording. You need fire safety advice at every milestone of your project, preferably right from the very beginning whilst you are still in the planning stages.

It is important to have a complete consultancy package to strategically project-manage the fire safety of your building for the full duration of your

works. Your fire safety measures need to be periodically reviewed and your fire risk assessment updated at every significant stage. Ongoing liaison with architects, contractors, Building Control, Planning, Conservation and Fire Authority Officers and fire safety equipment suppliers are necessary. Your fire safety consultant needs to be with you every step of the way.



Picture by: Altitude Scaffolding.

Change of Use

The National Churches Trust encourages diversification in the use of church and chapel buildings as venues for the arts, leisure, social and other community activities, including hosting facilities such as a library, Citizens Advice Bureau, community shop, farmers market or post office.

In line with this trend, in November 2017 the "Crossing the Threshold Toolkit" was launched jointly by the Diocese of Hereford and the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance, supported by the Allchurches Trust. It provides help and guidance to



any group taking a community development approach towards adapting a church building for wider community use, while balancing the needs of existing worshippers.

If you are planning to expand or vary the use of your place of worship, even if major building works are not required, this will still be considered as a "significant change" under the FSO and can have a substantial effect on the fire safety in your building. These changes MUST be considered in your fire risk assessment and may require additional fire safety equipment to be compliant.

What Heritage & Ecclesiastical Fire Protection Provides

With every Fire Risk Assessment, we provide:

- Most importantly—**Compliance, Life Safety & Heritage Protection.**
- A comprehensive, individually tailored assessment of fire safety for your building to an enhanced standard that will reflect the unique nature of your special property.
- A comprehensive and unique arson risk assessment for your building.
- Applied expert knowledge of heritage and ecclesiastical buildings.
- A full report in plain English, detailing any actions you need to take in order to attain the legally required standards of fire safety.
- Pragmatic solutions to fire safety issues, with full consideration for the historical and spiritual character your building and interior.
- Ongoing fire safety consultancy and advice.
- ... and much more ...





We are proud to be members of the National Churches Trust Professional Trades Directory



Specialist fire safety management company **Heritage and Ecclesiastical Fire Protection** has the necessary knowledge, experience and expertise that you need to adequately protect life and property from fire in your historic building and to ensure full compliance with fire safety law and insurance requirements.

Our MD, Keith, is a fire safety professional with over 14 years experience of assessing and enforcing Fire Safety Regulations in all types of buildings, and with 10 years of expert knowledge and experience dealing with the fire safety requirements of historical listed and ecclesiastical buildings. With a passion for historical buildings, he was formerly the Heritage and Church Building Fire Safety Advisor for the Fire Authority and has worked closely with the National Trust and English Heritage and many PCCs and has been commended for his pragmatic and sympathetic ethos towards fire safety in heritage and church buildings. He also holds the NVQ Award in Heritage Construction.

Heritage & Ecclesiastical Fire Protection - Our Three Principles:

PREVENTING FIRE

The ideal situation is to prevent a fire in the first place and it is the obvious first stage of physically assessing the risk of a fire within any building. We pay great attention in our fire risk assessments to identify potential ignition sources and combustible materials and seek solutions to reduce the risks of a fire starting accidentally or deliberately. Our fire risk assessments always include a comprehensive arson risk assessment.

PROTECTING LIFE

Safeguarding the occupants is the most important part of our fire risk assessments. It is the first and foremost aspect of any fire safety management strategy. We will always ensure that, regardless of the age or physical constraints of a building, life-safety will be the number one priority and we will advise you on any aspects of your building that fall



short of full compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

PRESERVING HERITAGE

Preserving Heritage buildings and protecting them from fire is about finding ways to prevent fires starting but if one does happen, knowing about it quickly and limiting its spread. Pragmatic solutions to fire safety issues and careful selection of fire protection equipment, when required, is our philosophy when fire risk assessing an historic building and interior. Our thorough and robust fire safety strategies are individually tailored to your buildings to ensure that they have the very best fire protection with the minimum visual impact and without causing irreversible damage to the historic fabric.

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