University of Glasgow

Safety & Environmental Protection Services Guidance Note

As Safe As Houses

This leaflet is for YOU to read about YOUR safety and the safety of others who live near you. It is about fire and the tragic consequences of getting some simple things wrong. Please take a few minutes to look at this advice.

Deaths and injuries from fires

Each year more than 800 people die and thousands are injured in fires. These tragedies occur mostly in housing, usually when people are asleep. Although the record of Universities is good, all the elements are there in our residences to cause a serious fire unless you play your part and take sufficient care. A fire with fatal consequences could be started or made worse by your own actions.
An undetected fire can grow quickly and spread over a wide area. If this happens when people are asleep, the fire can trap and kill them unless all the fire safety precautions are in place and working.

But surely we don't have fires here do we?

Sadly, the answer is 'Yes'. Over the last 10 years there have been 4 serious fires in the University which have all done a great deal of damage. Every year there are fires in residences. Fortunately, nobody has been seriously hurt, but we all have to learn from these experiences - next time we may not be so lucky.

What causes fires?

Fires start in Residences mainly because of the following reasons:-

- faulty electrical equipment;
- carelessly discarded cigarettes;
- overheated cooking fat and similar heating and cooking activities;
- candle flames and other naked flames.

A common feature tends to be that the person responsible had just left the room before the fire started. This is invariably the case in chip pan fires: the time at which they start to overheat is easy to detect by anyone present in the kitchen.

- After a late night out a hungry reveler leaves a pan of fat to heat while he goes to chat with friends along the corridor. When he returns the kitchen is ablaze;
- When the long awaited taxi arrives, a cigarette is hastily stubbed out and thrown into a waste bin. Later the smell of smoke alerts another resident who sensibly sounds the Alarm. The Fire Brigade put out the fire, but the room is destroyed with all the student's clothes, notes and books;

- A candle, lit to give a bedroom atmosphere for a quiet summer evening indoors, is left burning while the owner goes to make coffee. A gust of wind from the open window topples it on to papers on the desk. When the owner returns, the room is well alight.

Because our experience over the years of these scenarios shows such a repeatable pattern, we must reluctantly prohibit the use of candles in study-bedroom. The University is sorry to have to do this, but we do have obligations to learn from the evidence of our experience and to take appropriate action.

How do fires spread?

All fires start as small ones, but just how dangerous they become depends on how rapidly they grow before there are detected. Some fires can spread very quickly indeed and in some cases can overtake people trying to escape to safety along a corridor. Remember, it is not the flame of the fire which usually kills - it is the highly toxic smoke which comes from the combustion of modern synthetic materials.

Fires cannot spread unless they have a good supply of combustible material. There are just the sorts of materials which you will undoubtedly have all around you in your study bedroom. It is for this reason that you must not cover too much wall area with loosely attached posters. Not only can they catch fire readily, if the area is large the flame will spread very quickly. Also, it is dangerous to cover a light fitting with paper or cloth - if the natural ventilation is impaired parts of light fittings can get hot enough to set fire to the material. Especially dangerous are soft furnishings which are filled with foam which does not meet the relevant flame retardancy standards. Even before legislation on this came into effect the University had begun a programme of replacement of this type of furniture in residences. You must not import your own upholstered furniture which may contravene this legislation. It can take as little as three minutes for this kind of fire to produce a vast amount of heat, and lethal fumes which can kill in a matter of seconds in a small room.

So am I not a risk from a fire in someone else's room?

All accommodation owned and managed by the University is open to inspection by the relevant statutory authorities. Each residence has a variety of fire precautions in place to minimise the spread of fire to comply with the requirements applied to specific buildings. The main objective is to ensure that there is enough time of safe evacuation and for the Fire Brigade to reach the building, assess the situation and call for further resources if necessary. This ensures that spread of fire is limited as far as possible and it is therefore important to ensure that fire doors and room doors are kept closed as a matter of routine.

But what if a fire starts and is undetected until it does break through the door?

Most of our residences have automatic fire detection systems which will sound the alarm sirens and call the fire brigade automatically. A series of smoke and heat detectors respond when conditions consistent with an outbreak of fire are detected.

In corridors there are smoke detectors which react to smoke before the human senses can detect it. These fully automatic systems will sound the alarm in good time to wake you if you are asleep and enable you to escape before the fire becomes too dangerous.

What about the buildings where there is only one means of escape?

Means of Escape are normally protected by self closing doors which can resist the effects of fire for 30 minutes - BUT this protection will not be effective if the self-closing doors are wedged open or if the hallway or stairway have combustible materials stored in them. And if there are bicycles chained to the stair rails, there is a risk that people hurrying to escape through smoke might trip on them and fall.

I am pleased we have good fire detection systems but what can be done about all these false alarms?

False alarms are more than a nuisance to us at the University, especially when they happen at exam times when a disturbed night can have a critical effect on performance. They cost the Fire Brigade a great deal in time and resources. Every fire engine on its way to a false alarm cannot attend a genuine emergency elsewhere.

Whilst we know that some false alarms are unavoidable, we also know that most of them need not have occurred. More often than not, the cause is cooking fumes (typically from burnt toast) which have invaded the corridor through an open kitchen door. The University has worked very diligently with the Fire Brigade in trying to reduce false alarms, and we are confident that false alarms can be kept under control if YOU cooperate by keeping fire doors closed and by constantly watching food being toasted, grilled or fried. The University will not shrink from its responsibilities in dealing with anyone who misuses any fire safety equipment or compromises the safety of others and their property through improper conduct.

But why should I have to leave my room when I know it is likely to be a false alarm? If I knew it was a real fire I would leave soon enough.

OK, your personal experience tells that it is probably another false alarm, but you can't be certain, can you?

It all comes down to the speed with which fires can grow. There have been numerous multiple tragedies caused by fires in which the evidence was there, but ignored by the people present because they thought it would be alright to wait until they could see the danger themselves. Ever heard of the fires are Bradford football stadium?..... King's Cross underground station?..... the Stardust Disco? In these fires hundreds of people died needlessly and many more were injured for life because they failed to respond to the first warnings soon enough.

Every year people get killed in fires in their own homes and in hotels throughout the land. No student has yet died in a fire at a British University. Make sure you are not the first, or the cause of the first fatality.

Help yourself and the people who live near you by following these basic actions:

- Know where the nearest fire alarm call point and the nearest fire extinguisher are located
- Do not leave heating fat unattended
- Where smoking is permitted, make sure cigarettes are properly extinguished in a safe manner
- Keep fire doors closed
- Have any suspect personal electrical equipment checked by an expert.