



Fires in Communal Areas

Information for External Partners

Protect – Commercial or Policy
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1 Introduction

This document has been prepared by the LFB Fire Safety Regulation Department; to show how relatively small fires in communal areas can rapidly develop, put the residents in danger, cause significant damage and result in a major cost to the housing provider/insurer. In London this year, there have been around 20 fires in communal areas per month.

These fires can kill. In a recent tragic fire in Wales, a family of five died in a fire caused by an arsonist who set fire to a pushchair which was left in a communal area (a shared hallway). The family became trapped in their flat and neighbours made desperate attempts to rescue the family, but were driven back by the fire's intensity and heat.

The economic cost of fire can be hard to appreciate. Table 11 in the DCLG report (3/2011 – The economic cost of fire, estimates for 2008) cites the average cost of fire in a domestic dwelling as £48,092 in London. When the potential costs of mass displacement, re-housing and repairs are factored in, this figure could prove to be a conservative estimate.

2 Summary of incidents discussed

Over recent years, the Fire Investigation Team has attended a range of incidents where stored items such as prams or discarded/unwanted items such as household furnishings or rubbish etc. have been involved in fire.

The cause of these fires has often been arson and even serial arson. In one recent case, the serial arsonist was 'at work' for over four years in different blocks in a borough (which highlights the need for effective partnership working). The fires are made worse due to the materials being burnt, as there are often plastics and synthetic materials which create high volumes of poisonous and acrid smoke.

3 Taking steps to prevent this problem

It is recognised that the storage of items in communal areas (particularly prams etc.) is a problem that can be hard to police and resolve. However, this document is put forward to generate discussion and to motivate work to mitigate the risk.

As many communal areas are used for escape purposes in case of fire, these should be free from combustible materials and obstructions. This would ensure limited ignition sources and sources of fuel. The fire safety in purpose-built blocks of flats guide, Part E expands on these issues. It recommends either a managed or zero tolerance approach to storage in these areas because of the risk to persons with regard to being able to escape and the risk of fire in common areas and the subsequent risk of death or injury from fire.

This approach is also appropriate to any shared accommodation, including flats, sheltered accommodation, houses of multiple occupation (HMOs), Bedsits etc., which have previously been converted from a house or other type of use.

4 Case study examples

4.1 Example 1 – Small buggy set alight in an entrance lobby of a modern low rise block of flats.

The image to the right shows a small buggy which was set alight in a very modern entrance area to a low rise block. There was apparently very little additional fuel loading e.g. no toys and extra blankets.

The damage to the ceiling, plaster work, décor and electrics in the area would have resulted in a significant repair cost. It was lucky that no one came out of their flats during the fire, as there would have been significant amounts of toxic smoke and hot fire gases.



In another recent incident, a baby buggy was set alight on the ground floor of a common stairway area. Smoke spread up the stairway cutting off the single staircase escape from the upper floors.

The occupants were advised to stay in their flats until the fire was extinguished, but 21 persons needed to be assisted to the ground floor by the Brigade. Two people escaped from the upper floor before arrival of the Brigade suffering from smoke inhalation and needed medical attention in hospital.

There was a history of problems relating to leaving the buggy on the ground floor, as the owner had difficulties carrying it up to top floor flat.

4.2 Example 2 – Small cupboard in internal hallway in a high rise block of flats. Domestic items belonging to one of the residents were stored in it.



The three images on this page relate to a fire which occurred in a common lobby shared by 4 flats on the second floor of a high rise block. The seat of the fire was within a small cupboard (approximately 30-50cm wide) used to house services such as drainage and telephone cables. The cupboard had been filled with old clothes and electrical items (*example image left*).

One door to the lobby had been wedged open leading to the stairwell becoming heavily smoke logged.

Several occupants of flats on the upper floors called the brigade concerned that they were trapped and received fire survival guidance from Brigade control.



The image to the left shows the cupboard with some fire debris removed. There was not a huge amount of material involved, considering the extensive smoke damage, as seen in the image below.

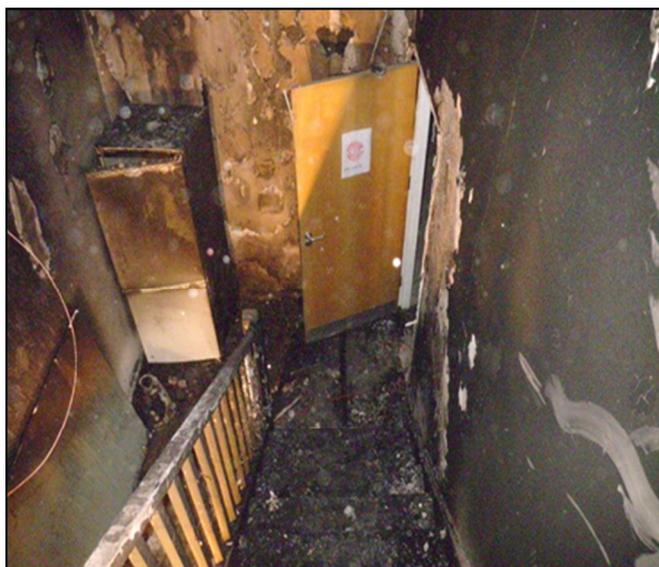
The fire was extinguished by breathing apparatus crews using a single main jet. The fire was confined to the area of origin with the remainder of the lobby and corridor being damaged by heat and smoke.

In this case, there was significant life risk, but luckily there were no casualties.



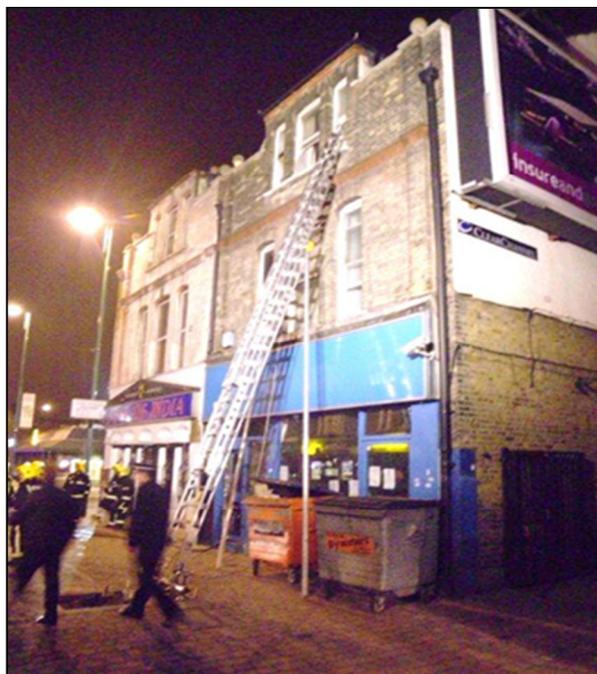
4.3 Example 3 – Papers & stored goods in a mixed use semi-detached building of three floors.

In this next example, the fire occurred in a interlinked semi- detached building of three floors, circa 1900s. The ground floor was used as offices, with the adjoining property's ground floor being used as a restaurant. The two properties were connected at ground and first floor levels. The upper floors were used as a house of multiple occupation (HMO). The building was undergoing a refurbishment. It is believed that there were nine people living in the building.



The fire started in the hallway on the ground floor offices at the base of the internal staircase to the flats (as shown in image to the left) and damaged approximately 50% of the ground floor. The remainder of the ground floor was damaged by heat and smoke, with the rest of the building damaged by smoke. The fire was attended by four fire engines.

There were seven people in the building at the time of the fire. All were unable to escape from the building. Two were rescued from a first floor window by a road contractor, who put the bucket of his JCB up to the window prior to the arrival of the Brigade. The other five were rescued from a second floor window by the Brigade with a ladder (as seen in image to the right, with Brigade ladder in situ). All seven were removed to hospital by the London Ambulance Service, suffering from smoke inhalation. All seven occupants had to be rehoused. The cause of the fire was believed to be deliberate.



4.4 Example 4 – Mattress and chair in lobby area of high rise block of 10 floors.

This fire occurred in the 6th floor communal area of a residential block of 10 floors. The deliberate fire involved two separate areas of fire, a mattress in the lift lobby and an upholstered chair in the adjacent stairwell within the same fire fighting shaft. There was very little lateral smoke spread, however there was considerable smoke damage to the stairway between the 6th floor and the 10th (top) floor. Six fire engines and a turntable ladder attended.

A 30 year old female and a 4 year old child were trapped in a flat at 6th floor level and received fire survival guidance. Both were rescued by a Breathing Apparatus crew and subsequently examined at the scene by the London Ambulance Service and treated for smoke inhalation.



Image above: View of communal area with the remains of the mattress in foreground. Note damage to ceiling and walls, doors and wall panels.

Image below: View from other side of doors. Note extensive damage to ceiling, walls, doors and wall panels. Light fitting and electrical wiring indicated by red arrow also damaged by fire.



4.5 Example 5 – Papers on a small sofa which was left in a ground floor communal area of a low rise block of flats.

Two fire engines attended this fire in the communal hallway of flats in a low rise residential building. Occupants were unable to escape due to the location of the fire and smoke spread within the building.

The fire is believed to be caused by the careless disposal of smoking materials into paper (envelopes magazines and cardboard) which were on top of an abandoned two seat sofa in the communal area of the ground floor stairwell (image below), the sofa was only partially damaged, however:

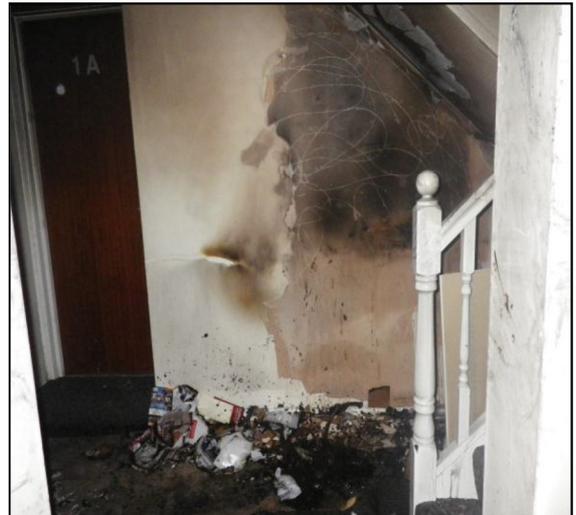


- A one year old child needed to be rescued from a 2nd floor window using a ladder.
- Two children and one adult female were rescued from a first floor window using a short extension ladder.
- Two adult males and one adult female were rescued from the ground floor by crews wearing breathing apparatus.
- One adult male and one adult female were rescued from internal staircase by crews wearing breathing apparatus.
- One adult male and one adult female were rescued by crews wearing breathing apparatus from the first floor and led to safety via the internal staircase.

- Two children and one adult were removed to hospital suffering from the effects of smoke inhalation

Crews wearing breathing apparatus extinguished the fire using main and hose reel jets. 25% of the communal stairwell from ground to second floor was damaged by fire.

The image (to right) shows the area of origin where the sofa was. Note that the structural damage was not particularly severe in this case, but the smoke travel resulted in the rescues and injuries detailed above.



4.6 Example 6 – Motor scooter (similar fuel loading to mobility scooter) left in ground floor entrance lobby of low rise block of flats.

The following example involved a small motor scooter in a communal area. What is notable is the extensive damage not only from smoke, but also from the heat. There was apparently relatively little petrol in the scooter; the majority of the fuel loading was from the plastic body panelling.



View of front communal entrance



View going in through the communal entrance. Note light fittings have melted



Clear burn pattern behind the scooter, Note rear tyre is still intact



Stairwell opposite the scooter. Note; spalled plaster from the stairwell has fallen onto the stairs



Image to left: View upstairs showing extensive heat and smoke damage.

5 What am I required to do as a Landlord or Resident

5.1 What am I required to do as a Landlord?

The management of common parts and escape routes is essential to ensure occupants can escape safely from the premises in the event of a fire.

The Regulatory Reform (fire safety) Order places a responsibility on the person in control of a premises, known as the “Responsible Person” to:

- Carry out a fire risk assessment which must focus on the safety in case of fire of all persons lawfully on the premises.
- Consider persons at special risk, such as disabled people and children.

The fire risk assessment must consider the means of escape in event of fire. These means of escape must be:

- Kept clear of combustibles and obstructions.
- Be checked on a regular basis to ensure this is the case.

These actions will reduce the potential for accidental fires to start and it also significantly reduces the threat of deliberate fires.

Where necessary it may be required to enforce covenants or tenants agreements.

5.2 What am I required to do as a resident?

Your actions should not hinder the landlord in fulfilling their requirements under the Fire Safety Order to maintain and manage the means of escape and keep common areas free from combustibles and obstructions.

It is essential that escape routes are kept completely clear of items of furniture, prams, buggies, rubbish, clothes drying facilities, bicycles etc.

Nothing should be allowed to accumulate in the escape route that would hinder the safe evacuation of residents and visitors in the event of a fire.

Prior to any items being stored in the escape routes, agreement should be sought through the landlord and the fire risk assessment reviewed to assess suitability. Not doing so could result in lease and/or tenancy being enforced up to and including the agreement being revoked by the courts.

Notes: