

FEATURE

Fire safety and heritage buildings

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Under the requirements of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order a suitable and sufficient fire risk assessment (FRA) is required for all premises other than private dwellings. For historic buildings it is of paramount importance that a well structured and properly implemented fire safety management plan accompanies the FRA.

In fact it is recognised in Approved Document B (ADB) that the most appropriate means of ensuring life safety in an historic building with respect to fire, is to take into account a range of fire safety features and set these against an assessment of the hazard and risk peculiar to the particular case.

The essential components of a FRA and fire safety plan for a historic building can be broken down into four steps: preparation, prevention, protection and management. There is no standardised format for recording or presenting the findings of a risk assessment or safety plan, but in every case the goal should be to produce clear and comprehensive documentation that is regularly reviewed.

Preparation - Before undertaking a FRA it is necessary to obtain accurate plans of the building, as this will not only save time and effort in the long run, but can also be useful when preparing business continuity plans, inventories of artefacts, cleaning regimes and security assessments.

Ultimately it will be the building plans, with relevant and up-to-date information on hazards, fire fighting equipment and salvage strategies, which will form the basis of how the fire and rescue service will respond in the event of a fire.

Prevention - Preventing a fire in the first place is the obvious ideal situation and is the first stage of physically assessing the risk of fire within any building. By identifying ignition sources and flammable materials and either removing them or introducing alternative methods of storage, the fire risk will be greatly reduced.

Identifying measures to reduce the risk of fire in historic buildings makes eminent sense, as remedial measures can be put in place almost immediately. They will be relatively inexpensive and involve minimum intervention in the fabric of the building.

Protection – Once the risk of fire has been mitigated as far as practicable, protective measures need to be introduced to safeguard occupants, the property and important artefacts in the event of fire.

Although the guidance in ADB can be unduly restrictive for historic buildings, the philosophy behind the five sections (B1 – B5) of Part B of the Building Regulations comprehensively covers all aspects of fire protection within a building. Therefore, by dealing with each of the requirements in turn, and introducing practical solutions suited to the building and its contents, a holistic fire safety strategy can be developed to ensure a safer environment for occupants, reduce the risk of fire and minimise the impact of fire should one occur.

Protective measures are often controversial because they can be disruptive to the original fabric of the building, and the physical installation of the systems can sometimes be difficult in a heritage building.

It is possible, however, to take suitable protective measures that are sympathetic to the historic fabric of the building, but which can also be designed for individual premises. It is highly recommended that a third party-approved company with a proven track record of installations in historic buildings is chosen for this.

The importance of liaising with the local fire and rescue service regarding access and facilities cannot be overstated and an agreed 'planned response' should be developed. If access to the building is restricted it may necessitate attendance by a different type of tender vehicle or a vehicle with specialist equipment.

Site plans with access points and other important information also need to be supplied to the fire and rescue service to maximise efficiency on site when dealing with an emergency.

Essentially, the quicker and more effectively the fire and rescue service can respond to a fire, the greater the chances of saving the building and its contents.

Management - Once the FRA has been completed and suitable protective measures are in place, a robust management system in the form of a fire safety management plan must be drawn up.

Artefact salvage plans need to be considered for historic buildings and for this it is vital to meet with the local fire and rescue service to devise appropriate emergency procedures. The fire and rescue services have been asked to consider artefact salvage through their Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMP's) and will obviously need to know priority items, location and which members of staff form the salvage team and any training that they may have had.

Safeguarding our heritage from the ravages of fire should be considered as conservation of our historical record for future generations. Provided that there is co-operation between all persons with a vested interest (e.g. building owners, the fire and rescue service, fire safety consultants, historians, architects, staff and visitors), historic buildings and the treasures within will be preserved and enjoyed for many years to come.

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