Guidance on Fire Refuge Areas

1. Introduction

This Safety Note explains the general principles that underpin the provision and use of "Fire Refuge Areas" as part of the fire evacuation procedures in University buildings. Although Refuge Areas are designed primarily for wheelchair users, everyone should be aware of the needs of other disabled people who may require assistance during an emergency evacuation e.g. people with reduced mobility, visual or hearing impairment. The University of Reading has a policy of accepting and accommodating persons with all levels of disability. This places a responsibility upon management within Residential Halls and Academic Buildings to ensure that emergency procedures take account of the needs of disabled people and provide adequate levels of safety.

2. What are Fire Refuge Areas?

Refuge areas are selected areas located within a building that have been assessed as "safe waiting areas" in which persons with a disability can remain during an emergency evacuation. The assessment is normally made by the University Fire Safety Adviser in existing buildings, or Building Control for new and refurbished buildings.

Refuge areas are identified with this symbol. Doors leading to the refuge enclosure are identified by the "Wheelchair" pictogram coloured white on a green background. These signs are normally located adjacent to the standard "Fire Exit" signs incorporating a directional arrow. The refuge area is denoted by the "Wheelchair" pictogram sign that incorporates the words "Refuge Area" this is again coloured white on a green background.

3. Location of Fire Refuge Areas

Normally the refuge is located within or adjacent to a protected enclosure that will offer a minimum of 30 minutes fire and smoke resistance. This takes account of the fact that the Emergency Services (Fire Brigade) will be in attendance and dealing with the emergency within 5 -10 minutes.

The site of the refuge area is usually within a protected staircase enclosure adjacent to lifts. Under no circumstances are lifts to be used for evacuation purposes as the lift shaft may be quickly affected by smoke from an adjacent fire. In addition power supplies to the lift may be interrupted and existing University lifts are not provided with secondary power supplies.

NB From June 2006 onwards, new and refurbished buildings may be provided with emergency evacuation lifts that will be suitable for use in an emergency, for the evacuation...
of disabled people ONLY. These will be clearly identified and their use will be included in the fire evacuation routine for the building.

Refuge areas are only sited in locations where there is adequate space and where a wheelchair or stationary individual will not impede the means of escape of other persons during an emergency evacuation. In some circumstances the wheelchair user may need to wait in a designated approach lobby or corridor until the majority of building occupants have vacated the area. The wheelchair user may then move to the refuge area located within the staircase enclosure. Where this situation applies then accommodation in the designated lobby or corridor still offers an acceptable level of fire protection.

Emergency services will be made aware of the location of the refuge areas by the building Evacuation Officer and their search patterns for the premises will initially concentrate on those areas. It is therefore essential that the Evacuation Officers obtain accurate information about the presence of any persons who may be located in a refuge.

4. Procedures for the evacuation of disabled people

An evacuation plan for disabled people (staff, students and visitors) will normally be based around use of a refuge area and evacuation from there, if necessary, by the emergency services. In the event of a fire the emergency services will normally assess the situation and take control of the evacuation.

4.1. Fire routine for disabled staff and students

A plan of action for a member of staff or student with a disability, should be completed at the earliest opportunity when the disabled person joins the University (see Safety Note 28 on Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPS)). This plan will take account of the type of chair in use, life support systems, normal place of work (or residence), availability of staff working in the immediate area, and type of assistance required by the disabled person. It is important to consult with the disabled person and explain the purpose of the refuge areas and the evacuation procedure. The Fire Wardens and any other nominated individuals identified in the plan must be made aware of the plan and their role within it.

Operation of a "buddy" type system will ensure a colleague or fellow student with a working knowledge of the disabled person’s needs, is immediately on hand. You should provide advance warning of a fire drill – this will ensure the disabled person becomes practised in the fire routine and is fully involved in the procedures.

As a general rule, in the event of an emergency evacuation the disabled person and a “buddy” or other responsible person should go to the refuge area and remain there. Floor/Section Wardens are responsible for checking refuge areas as they evacuate the building (see Safety Note 39). Occupants of refuge areas should notify the Floor/Section Warden of their location and instruct them to notify the Evacuation Officer at the Assembly Point. It is essential that a message is relayed to the Assembly Point and that the disabled person is not left by themselves. It is helpful if the disabled person or their buddy has a mobile phone with which they can keep in contact with the University Security Control room (Tel. 0118 378 6300).

4.2. Fire routine for disabled visitors

As a general rule all buildings should have a booking in system for visitors to the premises. This ensures a good level of security and fire safety provision. A disabled visitor should be met by
the person with whom they have an appointment, or a nominated deputy. In the event of an emergency evacuation, the building occupant or deputy should escort the visitor to the refuge area and remain with them. The routine is otherwise the same as for disabled staff and visitors i.e. remain in the refuge, ensure a message is relayed to the Evacuation Officer at the Assembly Point, if possible use a mobile phone to keep in contact with the University Security Control room (Tel. 0118 378 6300).

4.3. Evacuation from the Fire Refuge Area

The refuge areas have been selected as a place of relative safety in which a disabled person can wait until the situation is assessed. It may not be necessary for a disabled person and anyone accompanying them to be evacuated from the refuge area (e.g. if it is a false alarm, or the incident does not present any risk to persons in the refuge area). The emergency services will assess the situation and if they consider it necessary to evacuate the area they will arrange for a disabled person to be carried from the premises. Some wheelchair users will have life support or essential equipment linked directly between themselves and the chair. This can usually be removed for short time periods then re-connected.

This does not prevent the Evacuation Officer or Fire Warden from deciding to move the disabled person from the building in the event of a developing emergency. In this situation, able bodied volunteers with manual or casualty handling experience should be called upon. It will require a minimum of 2 people to re-enter the staircase enclosure and physically carry the disabled person from the premises. It is emphasised this is an emergency last resort. Anyone performing this task must be instructed to remain within the protected fire enclosure at all times.

If staff require training in casualty handling, please consult Health & Safety Services.

4.4. Assistance

Access audits have been completed on our premises and improvements have been made to facilitate access for disabled people. If any difficulties are experienced in accessing or exiting a building or in formulating an emergency evacuation plan, please contact the Fire Safety Adviser in Health and Safety Services or the Disabilities Office, who will provide assistance.

4.5. Emerging issues

The responsibility for the evacuation of all persons from a building rests with the employer i.e. the University. Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service has indicated that they are prepared to assist with the evacuation of disabled persons from a building during an emergency evacuation. This situation may change and the University may need to consider its own in-house managed solution. Schools and Directorates will be informed if current arrangements, as set out in this Safety Note, need to be enhanced.

Health and Safety Services
November 2006

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