



Safety Note 20

Guidance on Disabled Evacuation Procedures and Fire Refuge Areas

Introduction

The responsibility for the evacuation of people from a building rests with the employer i.e. the University. This Safety Note explains the general principles that underpin the procedures for the evacuation of disabled people from University of Reading buildings, including the use of "Fire Refuge Areas".

The University of Reading has a policy of accepting and accommodating persons with all levels of disability, including mobility, physical or cognitive impairments.

Evacuation Arrangements

If a person is unable to evacuate out of a building, or they may be slow to do so, due to a physical or mental disability, there are a number of systems available in different university buildings to assist with evacuation. These include:

- Fire refuge areas
- Evacuation lifts
- Evacuation chairs
- Use of stairs
- 'Horizontal' evacuation i.e. to another part of the building which is protected from fire and which is accessible to a mobility impaired person ie does not involve using stairs.

These can be used separately or in combination to evacuate to a place of safety.

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 (see below) and onwards evacuation from there, if necessary, by the building evacuation team.

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 assistance required by the disabled person, type of wheel chair in use, life support systems, normal place of work (or residence), and the availability of staff working in the immediate area.

Where a disabled person requires assistance to evacuate, as a general rule they and a “buddy” or other responsible person should go to a fire refuge area and remain there. Fire Wardens should check refuge areas as they ‘sweep’ the building and evacuate (see Safety Note 39). Occupants of refuge areas should tell the Fire Warden that they need assistance and instruct them to notify the Evacuation Officer at the Assembly Point. In the absence of a Fire Warden, any other responsible person should be asked to relay a message to the Assembly Point. The refuge Emergency Voice Communications equipment can be used by the disabled person or buddy to keep in contact with the University Security Control room (Tel. 0118 378 6300 if using a mobile telephone). The disabled person should not be left by themselves.

Thereafter, the evacuation procedure from the refuge to an ultimate place of safety will depend on the capacity of the disabled person, the availability of trained assistance, and the evacuation systems and equipment available in the building.

Fire Refuge Areas

What is a Fire Refuge Area?

A refuge is a location where people who need assistance to evacuate, or who may need to delay their evacuation until other building occupants have preceded them, can wait for assistance.

Whilst awaiting this assistance, they need to be protected so that they are reasonably safe from the effects of a fire. University fire refuges are therefore protected for a period of time, to enable the evacuation to be completed without placing the person(s) needing assistance, or those providing assistance, at unacceptable risk.

Although Refuge Areas are designed primarily for wheelchair users, they may also be used by other disabled people who may require assistance during an emergency evacuation e.g. people with reduced mobility, visual or hearing impairment, or mental impairment.

Refuges should only ever be considered as temporary waiting areas. Refuges should not be used as a place to leave disabled people to await rescue by the fire service. Other systems should be used to evacuate, as described later.

Location of Fire Refuge Areas

Normally the refuge is located within a fire protected staircase or a protected enclosure that will offer a minimum of 30 minutes fire and smoke resistance. A protected enclosure may be a fire protected corridor or in some cases a section of the building that is divided with fire resisting construction such as can be found in the Whiteknights House and URS Buildings.

How do I recognise a Refuge?

Doors leading to the refuge enclosure are identified by a green and white "Wheelchair" pictogram. These signs are normally located next to the standard "Fire Exit" signs incorporating a directional arrow. The refuge area itself is signed with the green and white "Wheelchair" pictogram and the words "Refuge Point". Alternatively a wheel chair sign may be incorporated into a 'FIRE EXIT' sign See examples below.



Refuge communications

University refuges are equipped with an emergency two way voice communication (EVC) system to enable occupants of a refuge to alert other people that they need assistance, and for them to be reassured that this help will be forthcoming.

Typically the voice communication systems in use are the 'Complus' system for refuges without an evacuation lift next the refuge, and the 'Windcrest' system where evacuation lifts are installed. Both systems are linked to a 'master control point' within the building and to the University Security Control Room. Examples are shown below.



Windcrest



Complus

It is essential that there is good communication between those organising the evacuation of the building and all refuges. The persons controlling the evacuation need to ascertain in respect of each and every refuge:

- a) How many people require evacuation assistance
- b) The nature of any impairment that might affect their ability to evacuate
- c) The refuge or refuges in which they are located.

In addition, the people in each refuge should be reassured that their presence there is known to the building management. They should be kept informed of progress towards helping them to evacuate.

The Evacuation Officer should then decide the most appropriate technique for evacuation – see Safety Note 28 on PEEPS for further guidance on the options available.

Use of passenger lifts for fire evacuation

As a general rule a passenger lift should not be used for fire evacuation purposes owing to the risk of power failure and being affected by fire or smoke. However **specially protected evacuation lifts** can be used for the evacuation of disabled people only. These lifts are operated under the direction and control of the building evacuation officer or security officer. The buildings currently fitted with an evacuation lift are:

- Hopkins
- Minghella
- Henley Business School
- ICMA Extension
- Enterprise Centre
- Mackinder Hall of Residence
- Stenton Hall of Residence
- L016 London Road
- L022 London Road
- L029 London Road
- L033 London Road

An evacuation lift, where provided, should always be available for evacuation purposes. Wherever practicable it needs to be a lift used routinely as a passenger lift and not one used solely for evacuation or occasionally as a lift for transporting goods.

Evacuation by using stairways

Many disabled people are able to descend (or ascend) a stairway, possibly with assistance. Others might need to transfer to an evacuation chair (see **Safety Note 60 Use of Evacuation Chairs**). The method of evacuation should be discussed with the individuals concerned and, where possible, incorporated into their Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) (see **Safety Note 28 Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans**).

People with sight or cognitive impairments will probably be able to walk up and down stairs but may need direction and assistance – see **Safety Note 28** which gives further guidance on techniques for particular categories of impairment.

Fire routine for disabled visitors

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 host 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. The refuge Emergency Voice Communications equipment can be used to keep in contact with the University Security Control room. See **Safety Note 28** for more detailed guidance.

Practice evacuations

A test evacuation should be carried out at least once a year and should be both horizontal (i.e. to another, safe, part of the building, and vertical i.e. down stairs or using an evacuation lift. Building managers 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.

However where the evacuation procedure could involve use of an evacuation chair, or in extreme circumstances, carry down, any risk to the disabled person should be considered, and it may be preferable to conduct practice evacuations with volunteer able-bodied people, acting as disabled people (see **Safety Note 60 Use of Evacuation Chairs**).

Repeated evacuations (whether as tests or as a result of a false alarm) can pose risks to disabled people. Management should therefore endeavour to prevent unnecessary evacuations.

A report on each test evacuation should be prepared and circulated to relevant members of staff (e.g. School Disability Advisers, School management, Building Manager, Evacuation Officers,

assistants such as fire wardens and evacuation chair operator). Conclusions reached from the experience that would improve the evacuation instructions, signage or procedures should be incorporated in a revision to the PEEP and any supporting written instructions.

It is not usually necessary to evacuate people from a refuge for a fire drill, unless that is planned as part of the drill. For 'false' alarms, evacuation should not be necessary if it is possible to quickly establish the cause of an alarm and confirm that there is no fire.

Fire safety design issues

See Safety Guide 34B for University policy on fire safety design issues relevant to disabled people.

Providing an accessible means of escape solution should be an integral part of the fire safety management process. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of disabled people, and fire evacuation must not rely on assistance by the Fire and Rescue Service. It cannot be assumed that facilities provided in a building to make it accessible, such as passenger lifts, will be usable in a fire evacuation, or that all mobility impaired people can use evacuation chairs. This needs to be considered at the design stage when it is easier to incorporate accessible features which will make evacuation management more effective, and which will help to preserve the dignity of disabled people. To this end, fire evacuation lifts are the university's preferred means of evacuation where practicable.

Further information

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. Likewise, H&SS will provide training on request in the use of refuge voice communication systems, and advice on casualty handling.

The following Safety Notes should also be consulted:

- Safety Note 28 Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans
- Safety Note 60 Evacuation Chairs

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