

Fire hazards: how to protect residential apartment blocks

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The management of high-rise residential facilities has seen a number of changes and challenges in recent years and David Breare, Director of [Canonbury Management](#), provides thoughts on how his company has met and overcome the various issues.

People have been put in an “unbearable” position after the top three floors of a fire-risk tower block were evacuated in the late evening, a resident said.

The Cardinal Lofts tower block in Ipswich was deemed a fire risk in 2020 and labelled ‘unsafe for occupation’. Incidents such as this and the ongoing cladding crisis show how important it is for your tower block to remain safe and well-maintained.

Fires are unfortunately quite common in the UK. The latest government data shows that in England and Wales, firefighters will have attended 154,772 fires in 2022.

Canonbury Management has over 40 years of experience in tower block management and helping people take over blocks via Right to Manage. Director of Canonbury Management, David Breare, has put together expert advice below on how you can make your residential block safer and more fire resistant.

“Safety is paramount. The cladding crisis has led to tragedy and its aftermath has caused both great anxiety for residents and a massive financial headache for block managers as they rightly make their blocks safer. By law, the owners of tower blocks should make their residence as safe and fire-resistant as possible. There are a few ways that both landlords and residents can make their tower blocks a safer place and reduce the risks of a fire.”

Compartmentation

Flats should all be individually sealed units, so that if a fire starts in one flat, it cannot easily spread to another one for at least an hour. Compartmentation can be achieved by ensuring plasterboard on walls and ceilings is of the right thickness to hold back fire for 60 minutes.

Fire doors

These must be able to hold back fire for 60 minutes. Landlords must ensure that they are kept shut, generally with an automatic door closer. There must be no gaps between the door and the frame. To help this they can install fire seals which expand in heat to fill in any gaps through which fire or smoke can spread.

Dry risers

Tower blocks over a certain height (usually between 18 and 60 metres) must be fitted with 'dry risers'. These are empty pipes that the fire service can use to pump water to every floor if there is a fire. They should be regularly serviced.

Clearly marked, safe escape routes

Any building over three storeys high must have the escape route marked with signs.

Emergency lighting

Any building taller than two storeys must have emergency lighting along the escape routes.

Install fire alarms and maintain them

This might sound obvious, but fire alarms are a critical part of fire prevention. Install them and maintain them. If you are a resident, you should be proactive in checking that your landlord has installed fire alarms in the property.

Keeping corridors clear

Blocked corridors can be dangerous in the case of a fire, especially for disabled and elderly people, those under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and those with children or pets.

Regular inspections

In England and Wales, landlords must make a fire risk assessment every year. In Scotland, the law is different, but the landlord is still responsible for keeping you safe from fire.

Providing and maintaining fire extinguishers

Your landlord should make sure that you know how to use the fire extinguishers: there may be instructions in the documents you received when moving in.

Making sure that tenants are aware of the emergency plan

Everyone in the building should know what to do in case of a fire, where the escape routes are, which doors lead to an outdoor space, etc. This may be displayed on signs in the common areas.

Keep a fire blanket and extinguisher in key areas

You can put these in the kitchen and anywhere else where there is a risk of a fire. However, the fire service recommends that they should be used only on fires; for any larger fires, you should evacuate the building and call 999.

Make sure your electrical goods and fittings are safe

Check the wiring of items such as lamps, white goods and heaters, especially if they are from a country with fewer laws around safety, or second-hand. If your landlord provided an item that you think is not fire safe, you should let them know. Don't overload sockets with plugs and make sure to unplug or switch them off at night.

Keep safe habits

Burning candles, smoking and cooking are all activities where you should be careful that nothing can catch fire and that you have extinguished the flame afterwards. Don't store materials such as fuel or oil-soaked rags.

Ask to see the fire risk assessment (England and Wales)

It's your right to ask your landlord when the fire assessment was last conducted and what the results were. Knowing the risk assessment results will help you correct any faults and be better protected against potential fires.

Have a plan

Most of all, be prepared. Think of how you would escape in a fire and factor any elderly people, disabled people or children you may be living with into your plans. If you follow these steps, you can maximise your block's fire resistance and keep your residents, neighbours and yourself safe and sound.