



Central Council of Church Bell Ringers
"Registered Charity number 270036"

Tower Stewardship Committee

Guidance Note No. 6

FIRE RISK ASSESSMENT AND PROTECTION

This guidance note gives guidance to ringers, parochial church councils and clergy regarding Fire Safety affecting the ringing of church bells.

As most of the ringing towers in the world come under the jurisdiction of the Church of England, it has been produced with this in mind. However, most of the principles addressed will apply to Churches of other denominations and also those outside the UK. It is recommended that, if needed, more specific local advice should be sought.

Ringers and church authorities have traditionally had little concern for specific fire safety measures for church towers. Fires in churches have usually started elsewhere in the building and although this has occasionally resulted in the tower being burnt out and the bells destroyed, there have been no reports of fatalities resulting from people being trapped in the tower by fire – or even individuals having to be rescued.

For churches in use it is the PCC (or the equivalent for non Cof E churches) or owners (in the case of a church not in parochial use or other building) that have the responsibility for the building as a whole and its fire safety. It is very important therefore that ringers at each church should be aware of what should or needs to be done and make the effort to communicate and consult with the PCC officers (or their equivalent) to ensure that what is needed is done and is practicable and sensible for the ringers' requirements.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 came into effect on the 1st October 2006 and applies to all buildings other than single domestic dwellings. It thus applies to churches and church towers.

The Department of Communities and Local Government has issued the Fire Risk Assessment Guides for small and medium places of assembly (guide 6) – accommodating up to 300 people – and for large places of assembly (guide 7). They are all available for £12 please (see page 4)

The aim of the legislation is to bring together all the previous health and safety legislation in respect of fire safety and to extend it so that all buildings to which the public may come are regulated in order that those members of the public (including volunteers, workers and visitors) are not subjected to what are termed 'uncontrolled hazards'.

To ensure this every person/body responsible for a building must conduct a Fire Risk Assessment and these arrangements are enforced by the local Fire and Rescue Service. Each PCC (or equivalent) must appoint a 'responsible person' who may be assisted by competent persons - e.g. tower captains/steeple keepers when it comes to assessing the tower. This responsible person must carry out the Fire Risk Assessment and ensure the carrying out of the fire safety measures identified by the assessment.

The assessment needs to detail the physical and management changes needed to make the building comply with legislative requirements and to keep the Fire Risk Assessment up to date.

If the PCC agrees, regular users of part of the church may appoint their own responsible officer who is to liaise with the church responsible officer regarding fire safety measures. It may be that ringers at a particular church may agree with the PCC that, as sole users of the tower, one of their number should be the responsible officer. A ringing master and steeple keeper may come within the definition of a responsible officer as one with 'control of the work place'.

The responsible person has a duty to ensure that users (i.e. ringers and visitors) know what is required of them. He or she has to ensure that 'reasonable and practicable' fire safety precautions are carried into effect.

'Reasonable and practicable' are the key words. It does not mean having to close access immediately to the tower because there is only one staircase or put in quantities of signs and fire prevention systems and fire alarm systems overnight. It does mean that the responsible officer should, at the earliest opportunity, carry out an assessment with particular regard to the following:-

1. Consider all the parts of the tower and identify any possible dangers and risks including sources of ignition. Such risks might include loose or old electrical wiring; quantities of combustible rubbish; flammable liquids such as paint, lawn mower fuel, lubricating oils and other materials stored in ringing areas – these need to be stored in a metal cabinet. Consider the possibility of fire spreading into the tower from other parts of the building.
2. Identify people at risk – ringers obviously but also visitors or members of the public, for example, on tower tours; church clock maintenance staff; ringers or others working on the bells, builders and contractors working on other parts of the tower
3. Evaluate levels of risk – and take steps to remove or reduce identified fire hazards. Thus, for example, providing a fire door in an opening between the tower and church roof; ensure wiring is checked and certified to be safe; clearing out any rubbish or detritus – such as piles of old ropes and broken stays and oil. Additionally assessing how quickly a fire would be detected and people warned.

4. Assessing what needs to be done to protect people – by providing fire precautions such as smoke detectors; providing fire proof doors; providing fire extinguishers at all levels of the tower; providing fire alarms and identifying and establishing emergency escape routes with adequate emergency lighting (for example through the church roof). If there is no fixed telephone line in the tower, ensure, as far as practicable that at least one person present has a mobile telephone and that there is an adequate signal.
5. The responsible officer would need to ensure that any fire prevention or fire warning equipment is kept in order and maintained and in working order at all times. He or she would need to ensure that any people using the tower are made aware of preferred escape routes either by verbal instruction or by use of standard escape route signs.
6. Record the findings and actions taken and work out an emergency plan. Ensure that those using or visiting the tower are aware of the plan. Appoint others to be stewards if visitors, members of the public or others who are unfamiliar with the tower are present. All such stewards must be properly trained so that they know the details of the emergency plan and can give proper directions.
7. Ensure that the fire risk assessment is reviewed regularly and record that this has been done.

The written record/assessment is required where there are five or more employees. As any tower can expect to have 5 or more ringers on at least some occasions, and since volunteers are counted as workers, a fire risk assessment, with written records, is legally required in every belfry.

There are organisations which will provide professional fire risk assessment but it would be unusual, and probably not cost effective, to employ such an organisation for such a small assessment. Your church may wish to employ a company to look at the whole church, but it is actually best practice for the responsible person to carry out the assessment his or herself and to seek advice if particular problems are encountered. The best people to assessing the risks are those who best know and understand the building, the people and the activities. Your local Fire and Rescue Service will usually be happy to offer advice and support free of charge.

The following will undertake fire risk assessments at a cost

B.R.E. (The Building Research Establishment Limited, Bucknalls Lane,
Watford WD25 9XX – telephone 01923664883
email – FRA@bre.co.uk)

The Institution of Fire Engineers, London Road, Moreton in Marsh Gloucester
GL56 ORH – telephone 01608 812580 – email – info@ife.org

Fire Protection Association, London Road, Moreton in Marsh, Gloucester
GL56 ORH – telephone 01608 812 500 – email – fpa@thefpa.co.uk

Documents

Fire Risk Assessment Guides for small and medium places of assembly
(guide 6) ISBN-13: 978 1 85112 820-4 £12.00

(This can be downloaded free from <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/firesafetyrisk7>
3.36MB – 144 pages)

Those who would wish to know more can refer to 'A short guide to making
your premises safe from fire' – with a Fire Risk Assessment form -
downloadable from <http://www.communities.gov.uk/fire/firesafety/firesafetylaw>

For further information, contact the Chairman of the CCCBR Tower
Stewardship Committee:

Ernie de Legh-Runciman

10 Derwent Drive, Onchan, Isle of Man, British Isles, IM3 2DG
Tel: 07624 426654 Email: tschair@ccabr.org.uk

Other **Guidance Notes** produced by the Tower Stewardship Committee are:-

- GN1 - Insurance**
- GN2 - Tower Management**
- GN3 - Child Protection In Towers**
- GN4 – Tower Safety and Risk Assessment**
- GN5 - Church Law**
- GN6 - Fire Risk Assessment and Protection**
- GN7 – Noise, the Law, and the Environmental Health Officer**
- GN8 – Data Protection and Bell Ringing**

These Guidance Notes can be downloaded free of charge from the Tower
Stewardship Committee section of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers
website:

www.cccbr.org.uk/towerstewardship