



Neighbourhood WATCH

Toolkit

Module 12: Protecting your home from fire

This module will help you and your scheme members to understand and apply improvements to fire protection in the home.

By the end of this module you will be able to:

- understand the need for a basic fire safety survey;
- anticipate potential risks;
- discover strengths and weaknesses in the fire safety of your buildings;
- identify priorities for action; and
- have confidence that you and your Neighbourhood Watch scheme can help your community.

Introduction

The aim of the module is to help you to reduce the risk from fire to your home and neighbourhood by applying common sense and some basic knowledge.

Every year in the United Kingdom:

- the fire service is called out to over 56,000 fires in the home;
- more than 11,000 people are injured in these fires; and
- almost 500 people die in them.

If there is a fire in your home, your chances of survival will depend on how quickly and safely you are able to get out.

This module gives you advice on how to prevent a fire, and how to protect yourself should one occur.



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Acting safely to prevent fire

Almost all fires in the home can be prevented. Here are some fire safety tips that could help to prevent a fire from starting in your home.



Stop and think

Nearly two-thirds of all domestic fires start because of cooking in the kitchen. Many of these involve chip pans and other equipment that has been left unattended.

How do you think these fires could be prevented?

In the kitchen

Chip pans are a frequent source of fires. Here are some simple rules to make them safer:

- Always switch off the pan when you leave the kitchen, e.g. to answer the door or the phone, because you may get held up.
- Never fill a pan more than one-third full of fat or oil.
- Always test the temperature of the oil before you put in the food – put a small piece of bread in the oil; and if it crisps up quickly the oil is ready.
- Never let the oil get too hot – if it begins to smoke, turn off the heat source.
- Always dry food before putting it in hot oil – water on food can make the oil explode.

The safest way to deep fry is to use a thermostat-controlled, electric deep-fat fryer. Its thermostat stops it from overheating.

Heating the home

Whenever you have an open fire:

- **always** put a fireguard round it to protect the room and its occupants; and



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- **never** rest clothes or place newspapers on the fireguard.

Portable heaters should also be treated with care:

- always sit at least 90 cm (3 feet) away from a heater
- never dry clothes on or near the heater
- never stand the heater near furniture or curtains.

Smokers and their equipment



Stop and think

More fire deaths are caused by smoking than by any other single cause.

How do you think these deaths could be prevented?

If you are a smoker, follow these simple rules:

- Always use a proper ashtray that is difficult to knock over.
- Never let ash and debris build up in an ashtray - empty it frequently, as soon as the contents are cold.
- Always double-check that your cigarette has stopped burning after you have stubbed it out.
- Never leave a lit cigarette or pipe unattended - it may fall down the side of a chair or onto the carpet and smoulder for some time without being noticed, then cause a serious fire when the room is empty.
- Never smoke when you are feeling sleepy - you may doze off in your chair and set light to it.
- Never smoke in bed - it's too easy to fall asleep.
- Always keep matches and lighters well out of the reach of children.

Outside the house

Malicious fires in wheelie bins are an increasing problem in many areas, and if the bin is kept close to the building the fire can spread very easily into the home.



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If possible, store the bin away from the house or building. If you cannot lock it away to stop it being reached by vandals, use a chain to lock it to a wall or fixed post at a distance from the dwelling.

Protecting your family and your home

Smoke alarms save lives - you are twice as likely to die in a fire if you don't have a smoke alarm, so make sure that they are installed in your home. Although an alarm will not stop a fire from starting, it will alert you if a fire does start. The sooner you know about the fire, the less chance it has to take hold and the easier it will be for you and your family to escape unharmed.

Fires discovered by smoke alarms:

- are found more rapidly after ignition;
- produce fewer casualties; and
- cause less damage.



Remember

There's no excuse for not having a smoke alarm.

Installing and maintaining a smoke alarm

Smoke alarms cost from under £5 and are simple to install. They are available from most DIY, hardware and electrical shops and some supermarkets.

Make sure that the model you choose meets British Standard (BS) 5446-1, and preferably also carries either the British Standards Institution's kitemark or 'horseshoe' mark.

Follow the manufacturer's instructions on how to fit and position the alarm. If you find installing it difficult, local voluntary organisations may be able to make arrangements to have the alarm fitted for you.

It is important that you keep the smoke alarm free of dust and, for battery-operated models, that you change the battery before it runs out. Some smoke alarms have special long-life batteries that



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last 10 years; the instructions that come with the alarm will provide guidance on battery replacement and maintenance.

- Once a week, check that your smoke alarm is working properly.
- If you have to change the batteries in your smoke alarms every year, always do it on the same day - choose an anniversary or birthday to help you to remember.

Smoke alarms for people with hearing impairments

Many people whose hearing is impaired can still hear a conventional smoke alarm. However, they may have difficulty hearing one that is not nearby. In this case you can link the alarms, so that smoke detected in the living room will set off another alarm in the bedroom. An electrician will be able to advise you about linking the alarms.

For those who cannot hear a conventional smoke alarm, there are special devices available that set off a vibrating pad or a flashing light instead of the usual auditory signal; the vibrating pad alarms are particularly useful for deaf-blind people.

A local voluntary organisation or your social services sensory impairment team may be able to offer advice and assistance on products specially designed to help people with disabilities.

Further information is available from your local social services or from the Royal National Institute for Deaf People ([see the 'Further information, help and advice' section below](#)).



Remember

Your local fire brigade is a good source of information about fitting and using smoke alarms.

Safety at night

Many house fires start at night, when the occupants are asleep. It will be longer before the fire is noticed, so it will have more time to take hold. In some cases the occupants will be overcome by smoke or fumes before they wake up.



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You can reduce the likelihood of this by:

- taking positive actions to prevent fires starting while you are asleep; and
- knowing how to escape if a fire does start.



Remember

Never smoke in bed - you could easily fall asleep while the cigarette is still alight.



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Actions to take before you go to bed

- Turn off any portable heaters.
- Switch off and unplug all electrical appliances that are not designed to stay on overnight.
- Check that all cigarettes and pipes are properly extinguished.
- Empty any ashtrays after ensuring that the contents are cold.
- If you are using candles, make sure that they are secured in a proper holder and are kept away from curtains, fabrics or paper. Always ensure that they are extinguished before you leave the house or go to bed
- Close the doors to the hall and landing - a door can hold back a fire for up to 20 minutes, so will help to stop a fire from spreading.



Remember

Follow this bedtime fire safety routine to keep you and your family safe.

Planning your escape route

If you do need to escape from your home because of a fire, it may be in difficult conditions in the dark. But it will certainly be easier if you have planned your escape route in advance. Plan a route from each bedroom in your home.

- Make sure that everyone in the house knows the planned escape route.
- Always keep the escape route free from obstructions. Check that there are no loose floor coverings that could trip you up in the dark.
- If you install smoke detectors along the escape route, it is more likely to be usable if a fire does occur.



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Stop and think

- What will you do if the planned route is blocked by fire?
- How will you get out if the stairs are blocked?
- If you are on the first floor, are there any flat roofs or porches that will help you to get down to the ground?
- If you have security locks on the doors or windows, will the keys be easy to find?
- If you are cut off by fire, will you be able to reach a phone in order to call 999?

If you have serious mobility difficulties, you may want to consider having your bedroom on the ground floor (if this is practical), and as near as possible to an exit.

If you will need assistance to make your escape, it is vital that you can summon help. Make sure that you have a buzzer, intercom or telephone by your bed. There are systems that will automatically dial out on your telephone line to summon help or send a signal to a manned control room.

Details of the many emergency call/alarm systems available can be obtained from the Disabled Living Foundation ([see the 'Further information, help and advice' section below](#)).

What to do if a fire starts

We all try to prevent fire in our home. But fires do happen - it only takes an unguarded or careless moment, or simply an electrical fault. A couple of minutes later and your home could be filled with smoke. Smoke and fumes can kill - particularly the highly poisonous smoke given off by some furnishings when they burn.



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Remember

You will only have a short time to get out. Use it wisely and try not to panic.

It will be easier to get out if you have planned an escape route in advance, instead of having to decide how to get out in difficult circumstances.

- 1 Get everyone out as quickly as possible. Don't try to pick up valuables or possessions. Make your way out as safely as you can and try not to panic.
- 2 If possible, close the door of the room where the fire is, and close all the doors behind you as you leave. This will help to delay the spread of fire and smoke.
- 3 Before opening a closed door, use the back of your hand to touch it. Don't open it if it feels warm, as this means that the fire is on the other side.
- 4 Telephone the fire brigade on 999 from a neighbour's house or a telephone box. Clearly state the address of the fire.



Remember

Never go back into the building until a fire officer has told you it is safe to do so.

If you are cut off by fire

If you are unable to use the door because of flames or smoke outside the room, there are some actions to take to help your escape:

- 1 Close the door.
- 2 Use towels, sheets or other soft material to block any gaps. This will help to stop smoke spreading into the room.
- 3 Try to make your way to the window. If the room is already smoky, crawl along the floor, where it will be easier to breathe (smoke rises to the ceiling).



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- 4 If there are no flames or smoke on the other side of the window, open the window and try to attract the attention of others, who can then alert the fire brigade. Wait for the fire brigade to arrive - they should be there in a few minutes.
- 5 If you are in immediate danger and your room is not too high from the ground, you may be able to escape through the window.
 - Drop cushions or bedding to the ground below to break your fall.
 - If you can, get out feet first and lower yourself to the full length of your arms before letting go and dropping down.

Fire in the kitchen

If a pan catches fire on the stove:

- 1 **Don't move the pan** - it might give you terrible burns.
- 2 **Turn off the heat** if it is safe to do so, but never lean over the pan to reach the cooker controls.
- 3 **Never throw water onto the fire** - this will always make it worse.
- 4 **Get out, stay out, and call 999.**



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Further information, help and advice

Your local authority or fire and rescue service will be happy to advise you on fire prevention and safety.

If you are looking for an electrician, for example, ask friends and neighbours to introduce you to trustworthy people they know about. Elderly people especially should try to have someone they know with them when they have asked a stranger to call at their home.

You can find more information and advice online at the Fire Kills website (www.firekills.gov.uk).

For people with disabilities

The following organisations may be useful:

Disabled Living Foundation

380-384 Harrow Road
London W9 2HU
Helpline: 0845 130 9177
Textphone: 020 7432 8009
www.dlf.org.uk

National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom

Sir John Wilson House
215 Kirkgate
Wakefield WF1 1JG
Tel: 01924 291313
www.nfbuk.org

RADAR - the disability network

12 City Forum
250 City Road
London EC1V 8AF
Tel: 020 7250 3222
Minicom: 020 7250 4119
www.radar.org.uk

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

105 Judd Street
London WC1H 9NE



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Helpline: 0845 766 9999

www.rnib.org.uk

Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)

19-23 Featherstone Street

London EC1Y 8SL

Tel: 020 7296 8000

Information line: 0808 808 0123

Textphone: 0808 808 9000

www.rnid.org.uk



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Practical activity 12.1: Protect your home from fire

The aim of this activity is to get you to look critically at the fire safety measures in your home. By the end of the activity you will be able to identify:

- weak spots in the fire safety of your home; and
- steps you can take to improve fire safety.

There are three stages to this activity:

- 1 Read the 'How to stop a fire starting in your home' section of this module.
- 2 Walk round your home and identify as many fire risks as you can. Look at your cooker and all your electrical appliances. Consider candles, open fires, portable heaters and any smoking materials that you may use. If you have them, don't forget to look in sheds and outbuildings. Record the risks in the table on the next page.
- 3 For each fire risk you have identified, decide what changes you could make in order to minimise the risk.

Answer the four questions at the bottom of the table. If you answered 'No' to any of them, you will need to change something!

If several members of your scheme fill in the form at the same time, you could compare notes at a Neighbourhood Watch meeting.

How many homes need smoke alarms? You might be able to negotiate a group discount from a local supplier or fitter.

Practical activity 12.1: Protect your home from fire

Fire risks in your home	How could you reduce the risk?



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Practical activity 12.2: Protect your neighbourhood from fire

The aim of this activity is to look critically at fire safety in your neighbourhood, and to establish what you could do, collectively as a scheme, to improve it. By the end of the activity you will be able to identify:

- areas where the scheme can work as a whole to improve neighbourhood fire security; and
- steps you can take collectively to improve neighbourhood fire security.

- 1 Complete the form on the next page about fire safety in your area. You could give a copy of the form to several members of your scheme and ask them to fill it in independently.

Think about areas that may be vulnerable to arson, such as school buildings, abandoned buildings and rubbish tips.

Think about people who may need special help if a fire did break out, for example elderly or disabled residents and single-parent families.

- 2 Then discuss the answers at your next Neighbourhood Watch meeting. Invite a member of your local fire brigade to comment on your findings and suggest how you could reduce the risk of fire.

Joint action, such as letters and petitions to your local council, can be effective.

Practical activity 12.2: Protect your neighbourhood from fire

Fire risks in your neighbourhood	How could you reduce the risk?



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People who may be in need of special help	