



Central Council of Church Bell Ringers

"Registered Charity number 270036"

Tower Stewardship Committee

FIRE SAFETY

This leaflet is one of a series of leaflets produced by the Tower Stewardship Committee of The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers giving guidance to ringers, PCCs and clergy on external factors that may affect the ringing of church bells. Other leaflets in the series address child protection, insurance, tower management, tower safety, risk assessment and church law.

As most of the ringing towers in the world come under the jurisdiction of the Church of England, they have been produced with this in mind. However, most of the principles addressed will apply to other areas. However, it is recommended that if needed, more specific local advice should be sought.

FIRE SAFETY

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

The recent legislation will therefore have come as something of a shock to ringers and PCC Fabric Officers alike. 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 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 so that those members of the public (as well as volunteers/workers in the building or 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 church (PCC) 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 to keep the Fire Risk Assessment up to date.

If the Parochial church council 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 therefore be that ringers at a particular church regarding themselves as the effective sole users of the tower should have one of their number as the responsible officer in their own right, A ringing master and steeple keeper may come within the qualification of a responsible officer as one with 'control of the work place'.

The responsible person has a duty to ensure that users (and thus in a tower the ringers and visitors) know what is required of them. He has to ensure that 'reasonable and practical' fire safety precautions are carried into effect.

'Reasonable and practical' are the key words. It does not mean having to immediately close access to the tower because there is only one staircase or put in quantities of signs and fire prevention systems and fire alarm systems over night **BUT** 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 be loose or old electrical wiring; quantities of combustible rubbish; the possibility of fire spreading into the tower from other parts of the building – amongst other risks.
2. Identify people at risk – ringers obviously but also visitors or members of the public say 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 needed 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 (possibly say through the church roof?); in the absence of any fixed telephone line anywhere in the tower to ensuring that there is with at least one person in the tower at any time that it is occupied with a mobile phone.
5. The responsible officer would need to ensure that any fire prevention or fire warning equipment is kept in order and maintained and at any given time is in working order. He would need to ensure that any persons using the tower are aware or are made aware of preferred escape routes by means of signs.

6. Record the findings and actions taken and work out an emergency plan and ensure that those using or visiting the tower are aware of the plans. Appoint others to effectively be stewards if visitors, members of the public or other are unfamiliar with the tower are present.
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. Bearing in mind ringers are usually five or more in number and volunteers are counted as employees/workers written record and assessment for the tower is required under the legislation.

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 www.firesafetyguides.comunities.gov.uk.

There are organisations that will provide professional fire risk assessment – it would probably be rather unusual to ask them to do an assessment just for a tower but the ringers may wish to encourage the PCC to have such an assessment down for the church as a whole including the tower.

These organisations are:

B.R.E. (The Building Research Establishment Limited, Bucknalls Lane, Watford WD25 9XX – telephone 01923664883 – email – FRAquote@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

For churches in use it is the parochial church council (or the equivalent for non Cof E churches) or owners (in the case of a church not in parochial use) 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 practical and sensible for the ringers requirements

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

Ernie Runciman

See <http://www.cccbr.org.uk/tsc/> for contact details

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