

FIRE PRECAUTIONS FOR CHURCH BUILDINGS

Guidance note

from the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches
2016



Most fires are caused by arsonists or builders working on lead. These guidelines provide general advice and set out some of the steps you can take to protect your church. The guidelines are not exhaustive and professional help should be sought from the local fire service.

Keep **flammable materials** such as matches, candles, oil, incense, charcoal, white spirit and petrol locked up in a secure place. They are a temptation to arsonists. Ideally they should not be stored in the church.

Take extra care when **workmen** are in the buildings. A fire can easily start when work is taking place on a building. Workmen should be shown the position of fire extinguishers and how to use them. It should be part of the contract that smoking is not to be allowed in the church. The church should be inspected at the end of every day. Ladders should be put away under lock and key, so that they cannot be used by intruders.

All **hot works** should be finished 3 hours before the end of the working day, and checked before leaving.

Keep the **vestry locked** and do not hide the key in the church.

Discourage clutter. Too often vestries, towers and odd corners of the church are filled with old books, wood, carpet and rags, all of which are good fuel to start a fire.

Portable heaters are a major fire risk. Ideally gas heaters should not be used - the moisture they give off also damages the fabric of the church. However if they are used they should have a guard and should be kept at least three feet from anything which could catch fire. Paraffin and oil-fired heaters should never be used, even as a temporary measure.

Have **chimneys and flues** swept and inspected each year. A fractured flue or dirty chimney is a real fire risk. An inspection is not usually part of the maintenance contract with a heating engineer, so you should discuss this with the church architect and make sure that it is done.

Have **fire extinguishers** located at various points in the church and make sure they are inspected regularly. The fire service will advise on how many and what type of extinguishers you should have in your particular circumstances. For general use, water type extinguishers are best, though there should be a carbon dioxide type near the organ and the mains electric distribution board. Check every month to see if they have been used or damaged, or have been moved from where they should have been kept. They should be serviced every year. Small churches should have at least two, medium sized churches should have three, and large churches should have four or more extinguishers in the main area of the church. In addition a fire extinguisher should be in the boiler house, and the kitchen should have both a fire extinguisher and a fire blanket.

Train people to use fire extinguishers. The parish clergy, the churchwardens, PCC members, all staff and as many responsible members of the congregation as possible should know where extinguishers are and how to use them. A training session should be arranged and can be good fun!

Have all **electrical wiring** professionally checked every five years. Numerous church fires are caused by faulty electric wiring or apparatus. Only electrical contractors enrolled with the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting (NICEIC), ECA or NAPIT should be employed for work in churches. You should also check that the fuse boxes are clean, dry and dust-free. Make sure that the right fuses are to hand when needed and you keep a good supply of spares.

Routine checks you should carry out should include looking out for breakages; wear/deterioration; signs of overheating; missing parts [covers, screws]; switchgear not obstructed; loose fixings.

Switch off all **electrical circuits** when not in use. Switchgear of the church should be labelled to show a) the date of the most recent inspection and b) the date of the recommended future inspection.

The **electrics in the organ and blowers** should be inspected regularly. A professional organ builder should carry out the inspection, and the electric organ blower and humidifying apparatus should be examined by an electrical engineer. Organ lights should be installed so that there is no danger of them setting fire to timber or music sheets if they are left on. The recommended trade practice is to inspect organ blowers and humidifying apparatus every six months.

Have the **lightning conductor** professionally tested. A lightning conductor system which is not in perfect order is a positive danger, because lightning will be attracted to the terminals and then will not be able to go down to the earth. These should be examined and tested by a competent specialist firm.

Professional advice should be sought before installing **fire detection systems**. A Faculty will be required for the introduction of any such system.

The PCC should ensure that a **review** of fire safety precautions is undertaken.

On 1 October 2006, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 came into effect. This replaces most fire legislation with one simple Order.

Ecclesiastical Insurance Group (EIG) has issued helpful guidance on this
<http://www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters/churchguidance/fireguidance/index.aspx>

Further information can also be found on the Churches Legal Advisory Service (CLAS) website:
<http://www.churcheslegislation.org.uk/home>