



FIRE SAFETY: DISABLED REFUGES

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INTRODUCTION

The Regulatory Reform Order 2005 (RRO) requires a company to assess their Fire Safety systems on a regular basis to make sure they comply with the CURRENT standards and regulations. The risk assessment of a building must be carried out to “current standards” not those when building systems were implemented.

Current Building Regulations require that all new non-domestic buildings with more than one storey provide ‘Refuge’ areas – relatively safe places where people who cannot easily use fire escapes and evacuation lifts may call for assistance and wait until help arrives. Despite what many think, the provision of a refuge is not covered by the Equality Act 2010, formerly the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). However, those designing such facilities should remember that the Equality Act is an important piece of legislation, and whilst not specifying the requirements of refuges, the Act must be adhered to ensure that, where practical, disabled persons are not subject to discrimination on account of their condition.

A Disabled Refuge is a relatively safe area within a building or exit staircase where mobility impaired occupants can be placed (not just wheelchair users) while the main building occupancy is evacuated, allowing designated members of staff to safely assist these people from the building when stairwell crowding has eased. Mobility impairment is defined as not being able to walk 200 m continuously without aid, and includes arthritis sufferers, people with leg and back injuries and women over 6 months term pregnancy.

A refuge should be provided for each protected stairway affording egress from each storey of the building. They do not have to be located within the stairway but should enable direct access to the stairs. They should be sited in locations where there is adequate space and where a wheelchair or stationary individual will not impede the means of escape of other persons during an emergency evacuation.

People should not be left in a refuge to await the Fire & Rescue Service as any emergency plan should allow for the evacuation of all relevant persons irrespective of any disability. A refuge may be used as a safe resting place or even to wait until the need for a full evacuation is established. Refuge dimensions are usually specified to accommodate one wheelchair. This should not be a problem where there is more than one wheelchair user provided there is a suitable evacuation strategy in place. As one person progresses on their journey the next person will take their place in the refuge.



A refuge area should be clearly identified by appropriate fire safety signs complying with British Standard 5499 or EN 7010. Where a refuge is in a lobby or stairway the sign should be accompanied by a blue mandatory sign worded “Refuge – Keep Clear”. In many cases the signs may be combined.

To facilitate the effective evacuation of people from refuges an Emergency Voice Communication (EVC) system should be provided. It is essential that the occupants of each refuge are able to alert other people that they are in need of assistance and for them to be reassured that this assistance will be forthcoming.



The EVC should comply with BS 5839-9 and consist of outstations located in each refuge which communicate with a master station located either in the buildings main control room or adjacent to the fire alarm panel. The 2011 revision to BS 5839-9 also requires disabled toilet call systems to be linked to the EVC system.

Emergency plans should also include an evacuation plan for disabled persons and should be based around the use of a refuge area and evacuation from there. Your emergency plan should not rely on the Fire & Rescue Service to evacuate disabled persons from refuges; this still remains your responsibility. All disabled staff should have a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) completing at the earliest opportunity. It is important that you consult with each individual and explain to them the purpose of the refuge areas and the evacuation procedure and identify any assistance which they may need. This may take the form of direct assistance from designated and trained staff or specialist evacuation equipment. In many cases disabled persons may not need assistance and be able to self-evacuate with the correct facilities in place. Visitors to the site should go through a booking in procedure whereby any mobility impairment can be identified and evacuation procedures implemented around their specific needs



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