

Means of Escape

Means of escape in case of fire is relevant to all occupied buildings from domestic houses and flats to multi-storey offices, shops and factories. They are covered by Approved Document 'B' - Fire Safety, specifically B1 - Means of Escape. Other sections of the fire safety document may also be relevant to your proposals and can be checked or discussed as necessary.

This section is not intended to provide full details of the requirements of this document. Instead, it is hoped it can relay some of the areas where occupiers or owners have made the mistake of not making a building regulations application to cover works creating problems for themselves in the future.

These are listed below under their separate headings within either the residential or commercial categories.

Residential properties

Most homes, particularly modern homes will have been built with means of escape in mind. They normally have floors arranged around a hallway or landing giving access to stairs and the main entrance doors.

The problems arise once the occupier or owner decides to alter or extend the property. Extensions are not normally a problem as most people realise that planning permission and then building regulations approval may be required. However, when making internal alterations, that may not require planning permission, some people are unaware that building regulations approval may still be an issue. These alterations, if not controlled correctly, could cause problems for the owner or occupier at a later stage.

This could be through problems in selling when the changes are noted by a surveyor or by structural problems becoming evident due to the use of inadequate materials.

The following descriptions cover the more common instances of alterations that need to be covered by a building regulations application. Many will also be covered by other parts of the building regulations.

Removal of walls

This is normally carried out to open up the ground floor of the property, whether the stairs run straight up from the front door or whether they run from side to side as with older terraced properties.

Not only can the means of escape be compromised, but the unskilled person could also mistakenly remove a load bearing wall.

Loft conversions

These can be either fully converted to create living space (loved by children as bedrooms or play areas) or part converted to form storage space. Both require

building regulations approval.

Although the use as a storage space does not adversely affect the means of escape due to its infrequent use, living space and particularly bedrooms are a different matter. There needs to be an alternative exit for fire brigade rescue (unless the roof space is in a bungalow), via a dedicated escape window, fire separation between the loft and first floor areas and normally a proper staircase allowing access to the loft room. The door to the loft should be a self closing fire door and all other doors opening onto the stairs (apart from the bathrooms) should also be made self closing.

Smoke detectors must be provided, wired to the mains with battery back-up.

There are other issues involved both for means of escape and other areas of the Regulations.

The above points have been made to give an idea of the works required and therefore the need for the work to be properly controlled.

For further information see Guidance Notes 14, 17 & 18.

Commercial buildings (offices, shops, factories etc.)

If a building is used as a place of work, any alterations that affect the means of escape (even if it improves it) may require a building regulations application.

The fire authority will also need to be consulted. This can be done through your building control department who can also arrange meetings between architects/clients, building control and the fire authority to discuss the needs of larger schemes and therefore assisting in the application process.

The following are brief descriptions of works that need applications but are sometimes overlooked by the occupier or owner.

Subdivision of office areas

This is common to all office buildings both large and small. It is also responsible for most of the unauthorised works found by Building Control and Fire Authority Officers within office premises.

The act of subdivision creates inner room situations. The outer office becomes the access area and an incident in this area may develop to such an extent that escape from the inner room is impossible.

However, if one of the following precautions are built in, it can be safely allowed.

- An early warning system with either smoke detectors linked into a main fire alarm system with a sounder in the office if necessary, or inter-linked mains operated detectors (with back up batteries) if there is no main system, or
- A vision panel to enable the occupier of the office to be immediately aware of a problem in the access area. The panel can be in the door if it still allows a good view of the access area. There should be no blinds or curtains fitted to the panel.

Either of the above options will require building regulations application. The correct method of carrying out the works does not remove the need for an application.

Mezzanine floors

Many factories and warehouses install mezzanine floors for extra storage or even work space.

These will generally affect the distance of travel to an exit and the route to the exit, which may be restricted. Depending on the size and use, additional fire protection and a fire alarm extension may also be required.

Change of use

Shops and offices appear to be the largest group of building types that frequently experience changes in their use. This may result in extending into previously unoccupied areas either by horizontally knocking through into the neighbouring unit or moving vertically up or down into a different use type. For example an office at first floor taking over the old ground floor shop or a shop or office taking over what was private accommodation at first/second floor levels. Even if no alterations are made, an application for the change of use will be required.

As previously stated, all of the examples above have been used to illustrate a sample of means of escape issues that will in most circumstances, require building regulations applications to be submitted. They have been used specifically as they also represent a large proportion of the types of work discovered during checks on unauthorised works and will hopefully assist people in realising the need for applications prior to this point being reached. I would stress that in most cases, it is through misunderstanding rather than a deliberate attempt to avoid making an application.

The information given above is only intended to give a general overview and is not intended to show the full requirements of the means of escape document. All applications need to be looked at in their own right as various other aspects of the proposals need to be taken into account, including

- occupancy levels,
- overall travel distance to exits,
- exit widths
- and the number of exits.

Planning your work well in advance will help to reduce the chance of mistakes. Mistakes can result in costly remedial work. Please contact us for advice on the above and the application of the Regulations to other buildings.

For further information contact the Building Regulations Division

Please note that these guidance notes are for advice only and may not cover all situations. It is your responsibility to ensure that they are appropriate for use in your particular circumstance.