How to Evacuate a Multi-storey Building

- by Mark Roberts

When it comes to evacuating multi-storey buildings, all companies and organisations open to the public need to be prepared for any eventuality to get everyone out safely. With this in mind, extra precautions need to be taken into account to accommodate wheelchair users and the mobility impaired ensuring the risk level when evacuating is reduced.

Evacuation procedures should be set in place along with designated trained staff that will assist those in need during the evacuation process. Those employees must undergo practical training in the use and operation of any evacuation equipment that may need to be used. It is the employers or service providers responsibility to evacuate all people from a building in an emergency, as it is no longer the responsibility of the fire service to facilitate the evacuation of non-domestic premises, which is outlined in the Regulatory Form Order for Fire Safety 2005. It is therefore illegal to plan a fire evacuation that relies solely upon the fire service being involved.

Employers who neglect proper evacuation measures for all employees, visitors or the mobility impaired can be found guilty of failing to provide a duty of care and charged with corporate manslaughter in workplace cases. Pre-planning is therefore essential, ensuring the needs of all employees, visitors or the mobility impaired are identified and a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan, known as a ‘PEEP’ or a ‘GEEP’, (General Emergency Evacuation Plan) is devised by the relevant person responsible to comply with the Fire Safety Order.

The PEEP is tailor-made to secure the safety of the named individuals in the event of a building evacuation. It will explain the method of evacuation detailing the escape routes and identify those persons who will assist carrying out the evacuation and training or practice needs. It will also detail the refuge areas (which is where the mobility impaired can wait for assistance).

The plan should be tested and used during regular drills, to ensure all staff involved are aware of the procedures and receive a copy of the relevant PEEP. When planning for an emergency in a public access building where mobility impaired or disabled people have total access, a PEEP would not be sufficient. The
responsible person would need to devise a GEEP, to accommodate the needs of everyone.

The time required to evacuate a small building that is not a high rise, wouldn’t normally be an issue due to passive fire protection. Therefore, high rise buildings can present a number of challenges, the most obvious one being the potential distance needed to take to travel down the stairs to exit the building. These kinds of buildings set themselves apart from others that have a single stair case, due to the time it takes to get down multiple sets of stairs.

Evacuation chairs have proved to be the most efficient and user friendly, enabling the operator and passenger to safely exit the building. Due to more than one person maybe needing assistance other types of evacuation product may be required such as slide sheets, rescue mats, evacuation chairs or stretchers. All evacuation aids need to be located in a designated refuge point which is specified in the buildings fire strategy. Each fire exit has to accommodate the able bodied and mobility impaired therefore all equipments have to be readily available and accessible at the refuge point.

In order to comply, the responsible person should obtain professional advice to establish exactly what is required of them. This will involve evaluating each floor in order to determine the quantity of each piece of evacuation equipment and the suitability, with sufficient equipment on each floor to stop people having to re-enter the building to help others.

The key to ensuring you are prepared for any eventuality is to plan regular fire drills, which as a general rule should take place twice a year. An emergency evacuation can happen at any time without warning, so the practice of these fire drills can save time and lives in an emergency.

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