

Other Notes in this series show how to provide a building which disabled people are able to access, move around in, and use. They do not, however, mention escape from a building.

In the event of fire or several other types of emergencies, escape will need to be carried out in as short a time as practicable.

The principal entrance to the building might be impassable as a result of the emergency; therefore escaping may entail using routes provided solely as alternative escape routes, not up to the standards of accessibility of the other routes in the building. Escape routes may incorporate stairways, which some disabled people may find impossible to use unaided.

Lifts are most likely not suitable for use for escape. Some disabled people who used a lift for access, might not be able to use a stairway to escape without assistance.

Clearly, the matter of means of escape for disabled people is at least as important as is making buildings accessible to them.

This Design Note concentrates on those matters that need to be addressed in order to ensure adequate means of escape for disabled people, over and above the provisions that are considered adequate for able-bodied people.

Means of warning

Alarm is commonly given by an electronic sounder, a mechanical bell, or by people shouting.

Most people, including those who have impaired hearing, will hear such an alarm, or will be responsive to the subsequent actions of other people in the building.

There are circumstances where additional measures might be needed, for example in very noisy areas, or where a person might be isolated from others or asleep. In such cases visual alarms or personal vibrating pagers linked to the alarm system should be considered.

Escape time

Many disabled people cannot move quickly.

Disabled people may need to be escorted or even carried to a safe place, and they may need to rest for a while as they make their escape.

In order to minimise the amount of time taken to escape, the following matters should be considered: -

- Clear signage indicating escape routes should be provided, maintained and kept free from obstruction (see Design Note No 04 – Wayfinding and signs).
- Escape routes should be kept clear of obstructions.

Vertical escape

Unless a lift in a building is an evacuation lift, which is extremely unlikely, it must not be used for escape in case of fire because power failure could occur while it is in use, trapping any occupants.

It is essential that all members of staff know whether a lift is an evacuation lift or not.

A lift that is not an escape lift should have signs at all landings advising people not to use it in the case of an emergency.

A stairlift, as well being susceptible to suffering power cuts, commonly obstructs the stairway when in use (and not folded away), and should therefore not be used for means of escape.

Particularly in an older building, a route provided only for means of escape might well include a stairway, or other unsuitable feature.

The route of travel does not end at the external door but at a safe place away from the building. Sometimes it may be unrealistic for these external routes to be fully accessible (see Design Note No 11 – External environments), for example at the rear of a building where the floor level might be substantially lower or higher than adjacent ground level.

It follows that there will be circumstances disabled people would be unable to escape unaided, and would need assistance in escaping. Their evacuation might need to be phased, therefore a place of relative safety needs to be provided along their route, where they can await the next phase of their assisted escape, or perhaps rest for a while in a place of relative safety before continuing. For such circumstances, refuges should be provided.

Even where there is no stairway on the escape route, some disabled people may need assistance to escape.

Refuges

A protected stairway is an internal stairway intended for use as an escape route (it may also be in everyday use). The protection takes the form of an enclosure of fire resistant walling and doors.

A protected stairway, and a final exit from a building leading to an escape route to a place of safety where that route includes a stairway, should be provided with refuges (unless the building has no more than two storeys plus one basement storey, each under 280 square metres floor area).

A refuge: -

- Should be provided at each point where an escape route leads into a protected stairway, or an external stairway.
- Could be in the stairway, or in a protected lobby or corridor leading to a stairway. Where two protected stairways serve a storey, the whole storey could be effectively divided into two refuges using fire resistant walling and doors, giving two alternative refuges.
- Could be in the open air on a flat roof or balcony, protected by fire resistant walling and flooring as necessary.
- Where serving an external stairway, could be external, protected by fire resistant walling as necessary.
- Should not obstruct the flow of other people escaping.
- Should be at least 1400mm x 900mm, and perhaps larger depending on the number of wheelchair users it might need to serve.

Evacuation lifts

Should an evacuation lift be considered appropriate, the guidance of BS 5588 Part 8: Means of escape for disabled people should be considered. Refuges will need to be provided in conjunction with such a lift.

Managing evacuation

Clearly, a plan for procedures for evacuation of the building must be determined in advance. This is one of the requirements of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety Order

2005, which applies to virtually all premises apart from private dwellings. A fire risk assessment must also be carried out. Fire certificates are no longer valid. The fire and rescue service may need to inspect your property, but they will not carry out the fire risk assessment for you.

The evacuation plan should be fully documented, and all members of staff who are to be involved in it (including temporary and part-time) should be: -

- familiar with it,
- trained in it (a practice full evacuation drill at least once every year and preferably twice every year), and
- required to adhere to it.

Evacuation plans should be practicable; training is not only to ensure familiarity with them but also to ensure that they are effective.

Evacuation plans should be devised and kept up to date (in the light of experience and changes of circumstances) by, and training should be carried out by, a competent person.

Evacuation plans should take into account: -

- The layout and construction of the building (including the external environment where it is within the control of the management).
- Fire hazards.
- People at risk, including current disabled employees, and, if the building is open to the public, the disabled members of the public who might be in the building.

The following matters should be included when considering the needs of disabled people: -

- Some people may not be aware that evacuation is necessary (they may not have sensed the warning alarm, or appreciated that the building needs to be evacuated). The whole of the building is likely to need to be searched.
- Some people may need to be escorted to refuges, and subsequently escorted from refuges to safety (not necessarily just wheelchair users).
- Some people may need to be carried (not just wheelchair users).
- Some people may attempt to use a lift that is not an evacuation lift.
- In certain circumstances (for example where a large group of people attend an event), evacuation procedures will need to be varied to suit (in advance).
- It is vital that, at all stages of evacuation, management know how many people are in which refuge, that those people are assured that their presence there is known, and that action to achieve their safe evacuation is being taken by staff (they must not simply be left there to await arrival of the fire and rescue service).

Further guidance is given in government (DCLG) fire safety law guidance documents and in BS 5588 Part 8: Means of escape for disabled people.

Further information

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, and The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Subordinate Provisions Order 2006 are available to view or download from Office of Public Sector Information:

Web: www.opsi.gov.uk

Fire safety law guidance documents are available to view download or order from Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG):

Web: www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1162101

BS 5499 Part 1: Fire safety signs, notices and graphic symbols - Specification for fire safety signs

BS 5588 Part 8: Means of escape for disabled people

BS 5588 series gives guidance on means of escape for various types of buildings and circumstances

BS 8501: Graphic symbols and signs – public information symbols

These codes are available from:

British Standards Institution (BSI)

389 Chiswick High Road, London W4 4AL

Tel: 020 8996 9001

Web: www.bsi-global.com

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