

Smoke Alarms in Northern Ireland Homes

Research and Library Services

1. NUMBER OF HOMES IN NI WITH A SMOKE ALARM

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), in response to a Parliamentary Question¹ (June 2005), stated that 96 per cent of respondents to the June 2004 Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey had a smoke alarm in their home. Of these 72 per cent reported checking their smoke alarm at least weekly or monthly. Taking in to account the likelihood of those who tested their smoke alarms less frequently, or never, actually having a working smoke alarm, NIFRS estimated that, in June 2004, 19 per cent of homes may not have a reliable, working smoke alarm.

A Public Information Leaflet, published by NIFRS in August 2006, states that 98 per cent of households surveyed had a smoke alarm. Further clarification on this figure of 98 per cent has been sought from NIFRS i.e. how many homes were surveyed and what percentage of homes had battery operated versus mains powered smoke alarms.

Fire Safety Week in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was from 1st – 8th October 2007, when the NIFRS joined forces with fire and rescue services across the Republic of Ireland to promote the importance of having and maintaining a working smoke alarm in the home². The new 'Smoke Kills' public information campaign was unveiled at the joint North/South launch of Fire Safety Week on Monday 1st October, 2007.

2. BATTERY OPERATED VERSUS MAINS POWERED SMOKE ALARMS

At the 3rd International Symposium on Human Behaviour in Fire, (Belfast, 2004) it was revealed that research had shown that main powered smoke alarms were more effective than battery powered ones, mainly because batteries had not been checked or replaced. Despite that fact "*even if battery powered fire alarms were installed in every home that could cut the death toll [in the UK] in domestic fires by around 70 a year. Installing mains powered alarms would save around 106 lives annually [in the UK]*"³.

¹ House of Commons Hansard Written Answers for 28 June 2005, in response to Mr Gregory Campbell's question on 'Smoke Alarms'

² www.nifrs.org/news.php?sec=16&news=5792

³ www.4ni.co.uk/northern_ireland_news.asp?id=32787

3. SMOKE ALARMS IN NEW BUILDINGS

The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 (section E2) state that “A *building shall be so designed and constructed that in the event of a fire there is –*

- (a) where appropriate, adequate means of automatic detection;*
- (b) adequate means of giving warning; and*
- (c) adequate means of escape, which can be safely and effectively used at all material times”.*

The above Regulations were subsequently updated in 2005 to the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 with an accompanying DFP Technical Booklet E: 2005 – Fire Safety. The Technical Booklet (section 1.26) states that Smoke and heat alarms shall be ‘permanently wired’⁴.

4. NORTHERN IRELAND HOUSING EXECUTIVE – SMOKE ALARM POLICY

A 1999 NIHE Executive Briefing described its Smoke Alarm policy as meeting the requirements of Building Control Regulations with regard to the installation of “*hard-wired smoke alarms in the following categories:*

- *All New Build;*
- *All dwellings being improved where the improvement involves upgrading the power circuits; and*
- *All flats (up to 4 storeys) and maisonettes”.*

In 1999 it was estimated by the Housing Executives Research Group that approximately 70% of the Executive’s dwellings had smoke detectors installed. The Housing Executive has been contacted to supply more current details.

5. SMOKE ALARMS IN HOUSES OF MULTIPLE OCCUPANCY

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has published advice concerning smoke alarms for houses of multiple occupancy under its Private Sector Improvement Service. The publication Fire Safety Guide for Houses in Multiple Occupancy⁵ describes the optimal location of smoke alarms (section 4.2), states that a smoke alarm should be “*permanently hardwired to a circuit*” (section 4.4) and “*where more than one smoke alarm is installed they should be interconnected so that detection of a fire by any one of them operates the alarm signal in all of them*” (section 4.3).

6. EXAMPLES OF FREE SMOKE ALARM SCHEMES

In 2002 Voluntary Services Belfast operated a campaign to fit free smoke alarms for the elderly, families with young children and others in need. Under the scheme Belfast City Council paid for the purchase of smoke alarms and batteries and for the travelling expenses of the volunteers from VSB who carried out the actual work. Referrals of people eligible for the scheme were made though the Council’s own

⁴ Although there is no obligation to follow the methods set out on the Technical booklet, any other method adopted will have to demonstrate that it satisfies the requirements of the Building Regulations.

⁵ www.nihe.gov.uk/publications/reports/FireSafety.pdf

Home Safety Check Scheme and VSB's Home Security Scheme⁶. VSB have confirmed that this scheme is no longer in operation.

Following on from a pilot scheme with local authorities it was announced in September 2007 that, under the Community Smoke Alarm Scheme, 500 smoke alarms will be fitted free of charge in houses in Leitrim over the next two years. The aim of the scheme is to target vulnerable households that might not be captured by any of the other measures. The Chief Fire Officer for Leitrim noted that only 80% of houses in the Republic of Ireland are fitted with smoke alarms compared with 96% of houses in Northern Ireland⁷.

In 2002 a free smoke alarm scheme, SAVED, (Smoke Alarms for the Elderly, Vulnerable and Disadvantaged) was extended to the Chichester area by firefighters in the city. The firefighters asked local parishes to each contribute £300 to buy the alarms, which firefighters have volunteered to fit into the homes of the more vulnerable members of the community. This scheme was an extension to follow the success of other similar schemes in Sussex⁸.

In 2005, Suffolk Fire and Rescue offered free fitting of smoke alarms⁹ to deaf and hard of hearing people. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People stated that Suffolk was one of the first areas of the UK to supply free alarms specifically designed for deaf people¹⁰.

A New Baby Smoke Detector Scheme was established by Cannock Chase Council, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service and Cannock Chase Primary Care Trust in 2005¹¹. The New Baby Smoke Detector Scheme will ensure babies homes will be fitted with smoke detectors if they do not already have them. When health visitors go to the homes of newborn babies to carry out all of the usual checks, they will ask parents if there is a smoke detector fitted and working. If not, a referral can be made to the Fire Service. Local fire fighters will then fit up to two smoke detectors per household, free of charge, with a 10-year tamper-proof battery.

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⁶ www.4ni.co.uk/northern_ireland_news.asp?id=6830

⁷ www.leitrimtoday.ie/ViewArticle2.aspx?SectionID=2571&ArticleID=3235318

⁸ <http://webserver01.westsussex.gov.uk>, Press Release Number 137, 20 March 2002

⁹ Alarms for the deaf have a flashing light, a sound alert and a vibrating pad to go under a pillow or mattress.

¹⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/low/england/suffolkj/4470316.stm>

¹¹ www.cannockchasedc.gov.uk/site/scripts/news_article.php?newsID=50