Albion Mercer

A FREE GUIDE FROM ALBION MERCER

Fire Safety for Places of Assembly

A practical guide for halls, community venues, places of worship and other gathering spaces

Venue management, event layouts and safe evacuation explained.



For premises in England

November 2026

Fire safety for the building and the people using it

A community hall, church or hired venue may have changing users and few permanent staff. The fire safety arrangements still need to work every time it opens.

Does a volunteer-run venue need an FRA?

Fire safety law normally applies to halls and other gathering places, including those run by charities or volunteers. You need a suitable fire risk assessment (FRA), a full written record of it and a record of how fire safety is managed.

Who is responsible?

The owner, operator, management committee and hirer may share duties, depending on who employs staff and who controls the building, activities and safety measures. Agree what each party is responsible for.

Which venues does this guide cover?

This guide is for small and medium venues such as village halls, community centres and places of worship. Even a small venue may need specialist advice if its layout or activities make escape difficult.

What about larger or different uses?

Large venues, theatres, outdoor events and overnight stays need advice suited to their use. Speak to a fire safety specialist before introducing activities that your existing assessment does not cover.

Having no paid staff does not remove fire safety duties.

Agree who will arrange checks, maintain equipment, brief hirers and deal with reported faults.

How many people can use the venue safely?

The safe number is affected by escape routes, exits, layout, activities and the people attending. Floor area alone is not enough.

Agree a safe number for each layout

The number you can safely admit depends on the layout, escape routes, exit widths and any other limits that apply. Count everyone, including staff and performers. Do not assume the same number is safe for every event. Seek advice if the capacity has not been established.

Keep exits and gangways usable

Plan chair rows, tables, stages, displays and equipment so people can move to exits. Do not allow extra furniture or last-minute ticket sales to undermine the agreed layout.

Different activities

A seated meeting, dance, craft fair and performance can have different risks.

Different audiences

Consider children, unfamiliar visitors and people who need assistance.

Different equipment

Catering, temporary lighting, scenery and electrical leads can introduce new hazards.

Staff and volunteers

Make sure enough staff or volunteers are present and know what to do in a fire.

Check before accepting a different use

Discuss significant changes with the person managing fire safety before accepting a booking for a different use.

Check the layout before each event.

Make sure the furniture and equipment leave the agreed escape routes clear, and keep attendance within the safe limit.

Check the essentials before the doors open.

The public may not know the building. Clear escape arrangements and reliable precautions are particularly important when the venue is busy.

Raising the alarm

Provide a suitable way to raise the alarm. Where an alarm system is installed, consider whether people will notice it during music, performances or noisy activities.

Escape routes & exits

Keep routes clear, including outside paths and gates. Escape doors must be easy to open immediately from inside without a key.

Fire doors, walls & floors

Check that fire doors close properly and repair damage or faulty closers. Have gaps around pipes and cables through fire-resisting walls or floors assessed and sealed where needed.

Lighting & signs

Make exit signs clear and keep escape routes suitably lit. Check how people will find their way out during a power failure or a darkened performance.

Provide appropriate firefighting equipment

Provide the right equipment for the fire risks and keep it serviced. Anyone expected to use equipment needs suitable training. Nobody should delay escape or put themselves at risk to fight a fire.

Control common sources of fire

Set rules for cooking, heaters, candles and decorations. Maintain electrical equipment, remove rubbish and control work involving heat or flames. Check event equipment before use.

> **An exit is only useful if the whole route is available.**
>
> Walk through to the safe place outside, checking doors, gates, paths and obstructions.

Make every hirer part of the fire safety plan.

A hire agreement helps, but people need practical information and enough time to understand the venue before guests arrive.

Agree responsibilities for the booking

Explain the permitted use, capacity and layout, relevant fire precautions and who is in charge during the event. Discuss any extra risks their activities or equipment may introduce and agree how these will be managed.

Show hirers what they need to know

Show hirers how to raise the alarm, where the exits are and where people should gather outside. Give them emergency contact details. Explain who calls 999 and how to direct the fire and rescue service to the correct entrance.

Plan for people needing assistance

Consider disabled visitors and people whose needs are not known in advance. Agree what help people may need and make sure staff or volunteers are present and know how to provide it. A refuge is a protected waiting area, not a final place of safety; arrange assistance and communication for anyone using it.

Make the plan work at each event

Agree who will help people leave, who will call 999 and how toilets and side rooms will be checked without putting anyone at risk. Practise the plan with staff, volunteers and regular hirers, and improve it where needed.

> **Hiring out the hall does not automatically transfer every duty.**
>
> The venue and hirer need to cooperate. The plan should not rely on fire crews to make evacuation possible.

Checks before, during and after each event

Use a simple checklist so everyone who opens, supervises or closes the venue knows what to check. Keep a record of faults and repairs.

Before each use

Check routes, exits, the proposed layout and obvious faults. Make sure the person in charge understands the emergency arrangements.

During the event

Keep gangways and exits clear. Watch for overcrowding, unauthorised layout changes and blocked fire doors.

At closing time

Switch off equipment that should not be left on, check that heat sources are safe, remove rubbish and report faults to the venue manager.

Regular testing and servicing

Keep tests and servicing on schedule between bookings. Fire alarms with manual call points normally need weekly tests. Emergency lighting needs monthly checks and an annual test for its full rated duration.

When should the FRA be reviewed?

Review it regularly and when the building, activities or risks change. Alterations, increased occupancy, new catering arrangements, a fire or a serious defect may prompt an earlier review.

Do you need a new assessment every year?

A new assessment is not automatically required every year. Agree a suitable review interval and continue routine checks and maintenance.

> **Agree who will arrange repairs.**
>
> Name a contact, agree who can approve the work and record when reported faults are resolved.

An assessment that reflects how your venue is used

Tell the assessor about the full range of activities, not only what happens on a typical quiet day.

01 **Before the visit**

Tell us about usual and maximum attendance, the events you host, hire arrangements and the staff or volunteers available. Share plans, previous reports and known concerns.

02 **During the assessment**

The assessor checks accessible areas, escape routes and fire safety equipment, looks at available records and asks how you manage fire safety.

03 **After the visit**

Your report explains what was assessed, what needs attention and how urgently. It identifies areas we could not inspect and anything that needs further investigation.

What if the report identifies problems?

Deal promptly with urgent risks to safety. Agree who will arrange other work and by when, and obtain approval where needed. Keep contractors' reports and records or photographs showing work is complete.

What other checks might be needed?

Electrical inspections and equipment servicing remain separate. You still need to plan for individual events and meet any licensing requirements. We do not normally open up the building during an FRA, so hidden construction may need further investigation.

Tell us about all the ways the venue is used.

Tell us about overnight stays, temporary structures, unusual activities and major changes when booking.

A short checklist for venue managers

Send us the records you have. If anything is missing, let us know when booking so we can explain what would be helpful.

- Address, building use, floors and available room or seating plans.
- Usual and maximum attendance, the activities you host and opening hours.
- Hire conditions, evacuation plan and arrangements for assistance.
- Access to halls, side rooms, kitchens, stores and outside escape routes.
- Previous FRA, outstanding actions, Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR) and maintenance records.
- Details of alterations, known defects and proposed changes of use.

Further information

These government guides explain fire safety duties, venue precautions, written records and help for people who need assistance to escape. Choose the guide that matches the size and use of your venue, or ask us for advice.

01 / Fire safety risk assessment: small and medium places of assembly

02 / Fire safety risk assessment: large places of assembly

03 / Workplace fire safety: responsibilities and evacuation

04 / Fire Safety Order 2005 (as amended)

05 / Written assessments and shared responsibilities

06 / Means of escape for disabled people

Sources checked 22 October 2026. General information for premises in England. Requirements depend on the property and its use; this guide does not replace a property-specific FRA.

Albion Mercer

ABOUT ALBION MERCER

Fire safety advice for your venue

Albion Mercer provides fire risk assessments, fire-door inspections and practical fire safety advice for property owners and venue managers. We consider how your building is used and help you understand the precautions and management arrangements it needs.

EXPERIENCE & CREDENTIALS

Lead assessor Ian Munro-Price has more than 25 years of property-industry experience. He is listed on the National Fire Risk Assessors Register (NFRAR) and is an Associate Member of the Institute of Fire Safety Managers.

CONTACT ALBION MERCER

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Serving Dorset, South Somerset, Hampshire and surrounding areas

This guide provides general information for premises in England and is not a substitute for a property-specific fire risk assessment. Requirements depend on the building, its use and the people at risk. Official sources are linked on page 8. Sources checked 22 October 2026. Text updated 2 November 2026. Cover image is an AI-generated illustration.