

Landlords and letting agents – are you playing with fire?

The tragic fire at Penhallow Hotel, Newquay in September 2007 must have shocked many hotel owners into checking they were fully compliant with the fire regulations. I hope it did the same for many landlords and letting agents too. Can you imagine how awful it would be if one of your tenants died, just because you hadn't installed the required fire doors in your property?

The Housing Act 2004 came into effect April 2006 and if your property doesn't comply, the consequences could be very serious. At the very least, in the event of a fire, you could find your insurance invalidated. At the very worst, if someone died in such an incident, you could end up accused of manslaughter as a result of gross negligence. So it's obviously worth making sure you are up to speed with the new regulations. The most likely properties to fall foul of the new law are HMOs (Houses in Multiple Occupancy).

Many landlords may not even be aware their properties *are* HMO's, as the definition has changed under the new law. If a two-storey house is shared by two or more tenants who are not blood relatives and not married/ co-habiting then it is classified as an HMO. This has implications for the risk assessment scoring of the HHSRS (Housing Health and Safety Ratings System) which applies to all rented property. Basically, HMOs are considered to present higher risks than, for example, a family living in the same house, so the requirements are more stringent.

The requirements will vary according to the risk assessment rating, but as a minimum landlords of HMOs are required to:

- Provide an interconnecting fire alarm system with a smoke sensor on the downstairs and upstairs landings, with a heat sensor in the kitchen.
- Provide a 30 minute fire door, a fire extinguisher and fire blanket in the kitchen.
- Dry line under the stairs, if that is where the electrics are located. This is so that if there is an electrical fire, the stairs do not burn before occupants upstairs have escaped.

In higher risk houses all doors may have to be made into fire doors, and each bedroom have its own smoke detector, again linked to all the others.

It need not be as expensive as you may think. We have been pleasantly surprised by how we have saved our landlords money by bulking together the work and finding cheaper ways of complying with the law. And of course the costs are far outweighed by the peace of mind you'll have from knowing you've done all you reasonably can to provide your tenants a safe living environment.

Further information:

If you have further questions, why not call Trevor Hames, Managing Director of Cambridge Property Lettings on 01223 322277.

To request an inspection by an Environmental Health Officer to ensure your property meets current standards, contact the Housing Standards department at Cambridge City Council on 01223 457000

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