

Safety Note 20

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Guidance on Disabled Evacuation Procedures, Fire Refuge Areas and Evacuation methods

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Summary

The responsibility for evacuating people from a building rests with the University. This Safety Note outlines the general principles that underpin the procedures for the safe evacuation of disabled people from University buildings.

1. Evacuation Arrangements

If a person is unable to evacuate a building, or may take longer to do so because of a physical, mental, or neurodiverse condition, most university buildings are equipped with a range of systems designed to support their safe evacuation.

These include:

- Fire refuge areas
- Refuge Communications
- Evacuation lifts
- Evacuation chairs
- Evacuation Mattress
- PEEP (Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan)
- GEEP (General Emergency Evacuation Plan)
- Trained Security Officers

Assistance using an evacuation chair, evacuation lift, evacuation mattress, or tactile guidance will only be provided in the event of a confirmed fire to support the person in reaching the assembly point safely

Identifying those that may need assistance

A Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) should be completed at the earliest opportunity when a member of staff or a student joins the University.

Staff

For new and existing staff, the line manager is responsible for identifying whether a PEEP may be required. The line manager will then contact the University Fire Safety Advisers, who will arrange and conduct a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan if the individual wishes to have one. For further guidance, refer to **Code of Practice 56**, provided in [Appendix 1](#).

Students

For students, PEEP assessments are coordinated by the Disability Advisory Service as part of the University application or support process. Students complete a questionnaire to help identify whether a PEEP is needed, and whether it applies to **Halls and Campus**, **Halls only**, or **Campus only**.

Visitors and General Procedures

For visitors, students, and staff who do not require a personalised PEEP, **General Emergency Evacuation Plans (GEEPs)** are available in the foyer areas of University buildings and online via the [Fire Safety](#) pages. Each GEEP outlines the specific evacuation procedures for individuals requiring assistance in that particular building.

When a PEEP is Required

A personal emergency evacuation plan will be created when:

- An individual requires **bespoke assistance** not covered by the building's GEEP; or
- A personalised plan would provide the individual with **reassurance** about what to expect during an evacuation.

Fire routine for disabled staff and students

Where a person requires assistance to evacuate, the general procedure is for them and their friend, buddy, or carer to move to a designated fire refuge area and remain there.

In some situations, the individual may be unable to reach a refuge. If it is safe to do so, they may remain where they are until assistance arrives or until they are able to prepare themselves to move to a refuge or exit the building with support. Similarly, if a person experiences a seizure and it is safe for them to remain in place, they may do so until they recover.

Fire Wardens will check refuge areas as they sweep the building. Anyone in a refuge or other location who requires assistance should inform the Fire Warden, who will then pass this information to the Evacuation Officer at the assembly point.

The Emergency Voice Communication (EVC) system located in refuge areas can be used by the individual or their buddy to maintain contact with the University Security Control Room. The person in the refuge must **not** be left alone. A buddy may stay with them; if no buddy is available, the Fire Warden should return to the refuge to remain with the individual.

If a person requiring assistance is located somewhere other than a refuge, they must contact Security on **0118 378 6300**. A friend, carer, or Fire Warden may also call on their behalf if they are unable to do so.

The Security emergency number is included in all PEEPs, GEEPs, and Refuge Action Notices.

2. Fire Refuges

A refuge is a designated location where individuals who require assistance to evacuate can wait safely until help arrives.

University fire refuges are protected areas designed to remain safe for a defined period, typically offering a minimum of 30 minutes of fire-resistant construction. This protection allows evacuations to be completed without placing those who require assistance—or those providing that assistance—at unacceptable risk.

Although refuge areas are primarily designed for wheelchair users, they may also be used by anyone who may require assistance during an emergency evacuation. This includes individuals with reduced mobility, visual or hearing impairments, mental health, or neurodiverse conditions.

Location of Fire Refuge Areas

A fire refuge is located within a fire protected staircase or a protected enclosure. A protected enclosure may be a fire protected corridor or in some cases a section of the building that is divided with fire resisting construction such as can be found in the Whiteknights House and URS Buildings.

How do I recognise a Refuge?

Wayfinding signage leading to refuge enclosures is identified by a green and white “wheelchair user” symbol alongside the running-man emergency exit pictogram.

The refuge area itself is marked with the green and white “wheelchair user” pictogram and Refuge point sign.



Refuge communications

Refuge areas are equipped with an emergency two-way voice communication (EVC) system, allowing occupants to alert Security that they require assistance and to receive reassurance that help is on its way.

Typically, the University uses the Red **Commend** system in refuges that are *not* located next to an evacuation lift, and the Silver **Windcrest** system in refuges where evacuation lifts are provided. Both systems are linked to and monitored by the University Security Control Room.



3. Evacuation Lifts

All passenger lifts will return to the ground floor and become inoperative when a fire alarm is activated. However, some passenger lifts are also designated evacuation lifts, and these can be brought back into operation by trained Security Officers.

Evacuation lifts are specially protected and are used **solely** for the evacuation of people who require assistance. These lifts are operated under the direction and control of the Security team to ensure safe and coordinated use

The buildings currently fitted with an evacuation lift are:

- Hopkins
- Mingella
- Henley Business School
- Health and Life Science
- Library
- ICMA extension
- Enterprise Centre
- Mackinder Halls
- Stenton Hall
- L016 London Road
- L022 London Road
- L029 London Road
- L033 London Road

4. Evacuation Chair

A Disabled Evacuation Chair is a specially designed folding chair that can be used to transport a disabled person down a building fire evacuation staircase.

Evacuation chairs are **NOT** suitable for use on circular stairs or on some external escape stairs.



5. Evacuation Mattress

Evacuation mattresses are available in certain University buildings. Their presence may be due to a specific PEEP requirement or a building constraint, such as spiral staircases .

Security Officers carry evacuation mattresses in their patrol vehicles, ensuring that a mattress is readily available while they investigate any fire alarm activation.

Evacuation mattresses are designed so that a person can be securely positioned and strapped in, allowing them to be moved safely through a building and down staircases.

They are particularly suitable for individuals who have significant difficulty moving, including those experiencing severe mobility challenges or recovering from a seizure.



6. Tactile assistance

Some people may not require the use of an evacuation chair, mattress, or lift. Instead, they may need **tactile support**.

This support may be required for individuals with impaired vision, hearing loss (especially if alarms cannot be heard), or for those who experience neurodiverse-related anxiety, disorientation, or “freeze” responses during emergencies.

Tactile support can take many different forms and should always be **guided by the preferences of the person requiring assistance**. Examples of tactile support could include:

- Gentle physical guidance
- Calm, reassuring, but direct communication
- Assistance in put on headphones or waiting for the person to put on their headphones which can help to muffle the noise

7. Who can use the evacuation equipment

Assistance to evacuate a building will only be provided **when there is confirmation of a real fire**.

Security Officers attend all fire alarm activations (except planned fire drills). They investigate the cause of the activation and, because they are already on site, are the personnel best placed to assist individuals who require evacuation support.

All members of the Security team receive training in the required evacuation methods, with some team leaders qualified as trainers. The team also undertakes regular refresher training to maintain competence in the use of evacuation aids and techniques.

8. Practise procedures

A test evacuation fire drill should be carried out at least once a year, and preferably twice. Taking part in these drills helps individuals become familiar with the building’s GEEP or their personalised PEEP arrangements. It also enables them to identify the nearest available refuge area and practise using the refuge communication system.

In some exceptional circumstances, advance warning of a fire drill may be provided to prevent unnecessary stress for individuals who may be at risk of seizures or adverse reactions to the fire alarm activation.

Repeated evacuations—such as frequent false alarms—can introduce additional risks. For this reason, as stated earlier, evacuation from a refuge should **only** take place when there is confirmation of a real fire or another emergency incident requiring full evacuation.

9. Fire Safety design

[Safety Code of Practice 34; Part B](#) sets out the University's policy on fire-safety design for new and refurbished University buildings.

Providing an accessible means of escape must be an integral part of the fire-safety management process. Particular consideration must be given to the needs of individuals who may require assistance during an evacuation, and arrangements must **not** rely on the Fire and Rescue Service.

It cannot be assumed that features provided to make a building accessible—such as passenger lifts—will be suitable for use during a fire evacuation, nor can it be assumed that all individuals with mobility impairments can use evacuation chairs.

These requirements should be addressed at the design stage, when it is easier to incorporate accessible features that support effective evacuation management and maintain the dignity of disabled people. For this reason, **fire evacuation lifts are the University's preferred means of evacuation wherever practicable**

Appendix 1

If any difficulties are experienced in accessing or exiting a building or in formulating an emergency evacuation plan, please contact the Fire Safety Advisers in Health and Safety Services (extn 8888) or the Disabilities Office, who will provide assistance.

Further reference can be found here;

- [CoP 56 Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans.](#)
- [General Emergency Evacuation Plans.](#)
- [CoP 34B Fire Safety Guide](#)
- [Disability Advisory Service](#)