



Safety Note 60

Guidance on evacuation chairs

1. Introduction

This Safety Note explains the general principles that underpin the provision and use of "Evacuation Chairs" for mobility impaired people as part of the fire evacuation procedures in University buildings.

2. What is an 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. A typical chair is shown here.

If a need arises for escape up an evacuation staircase e.g. from a basement area, an evacuation chair may be modified with carrying handles to allow this to happen. Any chair modified as described may need as many as four people to undertake an evacuation up a staircase.



Note: evacuation chairs are NOT suitable for use on circular stairs or on some external escape stairs.

3. Are there evacuation chairs in every university building?

No. If your building is higher than a ground floor and allows people to access the upper floors via a passenger lift then your building should have refuges (see Safety Note 26). All buildings with refuges have been risk assessed for the need for evacuation chairs. This risk assessment takes into account various factors such as:

- The number of storeys and staircases.
- Whether or not the building has an evacuation lift.
- What the fire risk rating is for the building.
- Whether or not the building is open to the general public.
- Whether or not the building management have any control over occupancy, including the number of centrally booked rooms.
- Where a chair can be allocated to help with the evacuation of a known disabled person.

If you identify a building or location where you consider chairs are still needed, please contact your Building Manager who will contact Health and Safety Services for further advice.

4. Who can use an evacuation chair?

Correctly used, an evacuation chair only involves a minimal amount of manual handling. Any person who is normally fit and active can use a chair if they have been trained. Any person unsure about their ability to use a chair should seek medical advice before volunteering for training.

Staff who are designated to help disabled people during an evacuation must be properly trained in how to use the chair and the general fire safety procedures to be followed. Wherever possible, training should also be delivered with the involvement of the disabled people who use the building. Disability equality and awareness training will also improve the confidence and effectiveness of staff in managing an evacuation.

5. Where can I get training?

Training courses will generally be arranged by Building Managers with Health and Safety Services. Typically a training session will last 90 minutes and will be largely practical, delivered in your own building.

6. Practice using the chairs

It is vital that people who have been trained in the use of evacuation chairs have the opportunity to practice. Building management should aim to ensure that all people trained to use the chairs get the opportunity to practice at least twice a year. This could be as part of a fire drill, or as a stand-alone exercise.

Repeated evacuations (whether as tests or as a result of a false alarm) can pose some risks to disabled people. Management should endeavour to reduce these risks by the preventing unnecessary evacuations. It is recommended that staff practice the use of the chairs with fellow members of staff who are also trained in the use of the chairs. Training sessions should be recorded on the training card located on the dust cover of each chair.

7. Fire routine for disabled staff and students

A plan of action for a member of staff or student with a disability should be completed at the earliest opportunity when the disabled person joins the University (see Safety Note 28 on Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPS)). This plan will take account of:

- the person's mobility
- type of wheel chair that they use, with or without life support systems
- their ability to transfer into an evacuation chair
- the location of their normal place of work/study (or residence)
- the availability of staff working in the immediate area to assist

- type of assistance required by the disabled person.

It is important to consult with the disabled person and explain the purpose of the refuge areas, evacuation chairs and the evacuation procedure. The Fire Wardens, evacuation chair operatives and any other individuals identified in the plan must be made aware of the plan and their role within it.

Operation of a "buddy" type system will ensure a colleague or fellow student with a working knowledge of the disabled person's needs is immediately on hand.

You should provide advance warning of a fire drill – this will ensure the disabled person becomes practised in the fire routine and is fully involved in the procedures. Normally this will mean making their way to a refuge and using the emergency voice communication system. Any transfer to an evacuation chair and movement down stairs must be done with the prior knowledge and agreement of the disabled person. See also paragraph 6 above.

As a general rule, in the event of an emergency evacuation the disabled person and a "buddy" or other responsible person should go to the refuge area and remain there. They should immediately contact the University Security Control room by activating the refuge emergency voice communications equipment. Fire Wardens are responsible for checking refuge areas as they evacuate the building (see Safety Note 39), and for notifying the Evacuation Officer at the assembly point if anyone in a refuge area needs assistance to evacuate. It is essential that a message is relayed to the assembly point and that the disabled person is not left by themselves.

7.1. Fire routine for disabled visitors

A disabled visitor should be met by the person with whom they have an appointment, or a nominated deputy. In the event of an emergency evacuation, their host should escort the visitor to the refuge area and remain with them. The routine is otherwise the same as for disabled staff i.e. remain in the refuge, ensure a message is relayed to the Evacuation Officer at the Assembly Point, use the Refuge Emergency Voice Communication Equipment to keep in contact with the University Security Control room (Tel. 0118 378 6300).

All buildings should have a means of informing 'casual' visitors i.e. those who do not have an appointment and are not escorted by a member of staff, of the evacuation procedures, use of refuges and chairs etc. This can be achieved by providing posters and leaflets at entrance hallways, reception desks etc.

8. Evacuation from the Refuge Area using an evacuation chair

The refuge areas have been selected as a place of relative safety in which a disabled person can wait until the situation is assessed. It may not be necessary for a disabled person to be evacuated from the refuge area (e.g. if it is a false alarm, or the incident does not present any risk to persons in the refuge area). The Evacuation Officer will assess the situation and if they consider it necessary to evacuate the area they will arrange for a disabled person to be assisted to do so.

Some wheelchair users will have life support or essential equipment linked directly between themselves and the chair. This can usually be removed for short time periods then re-connected. However the chair and any equipment fitted to it may need to be carried downstairs, preferably by staff with manual handling training. This must only be undertaken if the route out of the building is a protected escape stair, and there is no risk to personnel.

There are not any hard and fast national guidelines for the evacuation of disabled people by evacuation chairs. The following procedures are considered 'risk tolerable':

Internal Evacuation

On hearing the fire alarm trained personnel will go to a refuge where an evacuation chair is located and delay their evacuation down the fire protected staircase to allow time for a mobility impaired person to arrive at a refuge. The chair operator can provide assistance if required and if deemed reasonably practicable. If it becomes apparent that no one needs assistance i.e. after waiting for a few minutes, the evacuation chair operative can then make their way out of the building **by descending the refuge staircase and proceeding to fresh air.** Alternatively the refuge chair operators can be 'stood down' by the Evacuation Officer by means of using the Refuge Communications System. All designated refuges provide at least ½ hour resistance from the effects of fire and smoke.

External Evacuation

Alternatively people trained to use evacuation chairs can exit the building on hearing the fire alarm and report to the Evacuation Officer at the fire assembly point. If a disabled person needs assistance with evacuation from a refuge, the trained chair operators can be directed to re-enter the building **via a fire protected staircase** and then proceed upwards until the evacuation chair is reached. They should then take the chair to the level where the disabled person is waiting and assist with the evacuation using the chair. It must be stressed that re-entry to any building **must only be done by using a fire protected staircase that exits direct to fresh air.** Persons re-entering the building to provide assistance to a disabled person **must not leave the safety of the fire protected staircase.**

8.1. Evacuation by other means

Evacuation chairs are not suitable for emergency evacuation of all people with mobility impairments. Some disabled people cannot use an evacuation chair because they are unable to transfer themselves from their wheelchair to an evacuation chair. This does not prevent the Evacuation Officer or Fire Warden from deciding to move the disabled person from the building in the event of an emergency. In this situation, able bodied volunteers with manual or casualty handling experience should be called upon. It will require a minimum of 2 people to re-enter the staircase enclosure and physically carry the disabled person from the premises in their wheelchair. **It is emphasised this is an emergency last resort.** Anyone performing this task must be **instructed to remain within the protected fire staircase at all times.**

If staff require training in casualty handling, please contact Health & Safety Services.

9. Maintenance of evacuation chairs

The chairs require an annual inspection by a competent person. The annual inspections will be arranged by Health and Safety Services and carried out by the University's chair supplier, the Escape Mobility Company. In addition building management should carry out regular visual checks on the chairs to ensure that they are available for use and undamaged. Any defects should be notified to Health and Safety Services.

9.1. Assistance

University buildings have been adapted to facilitate access for disabled people. If any difficulties are experienced in accessing or exiting a building or in developing an emergency evacuation plan, please contact the Fire Safety Adviser in Health and Safety Services or the Disabilities Office, who will provide advice.

Health and Safety Services
December 2011