

Electrical Safety First

Analysis of the Response to Electrical Safety First's Consultation

"Supporting the Social Rented Sector in Ensuring Electrical Safety for Tenants"



1. Introduction

Electrical Safety First is the UK consumer protection charity dedicated to reducing deaths, injuries and fires caused by electricity. We campaign on behalf of consumers and electrical trade professionals to improve safety regulation and raise awareness of electrical risk in the home. We work with Government, NGOs and industry as the leading campaigning charity and technical authority on electrical safety.

Electrical Safety First's primary commitment is to ensure that everyone – regardless of tenure – can live safe from electrical risk in their own home. In the last few years the Charity has successfully lobbied for mandatory electrical checks in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government bringing forward regulations which resulted in the introduction of mandatory 5 yearly checks of electrical installations into England's PRS in June 2020.

Electrical Safety First also earlier led the way for these checks to be introduced in Scotland in 2015, and Scotland will now go further by introducing these checks in the Social Rented Sector (SRS) in the near future.

The Charity considers a safe home to be a basic necessity, and we are keen to see all rented properties regardless of tenure or location be subject to the same safety regime. This will guarantee that no matter who a home is rented from the residents can be sure that it has been inspected by a professional and is free of electrical safety risks.

Electrical Safety First investigated the SRS in 2018, commissioning The Centre for Housing Policy at York University to prepare a report on the sector, involving Freedom Of Information requests to Local Authorities (LA's) across the country. This identified the benefits and support in Local Government for mandatory checks to be introduced, and the need to seek the views of other housing providers¹. In early 2020 Electrical Safety First consulted a broad range of Social Housing providers, including LA's, not for profit Housing Associations and industry forums across the country in order to assess their views and whether they would support a move to bring the social housing sector in line with the private sector².

This paper sets out the findings of that consultation.

Whilst this paper was being drafted, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government released its Social Housing White Paper – The Charter for Social Housing Residents. This in turn was based upon a Social Housing Green Paper published in 2018, to which Electrical Safety First responded.

In its White Paper, the Government pledges to “consult separately on ways to ensure that social housing tenants are protected from harm caused by poor electrical safety”. Electrical Safety First very much welcomes this commitment and focus and understands the need to conduct a proper and thorough consultation. The charity considers that the views collated in this paper will prove invaluable in informing the Governments consultation.

Electrical Safety First is extremely grateful to those organisations who responded to our consultation.

¹ York University report: <https://tinyurl.com/yy5oc8t9>

² “Supporting the Social Rented Sector in Ensuring Electrical Safety For Tenants – A Policy Consultation Paper from Electrical Safety First”, published alongside this document and available upon request

2. The context: The existing electrical safety situation in the Social Rented Sector

Available data on electrical fires and risks in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) and Social Rented Sector (SRS) obtained from London Fire Brigade, the English Housing Survey and Home Office Fire data all show that fires and risks arising from electricity in the Social Rented Sector are comparable to those in the Private Rented Sector. London Fire Brigade data shows 628 electrical fires occurred in London's Local Authority homes between 2010-2019, with 427 occurring in Housing Association homes - a total of 1,055 for both LA and HA properties. During the same period, there were 1,169 electrical fires in PRS homes³.

The comparison between fires attributed to gas and electricity are useful for illustrating the difference in risk. Looking at London alone, there are significantly more fires in the SRS caused by electricity than gas. Between 2010-2019 there were 181 fires caused by gas in the SRS in London compared to 1,055 caused by electricity.

Across England in the year 2019-20 six times as many residential fires were caused by electricity than by gas. Data from the Home Office shows that for residential dwellings 13,855 fires were caused by electrical accidents versus 2,272 caused by gas. For every year from 2015 to 2020 electricity was five times more likely to be the cause of a fire than gas in domestic dwellings⁴.

This discrepancy can be explained in part by the omnipresence of electrical installations throughout the vast majority of homes in the country. Not only does almost every home in the country have mains electricity, it will be present in almost every room in those homes. Gas, in comparison, will often only be present in two locations – supply to the boiler for central heating and hot water and to a gas oven and/or hob.

However, despite the above, social landlords must undertake statutory gas safety checks annually but are not specifically required to carry out regular statutory electrical safety checks. Mandatory electrical safety checks and advice on using electricity safely in SRS homes are likely to help reduce fires caused by electricity, as well as offering clarity to the industry and customer alike. A further benefit of mandatory checks may be increasing the likelihood of tenants granting access to their homes, a known issue across the sector.

In response to the Government's 2018 Green Paper, "A new deal for Social Housing", Electrical Safety First responded to the question "Should new safety measures in the private rented sector also apply to social housing?" with the following:

"Yes. All sectors should be subject to the same basic safety standards to avoid the continuance of the current multiple-tier housing system. Whether in Private or Social housing all tenants must be certain that their homes are safe. Whilst analysis of the results of the English Housing Survey (EHS) carried out for Electrical Safety First⁵ shows that the SRS performs better than the PRS overall, the ageing housing stock of the SRS means that unless standards are maintained this situation will deteriorate. It should not be the

³ Data provided to Electrical Safety First by London Fire Brigade for the consultation document

⁴ Electrical Safety First analysis of Home Office Data: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fire-statistics-data-tables>

⁵ "Electrical Safety in the Social Rented Sector" - York University Centre for Housing Policy, 2018

case that one tenure is improved whilst another declines, and a uniform set of safety measures across all rented tenures will help prevent this.”

The intervening years have not lessened this rationale.

Current Events affecting the Social Rented Sector

In November 2020 the Government announced a large number of policies aiming to tackle climate change⁶. These included several which are likely to have a direct effect on the UK's Social Housing Stock, including a plan to make our homes greener and a target to install 600,000 heat pumps every year by 2028. Additionally further policies were announced to increase the take up of electric vehicles.

All of these policies together are likely to lead to an increase in the electrification of domestic heating and demands for electric vehicle charging. This will increase the importance of electrical installations in the SRS being safe and modern. Failure to do so may lead to some SRS residents being effectively barred from operating an electric vehicle or benefiting from low carbon technology.

In late November the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee released its summary of the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Building Safety Bill, in which it recommended that the *“Government include supplementary provisions in the Bill for mandating regular electrical safety checks in higher-risk buildings”*⁷.

A great many of the dwellings that this recommendation will affect will be SRS housing. If the recommendation is acted upon it would become even more important for a similar universal requirement to be in place for the SRS, regardless of building type. Without it, there will be two tiers of safety measures within a single housing sector. Such a situation would risk increasing confusion amongst those in the sector as to what legal requirements affect individual properties.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-outlines-his-ten-point-plan-for-a-green-industrial-revolution-for-250000-jobs>

⁷ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmcomloc/466/46611.htm>

3. Summary

The consultation asked 14 related questions on electrical safety issues in the Social Rented Sector, reproduced for reference in annex 1.

These covered the issues frequently encountered, financing maintenance, the impact of the Grenfell Tower fire on their operations, and whether they, as an organisation, would support a move towards legislating that periodic electrical checks be mandatory on a five yearly basis.

The range of organisations consulted has been intended to reflect a broad cross section of the sector, with several of the largest providers in the country participating, as well as local authorities and smaller associations.

Key Points

- **All but one of the Social Housing Providers that responded expressed support for mandatory electrical safety checks at five-yearly intervals**
- **There is a broad consensus amongst Social Housing providers that Electrical Safety checks should be treated with the same importance as gas safety checks**
- **Social Housing providers place a high importance upon electrical safety and fund accordingly**
- **Respondents believe that access to properties would be improved with the introduction of mandatory periodic electrical checks**

The view that the responses gave of the Social Housing Sector demonstrated that it is an industry which takes the safety of its residents extremely seriously and operates a “Best Practice” approach to safety. The majority of those who responded are already conducting five yearly checks, and all but one would like to see them made mandatory, albeit with some conditions.

The single housing provider which could not support the proposal did so on the basis that they would need to see more evidence for mandating the five year time period before committing. However they did note that they already conduct checks on a five yearly basis in their housing stock, and therefore that the decision to not support mandating at this stage can be viewed as one of preferring choice in the matter.

Supporting the importance of this move to mandatory checks, respondents were asked whether they thought that electrical safety checks should be treated as of equal importance to gas safety checks. The responses to this question were supportive, with many noting the numbers of fires attributed to electricity are significantly higher than those caused by gas.

Respondents also raised the need for improved guidance to be issued if such checks are introduced, as well as support with raising awareness.

Overall respondents stated that they would welcome the move to mandatory checks as it would not only improve safety for their residents but would also improve clarity on the level of service provision for provider and customer alike.

4. Response analysis

The 14 questions can be broadly grouped into five subjects; the question of whether five yearly electrical safety checks should be mandatory, the issue of funding, conditions encountered, the issues around access to properties and the industry's reaction to the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

4.1 Support for mandatory electrical checks

The response on whether mandatory five yearly electrical checks should be introduced into the Social Rented Sector was overwhelmingly positive. As an example of sector feeling, one large scale housing provider stated that:

“We are pleased that the proposal for mandatory electrical safety checks is being sought for (the) SRS and agree that you cannot compromise on the health and safety of tenants. Clearer requirements that are enforceable will ensure all tenants in the UK are safer.”

This view was reiterated by the majority of respondents, with 41 of 42 housing providers agreeing that mandatory 5 yearly electrical safety checks should be introduced. All 42 of the housing stated that they already performed electrical safety checks of their properties at five yearly intervals as standard practice. The industry acceptance of this practice is such that one Housing provider expressed a measure of incredulity that any organisation would still be performing the checks on a ten yearly basis. However, respondents saw a significant benefit of mandating the practice as **access to properties would be improved.**

A small number of respondents expressed concern regarding enforcement and how this would be performed. One respondent was concerned that excessive enforcement activity could be initiated by minor breaches such as being unable to complete work in a given timescale, due to factors which may be out of their control.

4.2 Funding

The consultation asked housing providers for their views on funding for electrical safety in their properties, and whether such funding needs to be ring fenced to ensure that a satisfactory level of safety was able to be maintained. The response to this proposal was that housing providers overall felt that existing levels of funding were sufficient for the purpose, and that ring fencing was unnecessary. Some providers gave further detail on how they allocated funding for this purpose to demonstrate that they had sufficiently robust measures in place to ensure tenant safety would not be compromised.

Some Housing Providers did, however, state that whilst the current financial situation allowed for sufficient available funds for electrical safety issues, there were concerns that this could change.

4.3 Most common electrical faults encountered

The consultation directly asked Housing Providers what electrical faults were most commonly encountered in their housing stock. The reported faults were very varied, and this is to be expected given the huge variety and age of stock managed by the Housing providers, ranging from new-build purpose built social homes to renovated historic properties. Several observations did frequently reoccur throughout, relating to sockets and Residual Current Device (RCD) provision.

On sockets, the points raised were to do with the condition and provision of sockets. Damaged sockets appear to be a common issue, which is unsurprising given the heavy use these parts of the electrical installation experience. This issue is perhaps one that supports the comments by several respondents on the importance of having supplementary visual checks more frequently, rather than relying solely on the in-depth five yearly periodic check all of the providers have stated they conduct.

The issue of a lack of socket provision was explained in some cases by references to the age of the housing stock, as older homes generally have far less socket provision throughout the dwelling than modern homes, which can encourage the use of extension leads, increasing the risk of overloading sockets⁸.

An RCD is a sensitive safety device designed to protect against the risks of electrocution and fire caused by earth faults. The provision of this important safety feature is again an issue which most likely relates to the age of the properties, as the inclusion of these devices as standard has only been made a requirement in the UK Wiring Regulations (BS7671) comparatively recently (2008) meaning many older properties will not benefit from RCDs. As properties are repaired or renovated more RCDs will inevitably be fitted, but any action to increase the rate of installation would be beneficial.

4.4 Access

Many housing providers stated that access to properties to conduct electrical safety work was more difficult than for when other hazards or issues needed rectifying, particularly those relating to gas. One group of respondents reported that first time access rates for conducting electrical safety checks were at 60%, whereas first time access for gas checks was at 90%. Various reasons were thought to account for this reluctance to grant access, including the lack of perceived visibility of the electrical installation in homes, and the mindset that as long as there are no obvious issues with the electricity tenants will assume that there is nothing wrong.

Some housing providers have countered this by offering incentives such as vouchers, upgraded equipment and decorating allowances, showing the importance that housing providers are attaching to electrical safety checks. However, as no such incentives are required for gas checks, when consulted on whether electrical safety checks should be treated as on parity with gas checks many responded in the affirmative, stating that this would lead to an improvement in access rates.

Access to properties was stated to be a known issue by the majority of respondents, and without clear legal backing it is felt that it will continue to be so. Despite this, a number stated they had achieved very

⁸ <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/guidance/safety-around-the-home/overloading-sockets/>

high success rates. It would very productive in these cases for the techniques and approaches used to be widely shared as best practice across the industry.

4.5 Industry reaction to the Grenfell Tower fire

Overall the responses indicate that whilst the tragic incident at Grenfell Tower led to additional scrutiny of existing procedures and requests for more oversight, the industry did not substantially change its procedural approach towards electrical safety as most providers stated that they already had sufficiently robust measures in place.

It was noted by several providers that tenants did become more risk aware as a result, and this has helped with access to properties, and some Housing Providers also stated that whilst their procedures had not changed, their attitude towards safety had overall become much more cautious.

5. Conclusion and Next Steps

The responses show that the SRS is a highly professional and safety conscious housing provider. In brief, the results of this consultation can be summarised as:

- **The SRS is in favour of Mandatory 5 yearly electrical checks**
- **Electrical Safety checks should be have the same parity as gas safety checks**
- **The SRS believes that electrical Safety is sufficiently prioritised and resourced at present**
- **Some of the main electrical issues encountered are related to housing stock age**
- **Access to properties is a sector wide issue which would be significantly improved if electrical safety checks were mandatory**
- **The Grenfell Tower tragedy has reinforced the existing safety focus in the SRS**

Given the strong positive response from the respondents it is clear that there is **strong support for the introduction of mandatory five yearly electrical safety checks in the SRS. Mandating the checks would make access easier and therefore save time and money as well as lives. Government should commit to aligning the Social Housing Sector with the Private Rented Sector by introducing such legislation.** This will improve clarity for Housing Providers and tenants alike, and ensure that where mixed tenancy buildings of both PRS and SRS housing exist all dwellings are subject to the same safety regime. This is an important step towards preventing the existence of a “two tier” safety regime, sometimes referred to as a “Tenancy lottery”.

Making electrical safety checks mandatory could also lead to wider benefits. By increasing public awareness of such checks and the mandating of them in two out of the three main housing sectors, those moving from the PRS or SRS into the Owner Occupied Sector may be more likely to import the safety regime they are familiar with into one where no such checks take place.

Whilst the Government will wish to consult on such a measure, as is right and proper, the response to this consultation shows that the appetite for immediate change is high and delay must be avoided. Whilst respondents to this all uphold high safety standards there may be many other providers countrywide who do not operate to the same level of practice. Electrical Safety First is concerned that any prolonged delay would result in a situation similar to that which occurred in the PRS, where the unnecessarily long time it took for mandatory checks to be introduced meant that numerous high profile electrical accidents occurred which would very likely have been prevented, had the dwellings been inspected⁹.

Respondents were strongly in favour of treating electrical safety checks in the same way as gas safety checks. However, whilst it was clear that respondents felt that electrical safety was as important as gas safety, they felt the time period should not be annually, which is currently required for gas safety checks, which reflects the difference in wear and tear a combustion appliance will experience when compared to a solid state electrical installation. Placing electrical safety on par with gas would reflect the high numbers of accidental dwelling fires caused by electricity, and this is seen as a positive move for the future.

⁹ <https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/coroner-family-call-better-legislation-2819469>

Access to properties at present is a serious issue. Many Housing providers reported low success rates in gaining access for electrical safety checks, and a wide variety of methods to try and improve this rate including incentives such as voucher schemes and home improvements, although it is unclear how successful these approaches are in driving up access rates. As some Housing Providers reported setting very high access targets and meeting and/or exceeding them, it is clear that the sector needs to improve the sharing of best practice and experience gained on this matter. Some groups, notably the Electrical Safety Roundtable, have worked towards this by producing literature to try and help persuade tenants to allow access¹⁰. If this has resulted in improved access to properties then this should be adopted by the sector at large, and there is scope for further investigation on this matter.

An issue which was frequently mentioned by respondents was **the need for clarity**, which in part could be fulfilled by mandating checks and so aligning the electrical safety requirements of the SRS with the PRS, removing any confusion of what is necessary between tenures. In addition to this it is apparent that Government action to advertise any change in requirements to Housing Providers and tenants alike will be required. This is particularly important when relating to any complaints or remedial works procedure to ensure all know what is expected of them,, and must include simple, clear advice on how such processes work, who manages oversight, and the timeframes involved.

When setting out to produce this consultation it was expected that the tragedy at Grenfell Tower in London, whilst was not caused by an electrical installation issue, would have had a serious impact on the way the sector operated. The responses indicated that whilst Housing Providers did review their existing procedures and report an increase in caution amongst both tenants and the business as a whole, overall the approaches they had in place for ensuring electrical safety issues are tackled were deemed to be sufficient, which reflects the high priority the respondents have all placed upon the safety of their tenants throughout the responses submitted.

Next Steps

Whilst there is plenty of scope for further activity and engagement with the SRS illustrated in the responses to this consultation exercise, there is one key action that should be taken, and that is for **the Government to introduce mandatory 5 yearly electrical safety checks**. This has almost universal support amongst respondents and the only obstacles are felt to be issues of clarity and implementation in introducing them. Electrical Safety First urges the Government to introduce this measure as soon as is practicable.

For the sector itself, on the issue of access, there is clearly much good practice in place which should be widely shared. Whilst the introduction of mandatory checks would be the biggest positive step towards improving access the sharing of best practice and successful approaches would be beneficial. . Sharing this knowledge would be a high reward activity for very little effort, and Electrical Safety First strongly encourages the sector to work closely on this matter, and applauds those who are already achieving great success.

¹⁰ http://www.electricalsafetyroundtable.co.uk/downloads/Social_Housing_Access_Infographic.pdf

Social Housing White Paper

On the 17th November 2020 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published the Social Housing White Paper, titled “The Charter for Social Housing Residents”. This document makes a commitment to conduct a consultation on electrical safety in the Social Rented Sector. This is a welcome step, and given the high degree of support our own consultation has demonstrated for mandatory five yearly electrical safety checks, we believe that the Government should focus on introducing this legislation as soon as is practicable.

Electrical Safety First looks forward to working with MHCLG and the Social Housing Sector to improve the standard of electrical safety and to bring clarity and consistency across the social and private rented sectors in order to make homes safer.

Annex 1: Questions posed to relevant organisations:

1. Does your organisation undertake regular electrical safety checks in social housing you manage or own? If so, what do they comprise and how often are they carried out?
2. With your experience of the SRS what is your general opinion of the standard of electrical safety in the SRS?
3. Has the Grenfell tragedy had a direct impact in the way you approach your electrical safety checks?
4. Has the Grenfell tragedy led to increased pressures on the SRS and if so what are they?
5. What are the most common defects and observations that arise from electrical safety inspections?
6. Is there a greater need for more frequent electrical safety checks due to the increased demands now placed on electrical installations?
7. Would your organisation support mandatory five yearly electrical safety checks being introduced in the SRS, mirroring those now being introduced in the PRS.
8. What are your experiences of funding for maintaining electrical safety in your housing stock?
9. Do you think that there is an appetite for some kind of ring fencing for electrical safety maintenance?
10. Should electrical safety checks in the SRS have the same parity as gas checks?
11. What are your experiences of accessing properties to undertake electrical safety checks? What is your assessment of compliance rates?
13. In your experience, has it been easier to gain access to carry out maintenance work as opposed to trying to gain access for electrical safety checks?
14. Are there any other comments your organisation would like to add with regards to the potential for mandatory electrical safety checks in the SRS?

Annex 2: Contributors

Submissions were gratefully received from 42 Social Housing Organisations, including the following:

Special thanks to the Electrical Safety Roundtable for consulting their members on this matter and compiling the responses.

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Karbon Homes
AB Building & Electrical Ltd
Your Homes Newcastle
Magenta Living
Nottingham Community Housing Association
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Gentoo Group Ltd
Metropolitan Housing Group
Stroud
Beyond Housing
St Ledger Homes
WDH
HHS
First Choice Oldham
One Vision
One Manchester
Longhurst Group
Flagship
Weaver Vale
100 Houses Society
Wrekin Housing Group
Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council
Orbit
Clarion
Stonewater
Plus an additional 13 responders who declined to be named.