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About CLEAR

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Our considerable experience in the property sector gives us the capacity to design bespoke and exclusive insurance solutions for the whole property market.

Understanding balcony fire hazards

At a glance

Balconies may seem an ideal place to relax during the summer – but they have also been the setting for a number of serious fires. Fire hazards on balconies range from discarded cigarettes to heaters and barbecues. Property owners and registered providers can minimise risk through careful design, and by educating tenants and residents on the hazards they face.

For many, balconies provide the perfect setting to make the most of long summer nights – eating, drinking and socialising with friends.

However, in recent years there have been a number of serious fires on balconies in private rental and social housing properties. While tenants, once educated on the matter, should take their share of responsibility, there is much that landlords and managing agents can and should do to minimise fire risk.

Understanding the risks

One of the biggest risks comes from barbecues. An estimated 1,800 people a year visit A&E in the UK having had an accident involving a barbecue, with burns and scalding the most common injuries suffered.

Barbecues should not be used on balconies under any circumstances. A number of recent fires in private rental and social housing properties have demonstrated the potential hazards, for example:

- Falling embers burning items on the ground below - a balcony caught fire after embers from a barbecue on the above balcony

blew down and ignited some rubbish on the balcony below

- Close proximity to other flammable objects, including the external face of a building – an explosion was caused by a barbecue on a balcony being next to a gas boiler.
- Disposable barbecues being left unattended after use – a fire started after a disposable barbecue was left smouldering on a balcony

The risks are compounded by the fact that wind speeds are stronger at a greater height, and wind patterns can be less predictable due to the proximity of neighbouring buildings. The constrained layout of balconies can also affect ease of escape for building occupants.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) says that of 89 barbecue fires it dealt with in the summer of 2013, 7% involved balconies. The LFB reported a further seven fires involving barbecues on balconies in the 12 months up to March 2014.

However, barbecues are not the only potential balcony hazard. Fire pits, patio heaters and smoking all pose additional risks. In April, Essex Fire and Rescue Service issued a warning about the dangers of patio heaters, after four people were hurt when a device exploded in Basildon. The explosion was caused by someone putting fuel in the heater while it was alight. The heater ignited the fuel in the container causing an explosion which sent molten plastic flying.

What can property owners and registered providers do?

There are two fundamental ways in which property owners can minimise fire risk. The first comes when designing, building or refurbishing a property, and the second relates to education.

Housing design

When designing housing, careful consideration should be given to the materials used. Combustible insulation or external facing materials such as timber cladding can increase fire risk, while developers should also be aware of the risk of fire spreading more quickly through voids and cavities. It is also essential that smoke detectors are fitted and tested regularly.

It may be possible to provide outdoor communal space, where devices such as barbecues can be used more safely. However, consideration must then be given to landscaping – for example, soft landscaping such as timber bark chippings can allow fire to spread more quickly and may affect the fabric of a building.

Educating tenants

Use of devices such as patio heaters and barbecues on balconies can be explicitly prohibited in tenancies, however a landlord's/lessees responsibilities should not end with a carefully worded tenancy or lease agreement.

In the summer months, it is important to educate tenants on the fire risks they might face when out on their balconies. Communications might include letter drops, articles, websites, newsletters, e-bulletins or social media.

Top 10 barbecue safety tips

While barbecues should never be used on balconies, they can be used safely in outdoor communal areas, provided these safety procedures are observed.

1. Ensure the barbecue is strong, sturdy and in good working order
2. Place it on level ground to avoid it tipping over
3. Keep it well clear of any trees, shrubs, or flammable objects

4. Keep children and animals well away
5. Never pour on petrol or other accelerants
6. For charcoal barbecues, only use the minimum fuel necessary
7. For gas barbecues, ensure the tap is turned off before changing the cylinder
8. Never leave the barbecue unattended
9. Keep a bucket of water or sand close by
10. Ensure the barbecue is cool before attempting to move it

As developers, registered providers and property owners build upwards to help ease Britain's housing shortage, an increasing number of tenants will see their balcony as their only outdoor space.

Current understanding is that there will be continued growth in the number of high rise type developments, including potential upward extension to existing structures. In London alone, more than 250 tower blocks of at least 20 storeys are reportedly in the pipeline.

As this trend continues, it is essential that those responsible for designing, building and maintaining properties combine education of residents with sound design principles to minimise the risk to people and property.

How Can We Help

At Clear Insurance Management Ltd we are specialists in the property market. If you'd like further information contact us today or visit www.thecleargroup.com/property.

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