

Smoke Alarms in Northern Ireland Homes **(Update)**

Research and Library Services

1. NUMBER OF HOMES IN NI WITH A SMOKE ALARM

As stated in the first Research Briefing, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), in response to a Parliamentary Question¹ (June 2005), stated that 96 per cent of respondents to the June 2004 Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey had a smoke alarm in their home and a Public Information Leaflet, published by NIFRS in August 2006, stated that 98 per cent of households surveyed had a smoke alarm.

Further clarification on this figure of 98 per cent has been received from NIFRS² and the figure is taken from an independent survey carried out for DHSSPS by Research Evaluation Services and is based on the results of 1000 interviews using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing. A second survey has just recently been carried out by Millward Brown for the DHSSPS and the new survey was carried out in 1000 homes. The NIFRS expected a difference in the percentage results due to the fact that people may not have admitted to not having a smoke alarm in the telephone survey thus artificially raising the numbers. The results showed, however, only a slightly lower figure of 94%.

2. SMOKE ALARMS - HOUSING EXECUTIVE UPDATE

The Housing Executive has installed smoke alarms in its homes as follows:

	With Alarms	% of Net Stock
Bungalows	17,079	95
Flats	15,686	92
Houses	29,618	60
Maisonettes	1,083	90
Totals	64,486	74

It has been Housing Executive policy since the 1990s to install smoke alarms in all Housing Executive flats, maisonettes and bungalows. There remain around 2,300 such properties where smoke alarms have not been fitted. It is anticipated that this will continue to reduce to around 2000 by March 2008. A further 300 dwellings will be included in MEI/kitchen schemes over a slightly longer period.

¹ House of Commons Hansard Written Answers for 28 June 2005, in response to Mr Gregory Campbell's question on 'Smoke Alarms'

² NIFRS Contact, Bill Majury, Group Commander, Community Development

However there still remains the issue regarding the remainder of properties where access is either difficult or refused. This will be reviewed in April 2008.

In addition it is current policy to install smoke alarms in all dwellings within planned schemes where alterations are being made to the electrical system.

3. FIRE STATISTICS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The following statistics for Northern Ireland are extracted from Fire Statistics Scotland (2005), published by the Scottish Government³. Statistics are included for Scotland, England and Wales for comparison.

Fire Service Area	Total No. of Fires in Dwellings	Smoke Alarm Absent	Smoke Alarm Present but did not operate	Smoke alarm present, operated but <i>did not</i> raise alarm	Smoke alarm present, operated and <i>did</i> raise alarm
N. Ireland	1,556	715	254	140	442
England	46,608	22,912	5,512	2,386	15,793
Scotland	7,054	2,750	1,079	432	2,793
Wales	2,535	1,044	338	186	967

Although the figures for smoke alarm ownership described in paragraph 1 above are over 90%, the figures in the table above indicate that in 2005 in 46% (715) of house fires there was no smoke alarm present and in a further 16% (254) there was a smoke alarm present but not working. These figures were queried further with the NIFRS who indicated that the vast majority of fires in Northern Ireland occur in 'high risk' homes where fire safety is not given the priority necessary e.g. in homes occupied by the elderly, rented accommodation and in homes found in areas of deprivation. According to the NIFRS, in such homes there is likely to be no smoke alarm or one that is not functioning due to it not being properly maintained i.e. battery removed or not replaced.

There are approximately 700,000 dwellings in Northern Ireland⁴, therefore it would appear that the figure for 2005, from the table above, of 715 cases (of a total of 1,556 fires) where no smoke alarm was present, easily falls within the percentage of homes that the NIFRS have confirmed have no smoke alarm.

4. THE WAY FORWARD

The NIFRS⁵ confirmed that the fact that the NI Building Regulations⁶ for new build dwellings and house conversions, e.g. attic conversions, now requiring that smoke and heat alarms shall be 'permanently wired'⁷ was a good step forward.

³ www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/22111518/20

⁴ 712,600 according to the Northern Ireland Housing Statistics Annual (25 September 2007), www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/news_items/ni-housing-stats-2006-07.htm

⁵ NIFRS Contact, Bill Majury, Group Commander, Community Development

The NIFRS are following another solution to the problem of poorly maintained smoke alarms in that any smoke alarms fitted by them are now a sealed unit from which the battery cannot be removed. The battery lasts for ten years at which point the whole unit is replaced rather than the battery.

The NIFRS confirmed that the focus of their campaigns in the next couple of years will be on the maintenance of a working smoke alarm, given the comparatively high percentage of homes that do possess a smoke alarm.

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⁶ Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005, with accompanying DFP Technical Booklet E: 2005 – Fire Safety. The Technical Booklet (section 1.26) states that Smoke and heat alarms shall be ‘permanently wired’⁶.

⁷ Although there is no obligation to follow the methods set out on the Technical booklet, any other method adopted will have to demonstrate that it satisfies the requirements of the Building Regulations.